Why Fostering a Culture of Companionate Love in the Workplace Matters by Knowledge@Wharton

For some employees, a typical day at the office might begin with a barrage of work-related questions from impatient colleagues who have been awaiting their arrival. For others, it might start off with a series of cheerful greetings from co-workers, questions about how their family members are doing or perhaps an offer to grab a quick cup of coffee before the daily work deluge begins.

According to Wharton management professor Sigal Barsade, there is reason to believe that the latter scenario — which illustrates what she refers to as "companionate love" in the workplace — is not only more appealing, but also is vital to employee morale, teamwork and customer satisfaction.

Companionate love is shown "when colleagues who are together day in and day out, ask and care about each other's work and even non-work issues," Barsade says. "They are careful of each other's feelings. They show compassion when things don't go well. And they also show affection and caring — and that can be about bringing somebody a cup of coffee when you go get your own, or just listening when a co-worker needs to talk."

To demonstrate the value of companionate love in the workplace, Barsade and co-author Olivia "Mandy" O'Neill, assistant professor of management at George Mason University, performed a 16-month longitudinal study at a long-term health care facility involving 185 employees, 108 patients and 42 of those patients' family members. Barsade and O'Neill set out to measure the effect of companionate love on emotional and behavioral outcomes of employees, as well as on health outcomes of patients and the satisfaction of those patients' family members. The results of their study are included in a paper titled, "What's Love Got to Do with It? A Longitudinal Study of the Culture of Companionate Love and Employee and Client Outcomes in the Long-Term Care Setting," which will be published in an upcoming issue of Administrative Science Quarterly.

To conduct their research, Barsade and O'Neill constructed a scale designed to measure tenderness, compassion, affection and caring. But rather than simply asking the participants if they felt or expressed those emotions themselves, the researchers asked to what degree people saw their colleagues expressing them. They also brought in independent raters to observe those four elements of the facility's culture, as well as asked family members to rate the culture. Last, they added ratings of "cultural artifacts" (how the culture is displayed in the physical environment) that reflect a culture of

companionate love — for example, having spaces with a “homey” environment, throwing birthday parties, etc. “We have a very robust measurement consisting of all the possible lenses on the culture of the unit,” Barsade says.

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This study was among the few to focus on emotional culture rather than cognitive culture, Barsade notes. “What we’re talking about is shared emotions. Our field tends to focus on shared cognitions of people at work, yet an understanding of shared emotions of people at work can also have important outcomes for organizations.”

When Love Is Infectious

Barsade and O’Neill believed long-term care would be the ideal setting to test their hypothesis that companionate love is a positive force in the workplace. “In these facilities, you have people dealing with residents who are there for a long time. You have employees who have chosen a caring industry,” Barsade says. “So it was a natural first stop for looking at the concept of emotional culture. Even though this has to do with how employees are treating each other, and not necessarily how they are treating their clients, we argue that if they treat each other with caring, compassion, tenderness and affection, that will spill over to residents and their families.”

One of the most significant findings in the study was that a culture of companionate love reduces employees’ withdrawal from work. Barsade and O’Neill measured employee withdrawal by surveying workers about their levels of emotional exhaustion and by studying their rates of absenteeism. They found that units with higher levels of companionate love had lower levels of absenteeism and employee burnout. The researchers also discovered that a culture of companionate love led to higher levels of employee engagement with their work via greater teamwork and employee satisfaction.

This could occur even with employees who don’t necessarily feel the high levels of companionate love that exist in their units. “The view that dominated our field for 20 years was that anytime you engage in emotional labor — meaning you’re changing or regulating your emotions for a wage –that’s going to lead to burnout,” Barsade says. “What we’re suggesting is that it’s more complicated than that. It may well be that even if you don’t start out feeling the culture of love — even if you’re just enacting it — it can lead to these positive outcomes. In addition, there is the possibility that as you enact companionate love, you will begin to feel it over time.”

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The study also found that the culture of companionate love rippled out from staff to influence patients and their families. “Certified nursing assistants rated the mood of the residents, and the outside observers rated the culture. Those outside observers could predict that [patients] would be in a better mood if the culture among the staff was more loving,” Barsade says.

Barsade and O’Neill measured patient quality of life based on 11 factors commonly used to assess long-term care facilities, including comfort, dignity, satisfaction with the food and spiritual fulfillment. Across the board, Barsade says, there was a positive correlation between a culture of companionate love and patient quality of life.

Interestingly, however, when the researchers looked at the health outcomes of the patients, they didn't find as much of an impact of companionate love as they expected. They measured three of the most critical outcomes for patients in long-term care: unnecessary trips to the emergency room, weight gain and incidence of ulcers from spending too much time in bed. They found that while a culture of companionate love did lead to fewer trips to the ER, it didn't affect weight or ulcers.

"We statistically controlled for factors such as general patient health, physical functioning and degree of cognitive impairment, so it was quite a conservative test," Barsade says. "But health effects are not always directly seen. I wouldn't give up on it."

Beyond Health Care Settings

There is one key question raised by Barsade's and O'Neill's research: Does companionate love matter in workplaces that don't revolve around providing love and compassion to clients? To answer that question, they performed a second study involving 3,201 employees in seven different industries. Using the same scale they employed in the long-term care facility, the researchers found that a culture of companionate love positively correlated with job satisfaction, commitment to the company and accountability for performance.

The relationships they found in the long-term care setting held steady. "What we found is that companionate love does matter across a broad range of industries, including those as diverse as real estate, finance and public utilities," O'Neill says. "But the interesting thing is that even though the overall baseline of companionate love can differ across industries, there was as much of a difference within industries as between industries. Overall, we found that — regardless of the industry baseline — to the extent that there's a greater culture of companionate love, that culture is associated with greater satisfaction, commitment and accountability."

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O'Neill and Barsade believe that their initial findings in other industries argue for further investigation. And additional studies are already underway. For example, O'Neill is working with Wharton management professor Nancy Rothbard on a study involving firefighters. "What we see is that companionate love acts as a helper for the problems they struggle with at work and outside of work," O'Neill says. "For example, [firefighters] tend to have high levels of work-family conflict because of the stress that comes from the job. Companionate love actually helps to buffer the effect of job stress and work-family conflict on other outcomes."

Barsade says her study in the long-term care facility has also inspired her to examine the role of other aspects of emotional culture at work. "We don't just have one type of emotional culture," she says. "We happen to be looking at a culture of companionate love here. But you could have a culture of anger. You could have culture of fear. You could have culture of joy. The natural second step is to look at how these factors influence one another, and then to look at the whole picture of how cognitive culture and emotional culture intersect."

Already, though, the research seems to be pointing to a strong message for managers in all industries, Barsade says: tenderness, compassion, affection and caring matter at work. “Management can do something about this,” she says. “They should be thinking about the emotional culture. It starts with how they are treating their own employees when they see them. Are they showing these kinds of emotions? And it informs what kind of policies they put into place. This is something that can definitely be very purposeful — not just something that rises organically.”