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# Leadership: What's love got to do with it?

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photo by David Mackenzie

IT IS COMMON BELIEF that “real” leaders are shrewd, decisive, action-oriented, results-driven, competitive and accountable only to the bottom-line. Our society reveres measurable results, financial success, analytical competence, and often, cutthroat competition. We tend to be sceptical of things that cannot be seen and measured, even our own feelings. We like to win, and we like winners.

Of course producing results and getting things done are important leadership qualities. I would question, however, whether our overemphasis of these traits fosters disastrous long-term consequences.

The practice of leadership is in crisis. According to the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, the public’s confidence in leaders across virtually all domains and sectors of society is extremely low. At

the same time, there is despair in the face of a wave of collapsing systems – from the fragmentation of families, to the bankruptcies of governments, and from pervasive environmental issues to a lack of apparent moral compass within the corporate sector. More and more people are recognizing that capable leadership was never in greater demand.

We also need a different kind of leadership, what we might call “authentic leadership.” According to researchers at Harvard, authentic leaders “demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their own values consistently and lead with their hearts as well as their heads.” They establish long-term, meaningful relationships and they “know who they are” – their self awareness is reflected not only in their ability to articulate their values and motivations, but is also consistently reflected in their actions and decision making.

**“THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT WE DO AND WHAT WE ARE CAPABLE OF DOING WOULD SUFFICE TO SOLVE MOST OF THE WORLD’S PROBLEMS.”**  
–GHANDI

When the demands seem to outstrip the capacities to deal with them, it is helpful to remember the words of Mohandas Gandhi: “the difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world’s problems.” I believe that our most valuable, effective (and neglected) capacities are less about *doing* and more about *being*, and the awareness of being. Recognition and cultivation of this awareness requires us to remember our fundamental nature, which I would suggest is *love*.

Humberto Maturana, noted Chilean biologist, has said love is the only human emotion that consistently generates the most productive and intelligent actions – capacities clearly essential to leadership at every level. This may seem like too simple a notion, yet human history reveals the tragic truth of its absence.

Let me share my experience of the relationship between authentic leadership and love and their absence. A few years ago, I began to ask myself: What if we base our leadership on a deeper self awareness, one that observes our state of “being” as well as the actions of our doing? What would it look like and feel

like? What difference could it make? What if we freed our leadership from systems of power and positional authority and instead used our leadership to build collaborative systems that unleash potential? What possibilities and results might be realized?

**MANY OF OUR LEADERSHIP PRACTICES ARE MOTIVATED BY FEAR, AND EVEN WHEN WE ARE NOT CONSCIOUS OF FEAR, IT IS OFTEN INSIDIOUSLY PRESENT.**

Neither an academic nor a leader of a large national or multi-national organisation, I have worked over the last 30 years in two moderately large social-sector organisations focused on serving girls and women, namely the Girl Scouts and the Young Women’s Christian Association. Most of that time, I have served as CEO. Based on that experience, there is no doubt in my mind that there is a significant struggle to generate social value while functioning within an organisation that puts a premium predictability and measurable results. Why? Because those values foster competition at the expense of relationships and kindness.

Success is determined not by the application of the latest and greatest management strategies, but mainly by the quality of the relationships within the organisation. This means how much love is present, not only between people, but also as a motivating force behind our decisions and actions. Very few organisations, even in human services, measure effectiveness and achievement by these standards: expressions of love, evidence of loving relationships and the resulting sense of well-being.

Unfortunately, we live in a society that fosters looking through the lens of fear while it tends to sexualize or trivialize our expressions of love. Many of our leadership practices are motivated by fear, and even when we are not conscious of fear, it is often insidiously present. Our work cultures and structures are rooted in the fear of some imagined consequence. In the worst of cases, organisations actually benefit economically from perpetuating fear.

Problem solving is the supposed insurance against a host of fearsome scenarios, and with it, our need to control people and outcomes escalates. We call this

leadership. This pattern of problem solving leaves an imprint of fear in our organisation's DNA, eventually permeating its culture and diminishing our individual, relational, and organisational well-being.

As I looked more closely at my own leadership, I saw a pattern of decision making that was often embedded in fear, following the legacy of our culture and the best intentions of previous leaders, boards and policy makers. Like the rest of us, they were reacting to the unfortunate realities of a litigious and competitive society. It is frustrating how human-service organisations continue to focus on avoiding any sort of risk – real or perceived. Our policies and procedures are overloaded with attempts to minimize risk.

Fear and the drive to compete left little opportunity for collaboration. I resolved instead to focus my leadership intention on love and building the conditions that foster well being and our collective and individual intelligence. My first challenge was to describe what love looks and feels like in an organisation. Even in an organisation like the Girl Scouts, we did not talk about love or well-being beyond our intense focus on the safety of the girls we served.

My new leadership practice was one of monitoring my fears and attachments to my authority. As I opened my heart and focused on listening deeply, I began to shed my unconscious habit of scanning for things to fix through quick judgment. This took courage because I had been valued for my problem-solving skills and ability to make rapid assessments.

As my behaviour changed, I noticed how quickly others on my leadership team joined me in this “new” approach. We had all been held in the grip of a deeply ingrained pattern and the privileges that hierarchical positions enable. We stopped looking for problems and jumping to short-term solutions. We began to see the success and potential that was previously invisible to us. Things that previously looked like problems or prey began to look more like opportunities and partners. A growing atmosphere of care, well-being and creativity began to permeate both our language and our behaviour. We increasingly would hear appreciation and gratitude expressed for one another, which eventually grew into expressions of love, understanding and collaboration.

As the conversational climate changed, we found

ourselves more comfortable with ambiguity. We began to ask deeper, more fundamental questions and sat more easily in the tension of not knowing. We started to regard “failures” as learning opportunities. The ethic of holding one another accountable began to feel more like supporting one another's achievements and encouragement to explore new innovations. Old habits of blame or of seeking permission from people in authority gave way to finding solutions and developing ideas that led more consistently toward meeting customer and client needs.



We became more skilful at inquiry, stopping and reflecting on our motives and realigning with our true intentions. As a result, innovation and collaboration was not something for which we had to set time aside; they emerged spontaneously. Our relationships with one another deepened, and we felt safe in sharing more of who we were as individuals, which led to a growing sense of well-being and belonging. In short, our love for one another grew.

The most powerful change across the organisation had little to do with precisely worded goals or strategy. The real magic of transformation happened largely because we stopped promoting fear and made more space for our loving natures as human beings – i.e. we made love our key leadership strategy.

## **Love and well-being**

Love is more than an emotion. It is also a state of conscious awareness and intention that shapes many behaviours critically important to any organisation,

including compassion, commitment, reflection, intuition, inclusiveness, forgiveness, kindness and care. The Institute for the Study of Love at Case Western University proposes that the essence of love is to affectively affirm, as well as unselfishly delight in, the well-being of others. It encourages us to care for and serve others.

### **RISKY OR NOT, WE MUST FIND WAYS TO BRING LOVE AND WELL-BEING BACK INTO OUR ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES IF WE ASPIRE TO MOVE LEADERSHIP OUT OF THE DOMAIN OF FEAR.**

The fullest expression of love therefore must consider the welfare of the whole – our whole selves and our common humanity. This may seem hard to sustain in a society that emphasizes competition, measurable results, and getting ahead. It is equally challenged by the general obsession with a notion of love that is defined by physical form, fashion, beauty and sexuality. We seem to have embedded in our language, our individual psyches and our societal constructs, the limiting belief that love is synonymous with sex. This makes even talking about, much less expressing, love in almost any organisation a risky venture. Risky or not, we must find ways to bring love and well-being back into our organisational cultures if we aspire to move leadership out of the domain of fear.

Visionary statements and brilliantly worded goals do not lead to substantive shifts in the organisational culture. If we want deeper and more trustworthy relationships, we need to better understand what is contributing to the culture of fear. We need to look honestly at how committed our organisations are to fear-based problem solving. We need to see our clinging to past successes when addressing current challenges.

Within our Girl Scout organization, hierarchical practices and structures had promoted short-term problem solving with many unintended consequences. In fact, being able to identify and then solve problems was perhaps the most frequently recognized and rewarded “leadership” skill. This drove those eager for promotion toward competition and performance at the expense of others – away from trustworthy, collaborative and loving relationships. Additionally, we were often stuck in patterns of trying to recreate success by replicating tried and true behaviour. This resulted

in seeing change, including innovation and creativity, as problems or threats. This was a vicious circle of actions and behaviours that remained invisible to us as long as we were wearing the lenses of fear.

When we finally saw these patterns, we had to refrain from some well-learned practices. We suspended individual performance reviews for two years and measured our successes through the accomplishments of teams, looking for achievements, innovation, collaboration and the evidence of success that had meaning beyond what could be readily quantified. We began to make time for listening to the full stories of events and activities. We started rewarding the sharing of mistakes and what had been learned through those experiences equally with traditionally recognized achievements. We learned to welcome surprises and became much more deliberate about conducting “no-blame autopsies.”

As we figured things out together, the environment and productivity in our organisation began to change. This change was the result of a natural assuming of accountability and leadership by individuals across the organisation who were valuing community with one another. Looking for love in our intentions grew into really loving to work together.

As we stopped competing with and blaming one another, and as we looked past our individual cultural and ethnic identities, we discovered that most of our organisation’s cultural pathology had grown out of hierarchical/patriarchal organisational practice. It was astounding for us to see how, in an organisation whose mission is focused on girls and women, we had unintentionally shamed not only expressions of love but other “feminine qualities” of leadership. We had internalised a culture which was overly invested in patriarchal habits and overly promoted command-and-control leadership qualities.

### **Balancing masculine and feminine leadership qualities**

Psychologist Carl Jung believed that feminine and masculine energies and qualities exist in each of us regardless of gender. Taoist philosophy also suggests that masculine and feminine archetypal poles are ideally maintained in a dynamic balance. This yin and yang dance can then yield the greatest wisdom to an individual, organisation or society. Sadly, the subordination

of the feminine in our culture has a long history, and that subordination is as damaging for men and boys as it is for women and girls. In other words, this imbalance squanders as much potential in men and boys as in women and girls.

As someone who has spent the bulk of my adult career working in service of girls and women, I feel that I have a well-grounded understanding of the issues women and girls face in education, career and society generally. There is lively debate and research that suggests a stronger presence of women in leadership would have fostered very different outcomes in our recent economic meltdown. The few financial institutions that did not suffer major losses had a higher proportion of women – a quarter to a third – in their leadership teams. Researchers postulate that women are less driven to make risky investments or are less likely to make decisions at the expense of others. That may be, but I question whether this is all a matter of gender. Perhaps more at issue is the subordination of feminine qualities in both men and women.



While I have experienced the social and very real constraints imposed on me as a woman, I am also painfully aware of the constraints men experience every day.

## WE CAN NO LONGER AFFORD TO SQUANDER ANYONE'S POTENTIAL.

My experience is that men are encouraged to preserve a mantle of masculinity at all costs. Any expression of what would be considered a feminine quality is treated with suspicion; remember that we reward and celebrate shrewd, decisive, competitive thinkers and doers. Reflective, intuitive, collaborative, compassionate and loving qualities are not often considered to be characteristics of “winners” and are rarely valued as leadership skills, especially when embodied by men.

Can we imagine our organisational cultures embracing new social arrangements which would include revolutionary ideas such as men being equally loving human beings as women? Can we imagine a world or even a multinational organisation where women are not considered by most people to be lesser, weaker and inferior leaders? The gender expectations we build into our cultures must be addressed if we are to create organisations that promote well-being and the kind of relationships that unleash human potential. As long as fear dominates, there will be a bias toward masculine leadership qualities.

We can no longer afford to squander anyone's potential. This is a time when organisations and communities will be transformed not because there are a few enlightened leaders, but because *everyone* shares in the responsibility.

### What's at stake?

The times demand that we step away from the shadow of fear and into our essential loving nature. These are times that require every one of us to be the leaders who lead our lives consciously and with an intention of love. I hope we come to see the end of positional and authoritative leadership that has for so long been overly empowered by fear. And I hope that love and the feminine qualities in all of us are no longer subordinated and trivialized.

I believe in the inherent ingenuity and wisdom of each person. Over, and over, I have witnessed the expression of this in people who are placed within an environment of love and respect. Creation of these conditions in our working environments is the work of leadership.

Together, we have the ability to navigate through

the complexities and radical changes which are the hallmark of this time. This requires each of us to stand up to the insidious nature of fear-based thinking, reactionary problem-solving, and domination-based relationships. The nobility of leadership has for too long been lost in these pathologies. I believe the *only* antidote powerful enough to address the pernicious culture of fear ... is **love**. ■■■



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