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The power of love in organisations

*By **Stefano Tasselli***

Love in the workplace goes far beyond the superficial. Expressed as trust, compassion, friendship, and creativity, love shapes our working environment to such an extent that we could say love *is* the organisation and vice versa. Problematically for our data-driven systems, love is impossible to quantify or manage. Rather than developing new frameworks in which to examine and discuss love in the study of organisation and management, it is easier for us to simply ignore it. But exploring these potential frameworks may uncover opportunities to more fully understand our workplaces, our teams, and ourselves.

Love has largely been avoided in the study of organisations, but we can still find its traces in studies of related concepts that neatly sidestep the use of the word 'love'. We may study workplace creativity, we may study ego and the working environment, we may study friendship and trust, we may study altruism, or any other number of personal motivators.

However, we have stopped short of admitting that love in its myriad forms has a powerful influence on the landscape of organisations, let alone creating an umbrella framework under which these disparate pieces of research could be collected. In short, love has not received the attention it deserves in the study of organisations.

Why we ignore love

There is a fundamental conflict between organisational design and the many ways love is felt and expressed. Studies of organisations and management have been dominated by an emphasis on efficiency, rationality, and measurable performance. These ideas contradict the idea of love, which speaks to passion and desire, and is personal and subjective.

Love shapes us as individuals as it shapes the way we see our personal and work lives. On the other hand, organisational life tends to privilege authority over passion, and homogeneity over self-realisation. Because love demands exceptions and singularity over reproducible consistency, it presents an innate challenge to the tools we use to study and manage organisations.

Ironically, modern organisations, like love, are intrinsically dynamic and evolving, but our managerial styles and the reward systems within these organisations are more reflective of assembly line management, inadvertently inhibiting the powerful productivity of love.

Love's three faces

Creating a framework for studying love within organisations begins with understanding the three concepts of Eros (me), Philia (we), and Agape (us all).

Eros calls for a full expression of the self beyond social and organisational norms. This kind of love pushes an individual toward authenticity, for example through creativity. Although creativity is celebrated in principle, it actually conflicts with most organisational structures. These structures tend to be macro, creating top-down cultures of similarity in which employees at all levels display the same thought processes and values as the top managers, perhaps regardless of what they truly think and how they truly feel. Macro structures also breed a kind of inertia, in which an employee's role is to ▶

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The power of love in organisations *(continued)*

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reproduce past actions and results, over and over, in predictable and quantifiable ways, shrinking the expression of the inner individual identity.

Philia is primarily about friendship, not only as a unit of two individuals but as an organisational culture built around being open to newcomers. The overarching type of love at play here is trust, and it is undeniable that individuals flourish in the workplace when they engage in trustworthy and positive relationships with co-workers. Philia is arguably the most powerful source of organisational functioning. New employees experience Philia when they are warmly welcomed and inducted as a 'citizen' of the organisation, and family-run businesses have, for better or worse, strong emotional bonds between its members that can be far more important to the individual than the work itself.

Agape is the broadest love of all, entailing compassion for all humankind. It is in the study of Agape that some of the strongest non-monetary motivations become clear. Non-profit organisations are an obvious example of Agape in practice, especially when the organisation is staffed by volunteers. Agape in organisations is perhaps best expressed through compassionate leadership. Like Britain's Queen Mother visiting Londoners during WWII bombing, or like a former US President shaving off his hair as a sign of empathy for an employee's young son affected by cancer, compassionate leaders show concern and emotional closeness towards their peers and followers.

Unlike Philia that may create friendships based on certain personality traits, Agape is completely unconditional. In practice this helps avoid common workplace problems that we prefer to pretend don't exist: issues like hiring bias resulting in a lack of diversity, or performance review bias, when a person is judged on who they are rather than what they do.

A new perspective

The search for love helps us understand the intimate connections between ourselves and those around us in organisational life. The avoidance of love in traditional organisational research conflicts with the love-related constructs we increasingly refer to as important workplace and organisational influences.

Despite the pervasiveness of love in the everyday life of the individual, organisational studies continue to treat love and the workplace as mutually exclusive. This idea of an organisation as a 'black box' fails to recognise the obvious fact that an organisation is made up entirely of people. As a person is affected by love (for example, through changing family situations or shifting workplace friendships), so too does the organisation inevitably change.

We understand intuitively that people look for meaning in the work they do, for personal connections within the workplace. This can occur to such a great extent that the bonds between work and love become inextricable, as in the case of a founder seeing his family firm as an embodiment of love. In this case, love *is* the organisation and the organisation is love. Those emotional bonds tend to be stronger in family firms, considering the potential for greater love (but also hate) among family members.

One of the key traits of any family is how failure is viewed. Sometimes failure is seen as a normal and healthy part of learning a new skill or testing an idea. At other times failure is seen as a source of shame and instils a fear of ridicule in an individual. An organisation mimics a family in the culture it builds around failure. At its best, the 'friendship love' Philia offers the freedom to fail without punishment or shame, encouraging ex-

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perimentation and new ideas, and providing a kind of bridge between inner and outer realisations of an individual's authentic self. Managers who activate Philia by creating a workplace culture in which employees are unafraid to fail, and encouraged to try again after failing, can build strong, loyal teams.

Unconditional compassion (Agape) may encourage a firefighter to work, not for money, but to help a community that he or she loves. A manager who understands this motivation is at a distinct advantage compared with one who offers yet another raise to keep members on the team.

Conversely, there are dark sides to the three forms of love outlined earlier. Do organisations use benevolence, compassion and sacrifice as ways to smoothen individual resistance and force members to achieve organisational goals? The self-sacrifice implicit in Agape may contribute to deaths caused by overwork or job-related exhaustion (eg, *Karoshi*, the Japanese word which literally means 'overwork death'). The fraternity of Philia may lead to favouritism and the creation of cliques in an organisation, sometimes allowing unethical behaviour to continue unchecked when the offender has 'friends in high places.' Only with a better understanding of the role of love can we better identify these kinds of problems before they begin. ■