



## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP: A BRIEF LOOK AT LOVE AND THE ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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According to Robert K. Greenleaf,

Love is an indefinable term, and its manifestations are both subtle and infinite. But it begins, I believe, with one absolute condition: unlimited liability! As soon as one's liability for another is qualified to any degree, love is diminished by that much. Institutions, as we know them, are designed to limit liability for those who serve through them. (2002, p. 52)

This is consistent with Winston (2002) and with a research model I proposed in 2003, both attempts to begin to name the connection between love and servant-leadership. Winston admonishes leaders to begin to see followers as hired hearts instead of hired hands, stating this unique call to servants-as-leaders begins with agápao love. Agápao love is moral love, love that directs the servant-leader toward the right or the ultimate good, at the right time and for the right reasons. The servant-leadership model I proposed identified love as the cornerstone of the servant/follower connection. To fully understand the important crucible where love meets servant-leadership, a more thorough understanding of love is needed.

### LOVE AND ORGANIZATIONS

Love is a mysterious concept, a concept that has been of great importance to both scholars and leaders (Daft, 2002; Myers & Shurts, 2002). Love has been acknowledged as having great importance by philosophers, theologians, and all who are interested in ultimate concern and ultimate



meaning (Myers & Shurts, 2002). The various interpretations and understanding of the word *love* have been both perplexing (due to the concept of being “in love”) and complex, creating a constrained definition as well as an assortment of typologies. According to Daft (2002), the day for love in organizations has come, and gone should be the days of leading with fear. Fear as a motivation tends to manifest in organizations as arrogance, selfishness, deception, unfairness and disrespect. In contrast, leading and serving with love generates dignity, respect and honor. Love, says Daft, is a potent form of leadership—a way of living that can also open the door for improved performance. Love has the power to create, and the result can be emotionally connected employees, lives that are rich and balanced, and an environment that allows members of the organizational community to take risks—learn—grow—and move to better ground. Gunn (2002) calls love in leadership a force, one that causes leaders to lead with understanding, gratitude, kindness, forgiveness and compassion.

#### AGÁPAO LOVE

Love is considered the cornerstone of all virtues (Sanders, Hopkins, & Geory, 2003), providing a sense of meaning and fulfilling the higher needs of the community. Love creates legitimate discernment and presence (Yu, 1998). This corresponds with what Winston (2002) has shown about love in the workplace setting: that *agápao*, or moral and social love, includes “embracing the judgment and the deliberate assent of the will as a matter of principle, duty, and propriety” (p. 5).

This perspective of love for leaders today is about actively considering the needs of followers along with a willingness to learn the giftings and talents of each individual. The leader who leads with *agápao* love has a focus on the employee first, then on the talents of the employee, and lastly on how this benefits the organization.

*Agápao* love is a component of servant-leadership (Winston, 2002; Patterson, 2003), a leadership in which the leader is emotionally, physically, and spiritually present (Ferch & Mitchell, 2001). According to Autry



(2001) this presence takes the form of availability with responsibility. Servant-leaders are genuinely interested in the lives of followers (Crom, 1998), and consistently build people up and have a goal “to grow less and less as others grow more and more” (Turner, 2000, p. 85).

For the servant-leader, love is unconditional and fosters esteem and the excellence of the people, as well as a belief in humanity—specifically, that all humans have value in their own right (Wagner-Marsh & Conley, 1999; Russell, 2001; Russell & Stone, 2002). Leaders who lead with love exhibit feelings and foster understanding, gratitude, kindness, forgiveness, and compassion (Gunn, 2002). The servant-leader, invested in love, serves the best interests of others.

#### LOVE IN LEADERSHIP

A recent article in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* (2004) states there is new insight into emotion at the executive level, specifically circling around the concept of love. The language of love, as in “I love my people,” has become an accepted paradigm of leadership; in fact, in some circles it is the preferred paradigm. A mature love, capable of forwarding social movement that is both enduring and complete, evokes in people their own life-giving and energized nature, and reflects Daft’s (2002) leadership notion that it is “the heart rather than the mind that powers people forward” (p. 187).

But what does love look like in the workplace? According to Gunn (2002), love makes people whole, opening the doors for faith and hope while liberating people from self-criticism, self-imposed limitations, isolation, and the ensuing diminishment of others. According to Gunn,

When we lead with this power, we encourage without effort. We guide without rules. We direct without saying much. We see with our ears and listen with our hearts. We are confident without bluster. We are certain without worry. We can be firm without being mean. We can ask people to do much without feeling guilty. We can step aside so others can step up. (p. 12)



## LOVE IN ACTION

How a leader's maturity is manifested in the organization can be seen in the lives of those who lead with love. A look at William B. Turner of the Synovus financial corporation provides valuable insights. Following this, I will briefly detail interviews I conducted with three organizational leaders on the connection between love and leadership. To give a miniature cross-section of leaders, I interviewed a minister, a military leader, and a business leader.

### WILLIAM B. TURNER

William B. Turner is best known for his leadership in the financial industry, which some might consider a cold or uncaring field, and yet William B. Turner has led with love. In his book *The Learning of Love: A Journey toward Servant-leadership* (2000), William B. Turner (retired chairman of the Executive Committee of Synovus Financial Corporation and member of the board of directors for the Coca-Cola Corporation for eighteen years) spends a good deal of time talking about how he learned to love the people who worked for him. Turner credits his leadership training to his father and grandfather. Observing their leadership styles, he learned his most vital servant-leadership understanding: listening to others.

Turner recounts one life-defining circumstance from his grandfather, who owned a textile mill during the Great Depression. Textile mills were shutting their doors and calling it quits in this financial bust time; companies were unable to sell their products, causing pile-ups of useless inventory. Turner's grandfather decided to keep the mill running; in fact he had no money to pay employees and issued scrip to them enabling them to buy groceries. The decision to remain open, made from love, kept many people from starving during an extended and grueling time of economic hardship. Serendipitously, when the Depression ended Turner's grandfather was able to sell the large accumulation of stockpile.

What would cause a man to make a business decision that is seemingly



illogical? Love for people was chosen over profits and losses. For Turner's grandfather, the decision was an extension of a life well-lived. This made a tremendous impact on Turner, who made a conscious decision to lead by creating a culture where people could grow in three ways: materially, intellectually, and spiritually. He developed an organization that is a meaningful place to work. Turner proposes a love that is both a noun and a verb. From this elegant understanding, he furthers a persevering and artistic look at organizational life by showing that loving someone is more about asking how they want to be loved than about how you want to love them.

#### INITIAL THOUGHTS ON LOVE AND LEADERSHIP FROM THREE LEADERS

The first leader I interviewed was a minister. When asked about the connection between love and leadership, he commented, "One leader reflects on his own leadership by asking himself how much he really loves the people he leads—this reflection sets a new standard by which he views his leadership." He further proposed that a good leader should ask about motivations, and whether her or his motivations encompass both hidden and inner attitudes toward people, as well as overt actions. Giving an introductory look at the vulnerability love requires, he said,

I've always known I want to love the people I lead, but I've never stretched the concept as far as to say that love is the way I lead them. I admit it frightens me a bit, because I have no idea where it might take me — or even what the next step might be.

The next leader interviewed was a military leader. He provided the following perspective on love in organizations:

Love is evident in care people demonstrate for one another. When I walk through work areas—we call them duty sections—agápao love presents itself through the tones in the various conversations around me, offers for help, and inquiries about task and non-task challenges each is facing. People who really care for one another usually work for a leader who models such behavior. Naturally there are exceptions (loving workers in



hostile environments and hostile workers in loving environments), but if an entire duty section demonstrates concern for one another both on task and off, the leader is likely influencing (encouraging, demonstrating or at least allowing) such a climate.

He further stated that love can be boiled down to one word—*listen*. His manner of leadership seeks to listen rather than be heard, to understand rather than be understood. He reported that listening causes a leader to respect and genuinely care for each person:

Five minutes of genuine attentive listening (with a desire to feel and understand) will expand our ability to relate and our desire to help our followers. A desire to serve—to make others happy—is the essence of love. If we don't listen to those we lead, we will never understand them enough to love them.

The military leader provided insight into loving those with whom we work, postulating that love compels leaders to desire happiness, success and rewards for others, and furthermore that this deep desire for the welfare of others can—and will—transcend animosity, disagreement and contention. Furthermore, an environment of harmony can surface, and notably, productivity increases as well as efficiency. Another benefit is the realization of a more positive atmosphere in which people feel more confident and more creative. On a counter note, commenting on the potential drawbacks of love in the organization, he stated,

Genuine care for others is hard work requiring a sustainable leader effort to love, care for and support employees. In addition, *agápao* love is a love that demands action due to the desire to want to do for others in order to help them reach their goals and solve their problems. And sometimes this action will require a balance or a significant sacrifice from the leader—a high calling.

The third leader interviewed, a business leader, engaged a perspective



on love and leadership that included an interior spirituality. Spirituality, he signified, is meant for the deep service of others:

Because our company was shutting down a distribution center that I ran (back in the mid-1980s), I felt it was extremely important to help prepare all of the associates that I managed (mostly hourly and well over 100) to be as prepared as possible to transition into other jobs. With my management team, we (on our own. . .not the HR group) developed a series of seminars to share with the folks a) what to wear to interviews, b) how to interview, c) how to prepare résumés, etc. During the process, because I was the building manager and had a fair degree of autonomy, I would pray openly for our entire workforce. This was an expression of. . .love toward and for them.

This business leader offered the following insight—he tried to set a thankful tone in the workplace by listening to and forming enduring relationships with employees. For those who desired, he led them in spiritual formation meant to deepen and enrich the interior of the person. Servant-leadership as a vocation, for him, meant creating a legacy in others that would in turn affect a future generation. He recounted a personal story of how an employee came to talk with him openly about a lifestyle choice, expecting rejection. The leader chose to love, spent a good deal of time with the employee, and deepened the relationship. Although the employee eventually left the organization, the dignity of the relationship endured. Leading with love, for this leader, is about time spent in service to others. He stated,

Any time I know of employees who have had loved ones in the hospital, I make it a point to send notes of encouragement to them and their family, letting them know I'm praying for them and to be a support should they need anything from me or the company. The principle here is taking time for the little, but very important things to express care and support for others.

Because of his understanding of love, he takes time to visit anyone who is in the hospital (on one occasion visiting a new employee who was



seriously ill for several hours). He stated that he takes time to pray with office staff that wish to and forms conversations in the organizational community that are vulnerable, transparent, and open; he is genuinely interested in the lives and the well-being of the employees and their families. He explained, "It is important to be sensitive to others and maintain flexibility to be sure that employees' families' needs are met." He reported, "Commitment and productivity is higher at work when a leader shows willingness to put others' needs over that of the business."

When asked about potential drawbacks to creating a culture of love in the organization, he offered the following insights:

I'm not sure there are really any drawbacks when leaders love those with whom they work. Leaders, as responsible agents of an organization, are required to work with excellence for the company. This expectation in no way nullifies how we are to reflect and show love toward one another. Frankly, if we "love well" and continue to always pursue excellence as leaders, the best possible results will occur both for people *and* the organization. While we'll never do both of these perfectly—thank God for daily do-overs!

#### LOVE AND THE ORGANIZATION

Servant-leadership offers a viable environment for love and leadership, a form of social and moral meeting place that is as powerful and transforming to the interior of the individual as it is to the culture of the organization. In the postmodern age the notion of death can take on an overly Western significance, one imbued with neglect, fears, regret, and isolation. Yet to those who love, love returns to them. Love in leadership can be a refreshing solvent to the acid that so often inhabits organizational life. The servant-leader, having developed a life of meaning and dignity, draws others toward meaning and dignity by loving well. In turn, the servant-leader is well-loved.





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