

Accessing the Power of Love in the Workplace

Roger Harrison Ph.D.

For most of my working life, love has not been an idea in good currency in organizations—to say the least.¹ When, in the eighties, I first wrote about the importance of understanding love in the workplace and tapping into its power, I did so against the counsel of trusted colleagues who had my best interests at heart and were concerned that I maintain my credibility. I went against this good advice because I believed, and still do, that we cannot fully access the power of a concept like love by using a euphemism such as caring, consideration, or the like. The "L" word wouldn't be as scary as it seems to be if that weren't true.

Early experiences with love in the workplace

I grew up in a family of scientists and engineers, and I learned early to value rationality. Although love was present, it was not something much talked about. I trained as an industrial psychologist, and I was well into my first professional job in personnel research with Procter & Gamble before an event occurred in 1958 that opened my eyes and heart to the potential power of love in working life. That event was a five-day workshop billed as an opportunity to learn about the dynamics of small groups. It turned out to be a "T group laboratory." That experience changed my life by opening up possibilities of levels of openness and intimacy between strangers that I had not previously imagined. The vision was naive, but it was very powerful. I was enthralled by the idea that by meeting with no agenda other than to understand what was happening in our group, we could come at the end of five days to respect and appreciate each one of the strangers we started out with. We felt love for one another—though not necessarily liking for each one. Although I bonded strongly with one or two others in the group, my feeling for most was a deep sense of empathy and compassion.

The group was personally very gratifying to me, and I became deeply engaged for some years in learning about and facilitating such "sensitivity training" groups and, later, team development within organizations. I came to think that a large part of my work as an organization development consultant was to look for ways in which organizations could become places where the human heart could flourish. Since this was not always or even often a stated value or goal of my clients, I also served them in a variety of different ways, most of which were oriented to helping them to build more effective working relationships.

Living and working in Europe for some time, I worked with many different sorts of people, in different national and organizational cultures. I came to understand that what we often think of as love is actually a subcategory of the many ways humans experience and express their love. We can experience many of those ways in organizations.

The power of love in organizations is commonly ignored

In this paper I advocate cultivating a "lens of love"² through which to view behavior in organizations, and at the outset I would like to explain why. We all know that love is a powerful

¹ An idea in good currency in an organization is one that is generally accepted, and is used frequently in the day to day thinking and conversation of people in the organization.

² I am indebted to Nick Fowler for this idea, which captivated me when I first heard it.

force in human affairs, so it has always seemed strange to me that so few managers and consultants pay attention to its working in organizations. It sometimes seems as though there is a taboo against the use of the "L word."

The potency of love in organizations is largely denied and repressed. We experience the same fear of it that we previously did with sex and power. Love has its wild aspects, and perhaps that is one reason we are wary of it. However, we shall not get rid of love by ignoring its operation in organizations, any more than we can avoid power or sex by denying their presence. By failing to examine love in organizations, we only prevent ourselves from accessing its powerful healing and creative aspects. These we do need. The wilder and sometimes destructive aspects will doubtless continue to arise regardless of whether we pay attention to them or not.

The need to express love is fundamental in humans. If nothing else, love is made necessary by the fact that there is no such thing as independent life. It arises from our fundamental connectedness. This need can be frustrated or repressed. Denial of our need to express love is endemic to our society and is a part of the illusion of autonomy that makes us among the lonelier peoples of the earth. When that need is repressed in organizations, we tend to put more of our energy into our needs for power and for achievement.

An understanding and acceptance of the power of love in organizations makes healing possible. It does not end conflict and competition, but it can bring grace and restraint into the dance of warriors, and bind the wounds of both victor and vanquished. I hope to make a case for its beneficial effects in much that is highest and finest in our working lives.

To enhance your own acuteness of perception in seeing the working of love in organizations, you might ask yourself questions like these:

- What *stories* have you heard in the organization about behavior, decisions, or conversations that could be construed as having been motivated, at least in part, by love?
- What have you *observed* people in the organization doing that might be motivated by love, rather than by other wants and desires?
- What situations in the organization seem more likely to evoke love-motivated behavior than others?

Anatomy of love in organizations

One of our premier psychological theorists, David McClelland, identified three fundamental human needs or motives: Power, Achievement and Affiliation. My own experience and thinking have led me to the view that love can be identified as a powerful force in all three of these domains of human experience. In the life of organizations, I think of it this way:

Humans have an innate need to love. That need is present to some degree in all kinds of human endeavor, although it can be obscured or repressed by fear to the point where it is difficult to discern the loving impulse behind a particular activity.

Love and the need to achieve

People with high achievement needs tend to love their work or profession, and engage in it for its own sake, not simply for the external rewards that may come their way as a result of their work. As Kahlil Gilbran wrote in *The Prophet* (1969), "Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy."

Much has been written about high performing, achievement-oriented organizations. Most such organizations share qualities such as these³:

- The work situation engages the total person.
- The values that people experience in the work transcend personal advantage. The situation evokes altruism, which is satisfying to everyone involved. People feel they are working for something bigger than themselves.
- People give their all, working long hours without complaint.
- People supervise themselves, seeking out what needs to be done without direction from above.
- There is high morale, teamwork, and a sense of camaraderie. The group frequently feels itself to be elite or special.
- There is a sense of urgency; people live "on the edge," putting out high energy for long periods of time.
- There is a clearly understood mission that is articulated and supported at the highest level of the organization.

The workplace thus becomes a field in which people may express their love through creativity, excellence and dedication.

Love and needs for power

Similarly, people with high needs for power and control may view having power as a way of accomplishing results in the world that they believe are in service to others, and in service to ideals and values they hold dear, to humankind as a whole, or to life on our planet. Such leaders are firm but fair, and generous with loyal subordinates. They show strong concern for the welfare, education, growth and development of those in their care. They have a sense of obligation to those weaker than themselves, and they exercise power according to their understanding of what is good for the organization and its people.

Thus, power relationships may foster love. Although benevolent paternalism seems nearly dead in the US, it has a long tradition and is still alive and viable in much of the world. Such relationships were probably more prevalent in the nineteenth century, when paternalism was a widely held value, not a dirty word. A classic example from the past comes from Dickens' [A Christmas Carol](#) in the character of Fezziwig, the revered and loving employer whom Scrooge remembers and revisits in his journey with the Ghost of Christmas Past.

³ This list, and the list of characteristics of affiliation-oriented organizations that follows are both taken from the author's "Organization Culture and Quality of Service" (see References)

Small family-run organizations often still manifest such relationships. When the weaker party to a power relationship experiences protection and nurturing from the stronger member, that experience can engender love and loyalty on the part of the former. In modern hierarchies, the practice of mentoring is a fairly common expression of this sort of love, and the same can be true of much parenting in families. However, we must recognize that in many modern organizations, as often in Dickens' day, we experience the opposite of benevolent paternalism, which is the exercise of personal power to dominate and exploit others.

Love and needs for affiliation

As for the affiliation motive, the need to love and be loved by others is most clearly evident here. Affiliation can be subtle, and although it can be found in some parts of most organizations it is unlike achievement and power, in that it is unlikely to be the dominant motive openly expressed in most organizations. To the degree that an organization is affiliation-oriented, it will exhibit mutual trust between the individual and the organization. In such an organization people believe that they are valued as human beings, not just as cogs in a machine or contributors to a task. Warmth and compassion are common, not just driving enthusiasm or striving for power. People like to come to work in the morning, not only because they like their work, but because they care for the people they work with. Because they feel cared for, they are more human in their interactions with others: customers, suppliers, the public, and their fellow workers.

Affiliation-oriented organizations show many of the following qualities:

- People help each other beyond the formal demands of their jobs. Help is often extended not only within one's own work group, but to other groups as well.
- People communicate a lot, not only about work, but also about personal concerns.
- People like spending time together. They often see each other off the job, as well as at work
- In hiring people, the organization gives special weight to whether the person is caring and cooperative and will fit in.
- People are viewed as basically good. When things go wrong, they get a second chance.
- People know that the organization will go beyond the requirements of the policy or the employment contract to look after them when they need it. In return, they go out of their way to take care of the organization, caring for the facilities and equipment, giving special attention to quality, conserving resources and/or protecting the company's reputation in the community.
- People celebrate together. They not only take pride in their work achievements, but they recognize such personal milestones as promotions, retirements, birthdays and anniversaries.
- People value harmony and avoid confrontation, sometimes to the point of leaving important issues unresolved.
- People "keep the faith"; they don't let each other down. This doesn't merely mean keeping one's word; it also means doing one's share of the work, including coming in to work when one isn't feeling quite up to par, in order not to overload others.

The dark side of the achievement, affiliation and power motives

It is worth noting that each of the motives has its darker side, which can evoke fear and other negative emotions. For example, the achievement motive can be expressed in cutthroat competition, and also in fear of failure. Having a high level of achievement motivation myself, I can testify that the fear of failure has been a frequent impediment to my creativity and productivity, especially when I am writing for publication or preparing for a presentation.

Similarly, with people who are highly motivated by affiliation, the wish to *be* loved often contains elements of fear and insecurity about being included and accepted by others. They may avoid conflict and avoid speaking unpleasant truths.

As regards the power motive, relationships in which people have power over one another are fraught with possibilities that evoke fear, where we are least likely to find loving expressions of the motive. We each have our own examples. By the same token, more open, egalitarian and participative structures pose fewer barriers and restraints to the workings of love.

Doing whatever meets one's need to express love makes people feel good about themselves, about their work, and usually about the people they are working with.

Why bother?

Is there really much point in digging out the workings of love in activities within organizations that we don't ordinarily identify as love-motivated? Perhaps a clue to the answer to this question may be found in a Delta Airlines advertisement that was current in the eighties. "When people love their work, it shows.... Our people are happy. Because they love what they do and who they do it for. When people feel that way, they simply have more to give."

A number of ideas follow on from what I have said above:

- It is worthwhile to make as many aspects of the workplace as possible into something that people can and will love, to find ways doing work that give people experiences of giving their best, of serving the work and others in ways that satisfy their needs to love.
This means that wherever possible, work should be crafted so that people can receive *intrinsic* satisfactions from doing the work, rather than working primarily for external rewards that are attached to performance, like money, status, promotion and the like. By intrinsic satisfactions, I mean not only the sheer enjoyment or pleasure in doing the work, but also experiences of living and acting according to their values, creating something worthwhile, serving a higher purpose, doing good in the world, and the like.
- It is beneficial to the work to reduce barriers in the organization to speaking about love, and its manifestations in work and work relationships. How can we solve problems and be creative in releasing and giving outlets for people's need to love if we can't find ways to talk about it? It is important to make the idea of work as "love made manifest" an "idea in good currency" in the organization (see footnote 1). In many if not most organizations this goal may seem unattainable. However, we can make a start
- Thus I am advocating that we learn to view the organization, its structures and processes, and the people we work with through a lens or filter of love. That means learning to see the variety of ways people may express their love, and to discern the loving need or impulse behind the individual actions and dispositions that others manifest We need to ask, "How could this be an expression of love?" "How can we reduce the barriers that exist to the fullest expression of love in this situation or activity?"

Going counter to the organization's culture

In many organizations, moving in the ways I advocate here may be difficult, counter as they seem to be to the organization's culture, norms and shared values and assumptions. The extent to which an

individual can transgress organizational norms with impunity depends in large part on his or her credibility and acceptance as a valued member of the part of the organization that s/he is endeavoring to influence. It is sometimes true that outsiders, such as consultants, will be given more latitude in this regard, and thus they can sometimes introduce deviant ideas more readily than insiders. It is seldom true, however, that a person cannot make any headway at all in moving counter to the current culture, if only in the circles within which s/he has some credibility and acceptance.

Love is the opposite of fear

We must acknowledge that love is the opposite of fear, and that when we are in fear it is difficult to experience or act upon our loving impulses. We each have our own vulnerabilities; ways that fear is evoked for us in the workplace. Here are some that I have experienced:

- When others exercise power and authority over me in ways that disempower me
- When I perceive signs of anger or violent intent towards me from others.
- When my work depends on others, and I don't trust them to do their part for whatever reason.
- When I find myself in competition with others and feel I am unlikely to win.
- When I feel inner pressure to act according to my own integrity, and believe that the consequences of doing so will bring criticism or harm upon me. An example is feeling called to speak out truthfully about something that others are unwilling to deal with. Another example is when I feel that being fully myself will not be acceptable to others.
- Expressing feelings about others or about their behavior, where doing so is outside the organization's norms of accepted behavior.

Each person who reads this will have his or her list. In some organizations such fears may be sufficiently prevalent to make it appear as though love is, for all practical purposes, absent from the workplace.

Hopeful signs: Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

However, there are signs and signals that some organizations, and certainly many organization members, are ready to make some movement in the direction of more openness to exploring the power of love to transform their working lives. I have certainly spoken with consultants who have said that they can speak with their clients about the workings of love in their organization.

One process that is in common use in organization development, David Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry (AI), appears powerfully to assist people to speak about and attend to what they love in their work situations. The following description of AI is taken from [Wikipedia](#):

Appreciative Inquiry is a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that fosters positive relationships and builds on the basic goodness in a person, a situation, or an organization. In so doing, it enhances a system's capacity for collaboration and change. Appreciative Inquiry utilizes a 4-stage process focusing on:

- **DISCOVER:** The identification of organizational processes that work well.
- **DREAM:** The envisioning of processes that would work well in the future.
- **DESIGN:** Planning and prioritizing processes that would work well.
- **DESTINY (or DELIVER):** The implementation (execution) of the proposed design.

The basic idea is to build organizations around what works, rather than trying to fix what doesn't. It is the opposite of problem solving. Instead of focusing on fixing what's wrong, AI focuses on how to create more of what's already working.

AI, with its emphasis on the positive is compatible with what I am advocating here. It seems to me that it would not require a great deal modification of AI to come up with an approach overtly focused on love that uses questions like these:

- What do you love about the work you do?
- What do you imagine you and others could do together to make the work you do something you could love even more?
- What do you appreciate or love about the people you work with?
- What do you think you and others could do to make your relationships with the people you work with deeper, more loving, or generally more satisfying?

What can I do?

If Appreciative Inquiry were more commonly applied, then I believe organizations would become more loving places. However, most people don't have the option to launch a formal AI project, so let's look at what we can do as individuals. Here's where applying the "lens of love" to how we see organizational processes can be helpful. Assume for a moment that in every organization people are capable of expressing love in one way or another all the time, and we would like to find ways to call out and enhance those processes and behaviors.

Let's look to our own behavior. Here are some questions to answer about your own exercise of love in your working life:

- What do you love about your work? Are there some things you do in your work that you look forward to, enjoy doing, or that you feel real passion about? What sorts of things do you enjoy so much that you give them special priority, even when there may be other things that "logically" should be put ahead of them?
- What talents, skills and areas of knowledge do you have that you love exercising?
- Are there particular kinds of activities, practices or situations that call to you, and when you are engaged in them, they feel as though they are "what you came here to do?"
- What goals evoke your energy and your best efforts? What values do you love and cherish?
- What sorts of contribution that you may make to the work, to others, or to the organization cause you to feel really good and to love yourself? For example, in how many ways do you gift others with assistance, time, energy, information, and so on.
- In what ways and in what situations do others act and speak in ways that support your exercise or expression of what you love? Are there particular relationships in your work that evoke, liberate or enhance your expression of what you love?
- In what ways do organizational structures, systems, procedures and norms assist you in expressing and experiencing what you love?

Having made such an assessment, we can go on to consider the ways in which our fears may restrict or constrain the expression of our loving impulses and tendencies in our work, listing specific ways in which fears such as those I've listed above for myself may inhibit us. We may then move on to consideration of ways in which these fears may be reduced, avoided or neutralized, either by

changes in oneself, or by using Appreciative Inquiry or similar approaches to reduce organizational barriers.

The Appreciative Self

Gervase Bushe has written a number of excellent papers (2001, 2006) detailing ways that improvements in behavior and performance can be stimulated by leaders and others when they cultivate an appreciative mind-set. He describes that mind-set as follows:

Instead of trying to fix what's broken, appreciative process improves systems by amplifying what is working. Appreciative change processes engage the people who need to be part of improving the organization in identifying the best of what they do, celebrating and learning from it, working with people's intrinsic motivation to be competent, do their best and be successful.

Bushe speaks of "tracking and fanning" the human virtues and behaviors that are latent in everyone, whether they are apparent or not. When we are "tracking," we are watchful to see any expression of these virtues, no matter how small or insignificant. "Whatever we pay attention to grows. ... Simply paying attention to something invests it with more energy. The Appreciative Leader chooses to pay attention to things he values, cares about, is happy with and wants more of. ... Appreciative processes are used to amplify things—to create social reality by increasing the amount or frequency of something you want more of." (Bushe, 2001).

"Fanning" refers to processes that feed and encourage desirable qualities and behaviors, as one might fan embers into flame. This is more than simply rewarding desired behavior with praise and affirmation, though that is certainly part of the process. Bushe refers to the Pygmalion Effect, research demonstrating that in the absence of any objective measure of ability or motivation, a positive mind-set on the part of a teacher or other leader can produce powerful effects on the behavior of a randomly selected student or employee. What is more, other research referenced by Bushe shows that even when there is no visual or auditory contact between the holder(s) of a mind-set and another person, quite dramatic behavioral changes can be effected through directed (willed) mind-set alone. I have myself experienced dramatic improvements in rapport between another and myself when I have initiated a visualization process called "kything," or spiritual presence in which I imagine a loving connection between the other person and myself (Savary and Berne, 1988).

I think of the cultivation and constant maintenance of a positive mind-set as the exercise of "good will," as contrasted with manipulation. Its essence is a willed belief in the existence and ultimate accessibility of normal human virtues in each person, no matter how unpromising the individual may appear at first. That belief is then exercised in shaping one's behavior towards the other.

For most people, cultivating such a belief requires a lot of practice. To me, such practice is love in action, in the form of empathy and compassion. I see compassion as the aspect of love that is the "safest" manifestation of love in organizations. I think we all know that when love takes the form of bonding or pairing its effects can be wild and even destructive, and I believe it is this aspect of love that is feared in organizations, to the point where use of the word is usually avoided. Compassion, on the other hand, makes no demands, creates no dependency or collusion, and inflames no jealousy or competition. It can effectively be practiced by anyone willing to make the effort, with or without

positional power or authority, and it is, so far as I know, free from unintended negative outcomes. I believe that the evidence so far is that it works.

Creating lasting changes, whether in an organization, an individual, or both, is far from easy or simple, but to me it seems there is good reason to believe that anyone, at whatever position in an organization, can make a start. There is much to learn and to practice, and my aim in this short paper has been limited to sharing my own beginnings in this learning and practice. In addition, I have tried here to suggest some practical ways love may be applied in organizations. Beyond that, I wish to advocate for a great deal more conscious inquiry into the workings of love in the workplace.

January, 2009

References

It is hard to find references to love in organizations. Here are some I have been able to locate, along with references for the citations in this paper. The two authored by myself are available from me on request. I welcome correspondence with readers, and I may be reached at the addresses given below.

Bushe, Gervase, "The Appreciative Self." Chapter 7 in **Clear Leadership**. Palo Alto: Davies-Black, 2001.

Bushe, Gervase, "The Appreciative Leader and Appreciative Change Processes." <http://www.clearlearning.ca/pdf/aplc.pdf>, 2006.

Ferris, Rodney. (1988), "How organizational love can improve leadership", **Organizational Dynamics**, Vol. 16 pp.41-51.

Harrison, Roger, "Strategies for A New Age." **Human Resource Management**, 22, 3, 209-234, 1983.

Harrison, Roger, **Organization Culture and Quality of Service: A Strategy for Releasing Love in the Workplace**. London: Association for Management Education and Development, 1987.

Savary, Louis M. and Berne, Patricia H., **Kything: The Art of Spiritual Presence**. New York: Paulist Press, 1988.

Wheatley, Margaret J. "Love and Fear in Organizations" **National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Newsletter**, Volume 20, Number 5., 1998

1760 Compass Blvd
Freeland WA 98249
<rogerh@whidbey.com>