

Discussion Paper

Can the Study of Love Help Business Build More Trusting Relationships with Society?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of love and how it may be applied to help business build more trusting relationships with society. We explore the concept of love in three ways: first, as a positive emotional state that is associated with many pro-social benefits. Second, we explore how love can be differentiated from other positive emotions. Lastly, we offer a definition of love that we believe can be applied by business to build trust relationships with multiple stakeholders, starting with employees and extending this to other stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers and communities.

Keywords

trust, business and society, love

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Introduction

Positive Emotions, Positive Stakeholder Relationships and Positive Business Outcomes

Much recent work links positive emotions in stakeholder relationships with organisational success (Money et al, 2017). It seems that organisations that have stakeholders who trust, admire and respect them also perform consistently better in terms of measures of financial performance (Fombrun et al, 2015). Organisations with good reputations also seem more financially robust when there are crises that affect an entire market or sector (Brooks et al, 2016). The mechanism by which this works appears to be relatively straightforward: having positive emotions towards an organisation is seen to encourage stakeholders to behave more positively towards an organisation, which, in turn, is linked to better cash flows and other measures of financial success (MacMillan, 2004). More specifically, when feeling positive towards an organisation, customers are likely to show more loyalty, employees are likely to be more engaged and communities are more likely to give companies the benefit of the doubt if things go wrong (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2003). The benefits of building positive emotions with stakeholders can be large. A recent study in the employee context, for example, found that people working in high-trust vs low-trust companies reported: 74% less stress, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives and 40% lower burnout (Zack, 2017).

While the academic evidence for the value of being held in positive emotional regard by stakeholders seems to be strong, little research has explored the nuances between different types of positive emotions, with much research using trust and emotional appeal as proxies for positive emotion (Fombrun et al, 2015; Money et al, 2017). In this paper, we seek to address this lacuna by focussing on love, a positive emotion that has received a lot of attention in the academic literature in the last few years, but is yet to be embraced by the management scholars and practitioners. In doing so, we seek to explore how advances in the study of love could be applied to the context of business.

Love as a Positive Emotional State

Love is seen by many scholars to be part of a broader category of positive emotions that includes joy, hope and happiness (Goleman, 1996, 2004). In interpersonal relationships, love is associated with concepts, such as trust, cooperation and other pro-social behaviours (Duck,

2007, 2010) as well as long-lasting and meaningful interaction (Gottman, 2011). Fredrickson (2014) distinguishes love from other positive emotions by suggesting that love has a relational focus – that is, love focuses people positively towards another person or entity. As such, love is seen to be one of the most important pro-social emotions because it is suggested to have a radial positive impact. The process of emotional contagion, the mechanism by which emotions seen to be contagious, appears to play a big part in this: when a person holds positive feelings that are focussed on others this may encourage the relationship partner to return this positivity and also spread it in their wider relationships (Goleman, 2004). Furthermore, Fredrickson (2014) argues love can help people develop a sense of purpose and meaning because in developing connections, people develop a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves.

While Fredrickson puts much emphasis on the positive relational focus of love, earlier theorists have explored aspects that can lay the foundation for holding others in such a positive regard. Ellis (2005) advocates that showing love for others depends upon holding a sense of love towards the self. For instance, Ellis suggests that unconditional acceptance of the self is an important foundation for building positive relationships with others. The author defines unconditional acceptance as when a person ‘fully and unconditionally accepts himself whether or not he behaves intelligently, correctly, competently and whether or not other people approve, respect or love him’ (Ellis, 1998). This approach to understanding the foundations of love fits well with theorists, such as Lewis, Amini and Lannon (2000), who see love as being built upon mutual interdependence and deep understanding of another. Love is therefore seen as a consistent, mutual and willing interdependence that is sustained over a period of time. It is one where each person takes care of another, driven by a strong attachment to each other. The benefit of this mutual interdependence is that both thrive and are resilient to the peaks and troughs of life.

Indeed theorists, such as Gottman (2011), suggest that love is built upon an acceptance of the self that extends to the acceptance of others. Acceptance of the self and others is another example of how love can spread pro-social energy in relationships. If a person feels accepted, they are likely to accept others too. This leads to a relational state where people accept and value themselves and others, even when there are differences between individuals. Lietaer (1993) labels this acceptance “valuing the deeper core of the (other) person, what she potentially is and can become”.

What could this mean in the context of business?

Trust in business is seemingly at a low level (CBI, 2017; Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018). Business and business leaders are amongst the least trusted of groups, with corporate failures, such as Carrillion and tax avoidance; by companies, such as Google, Starbucks and Facebook, eroding trust in business even further (Hillenbrand et al., 2017). Taken in context of political uncertainty, following events, such as Brexit and advent of fake news, has led many commenters to suggest that business is facing a crisis of trust (CBI, 2017). While business and business leaders acknowledge that they need to improve levels of trust with stakeholders, it is not clear that they have the mechanisms to do so (Hillenbrand et al, 2017). We write this brief article in the hope that lessons from the study of love may provide a new perspective on how business builds trust with society.

Early theorists (see Lewis et al., 2000) exploring love in context of society have openly questioned the role that business plays in the lives of stakeholders. They suggest that while many interpersonal relationships are based upon unconditional acceptance and mutual dependency, relationships between stakeholders and organisations are problematic in this regard. Essentially, they argue that the attachment and loyalty stakeholders have towards corporations are not often reciprocated.

While we acknowledge that there are many different perspectives, opinions and descriptions of love, we have chosen to explore love as an emotional state that brings a number of pro-social benefits, such as trust and cooperation, which are widely acknowledged to create value for business and its stakeholders. In doing so, we propose a definition of love that we believe may be useful to organisations to consider as a starting point in building trust in stakeholder relationships. As such we suggest the following definition: 'Love is a positive emotional state focussed on another person or entity that has its foundation in the unconditional acceptance of the self and others'.

With such a personal and emotional definition of love, one might ask if it is possible for business to embrace the concept of love, especially with its focus on financial targets and quarterly reporting? For an answer to this question, it is perhaps useful to look to recent theories in the field of management and leadership, for it is here where organisations are seen to form their identities, cultures and ways of operating (Money et al, 2017).

Early theorists such as Autry (1991) argue that good management is "largely a matter of love" (p.17). For Autry, the expression of love is integral to leadership because leadership is a

relational construct that depends on positive regard between leaders and followers. Cadwell and Dixon (2010), page 14, also suggest that love is a critical competency of the modern business leader suggesting that an expression of leadership should include 'unconditional acts of respect, caring and kindness that communicate the worth of others and that promote welfare, growth and wholeness'. It seems reasonable, to these authors at least, that a starting point for the application of love in business could be the relationships organisations have with employees. If employees do not hold themselves and their leaders in a positive regard, how can they build positive and trusting relationships with other stakeholders? The research on love reviewed in this paper suggests that a positive regard for the self is a foundation of holding lasting positive regard for others. Fostering intra- and interpersonal acceptance between employees therefore becomes our suggested starting point for business to build trust with society.

More specifically, building on our definition of love and applying it to the field of stakeholder relations we pose the following questions for researchers and practitioners:

- How can organisations foster environments where employees are encouraged to be more accepting of themselves and others?
- How can the acceptance of the self and others be embedded into the wider stakeholder engagement strategies of organisations?
- What is the role of senior leadership in embracing a loving approach in business?
- How can the impacts of incorporating love and acceptance into business strategy be measured?

Conclusion

In this short paper we have outlined the crisis of trust facing business at this present moment in history. We have also outlined the benefits that organisations could achieve if they were able to build more trusting relationships with stakeholders that are based upon more positive emotions. Despite many efforts it seems that business is systemically failing in its attempts to build more trusting relationships with stakeholders (CBI, 2017). In this paper we offer a fresh approach, which challenges business to embrace new insights from the study of love when building relationships with stakeholders. We argue that this approach is different from previous approaches in that its starting point is different. First, we suggest it is important to start internally, with employees, and, secondly, we suggest that organisations could usefully start the process by encouraging employees to be more accepting of themselves and others. We believe

that this greater sense of acceptance can act as the foundation to build reciprocal positive regard between and organisation and its other stakeholders such as customers, suppliers and communities. Overall we believe that embracing the concept of love will give organisations and researchers a fresh approach when it comes to building trust and positive relationships. The value of the concept in the field of business is yet to be tested, but we write this paper with the hope that researchers and organisations will embrace the concept of love and explore if it provides the many benefits to business it already offers to the world of interpersonal relationships

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