Shifting

the

Energy

How Love Leads Remarkable Teams

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CONTENTS

Introduction

I was rushing across the lobby on my way to play another 10-hour game of Beat the Clock. I came in early that day so I could get a head start on my too-long to-do list before my boss arrived and upended any hope of making a dent in it.

As our paths crossed, a woman who worked in another part of the building intruded on my rising crescendo of anxiety and worried thoughts. "Have you seen the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*?" she asked with half a grin.

I stopped, shook my head no, and tried to muster a courteous smile to suppress my irritation at the interruption.

She told me the movie was about a domineering, insulting boss who gave subordinates impossible tasks and made them feel worthless so they would work harder in an attempt to win the boss's admiration.

"The character is just like your boss," she said. "You should watch the movie."

I did.

And she was right.

A few days earlier, I found out that at least two of my coworkers were seeing counselors to help them deal with stress and health problems brought on by our bully of a boss. Until then, I thought I was the only one.

That's when I decided I needed to do something about it. Not just to save my own mental health and another trip to the hospital for stress-induced muscle and stomach issues, but to shift the entire paradigm.

To redefine what it means to be an effective leader.

No one should have to endure degrading, draining work environments. As human beings, we were made for more.

In the years to follow, I would research, study, teach, and apply the concepts of a healthier style of leadership and hope for the day when toxic managers like the one in the movie were no longer welcome in the workplace.

Today is that day.

There's been a shift in the energy on a scale far greater than any of us have seen during our lifetimes.

Expectations have changed.

A streak of global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, jolted us into a new era where employees renegotiated the terms of their work lives, and we've collectively acknowledged that emotionally healthy work environments lead to long-term, sustainable business performance.

Managers who bully, belittle, manipulate, abandon, or demean are no longer the norm.

They're being replaced by true leaders who inspire, encourage, protect, and appreciate the people they have the privilege to lead.

These are the leaders of today's remarkable teams.

Definitions & Disclaimers

Before we begin, I'd like to share a few notes with you.

Leader

I'll use the word "leader" often. For our purposes, this includes anyone with the ability to impact employees' performance and their quality of life at work, including:

- People who have been officially assigned supervisory authority, including supervisors, managers, directors, chiefs, vice presidents, and executives.
- People without formal supervisory authority who are responsible for the work performance of others. This includes project managers, program managers, and team leaders.

- People who have the authority to make decisions that have a significant impact on other employees' performance and quality of life at work. This typically includes some individuals who work in Human Resources, Corporate Communications, Legal, Finance, and Information Technology.

Manager

I'll use the words "manager" and "management" rarely.

When I do use them, it's typically with a negative connotation. This reflects a decades-long transition away from the authoritarian tactics taught in earlier versions of management training. Today's more human-centered approach focuses on *leadership* and distinguishes it as a more collaborative, emotionally healthy method for influencing others in the workplace.

The nuance is in how a person is taught to use their formal authority. Today's environment requires leadership, not management.

My Research

I'll reference my research with more than 200,000 people at certain points throughout the book. Here are the details of that research:

- Most of the input was collected from 2017 to 2023.

- The employees and leaders included in the research represented multiple industries, job types, and geographic locations. Candidly, the majority of the employees worked in North America.

- The research methods used most often were a combination of surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, polls, and workshops.

- I was the lead or principal researcher for all the projects, and I collected input from employees and leaders directly. In fewer than five cases, I had the assistance of another researcher who would facilitate one focus group while I was facilitating another at the same time. In all cases, I was the researcher who analyzed the input, translated it into research insights, and delivered the results and recommendations to executives.

Modifications for Privacy and Confidentiality

All quotes and examples are from real people and based on real scenarios I encountered during my work as a researcher and consultant. In some cases, I've modified non-essential identifying characteristics to protect confidentiality and the privacy of the individuals and organizations depicted.

Medical Advice Disclaimer

Many portions of this book refer to behavioral science, including concepts from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and neuroscience. However, the guidance provided here should not replace advice provided by a licensed medical professional.

Love Advice Disclaimer

This book explores how the concept of love is expressed in the workplace through connection, protection, and appreciation. At no point should any of the information be misconstrued as advice related to expressing romantic feelings in the workplace. Nor should it be confused with encouragement or permission to express such feelings at work.

Chapter 1:
Our Existential Epiphany

For years, we were speeding toward a new era of work life where employees enjoyed more freedom, spent less time in the office, and escaped the oppression of workplace bullies.

And then COVID-19 took us full throttle.

Suddenly, we were accelerating directly into the exact work scenarios we had been dreaming of – with many of us working from home, having more control over how we spent our time, and feeling supported by a community of caring coworkers and leaders.

But there was a twist.

It also came with a realistic threat to our collective survival as a species and a depth of uncertainty about the future that many of us had never encountered before. Our lives and the lives of the people we loved were in danger. As more time passed and the virus wasn't eradicated, it became clear that we were never going back to the lives we knew.

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The pandemic-induced lockdown extended beyond the spring of 2020 and a convergence of other major experiences would solidify the transformation already in motion. In addition to the disruption to our rhythms and routines, we experienced civil unrest, economic disruption, natural disasters, supply shortages, and additional health crises that heightened our fear and tightened our focus on how work life should fit into our definitions of *life* and *living* in the broadest sense.

This forced many people to consider a cascade of questions about purpose, priorities, success, and wellbeing.

It sounded like this:

- *Should my job be more important than my family, friends, and health?*

- *Is it worth it to give this much of my life to work or to the company I work for?*

- *Should job titles and money be this important to me?*

- *Could I ever return to a toxic work environment?*

- *Do I ever want to go back to being overworked, overscheduled, exhausted, and miserable?*

Their conclusions were clear as we watched the Great Resignation and the Great Reshuffle unfold. We experienced unprecedented job movement as the number of remote positions multiplied, negating the need to include commute time on our list of considerations for contemplating a career change.

Suddenly, everyone had many more options. They didn't need to return to bad bosses or hustle cultures. They were free to build a work life that left them feeling energized yet calm, challenged yet balanced.

That's when employees collectively restructured the terms of the social contract with their employers, the unwritten agreement for what they're willing to give for what they get in return.

But when there's a gap in that give-get agreement, something has to go. During the pandemic, employees started to go – to companies with healthier cultures and roles that fueled their souls, to jobs with better hours, to remote positions that allowed them to work from home, and to entirely new career fields that matched their passions and interests. Some even left the workforce altogether.[1]

And that was our great existential epiphany formed under the pressure of the pandemic: We wanted to live with more purpose and joy. We wanted to enjoy life and fill it with more moments that felt meaningful. We wanted to have a positive impact on others without going back to feeling completely depleted.

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That's when it became clear that the landscape of the work world – just like every other aspect of our lives – had been permanently changed.

That *we* had been permanently changed.

And so had our expectations of the leaders we were willing to follow at work.

Chapter 2:
Our Accomplices

A s we transitioned into roles and routines that reflected our new life priorities, we were assisted by three societal trends that served as accomplices aiding our escape from toxic cultures, bully bosses, overwork, and living in near-constant survival mode.

Trend #1: Wellbeing is in, burnout is out.

The life-threatening pressures of the pandemic and other global situations – along with the loneliness of lockdown and the pervasive plague of burnout – had taken its toll.

Grief, anxiety, and other natural human responses to such experiences highlighted the need for greater access to care for emotional and psychological struggles.

A long-term shortage of mental health professionals meant the new surge of people needing care were left looking for alternatives. This opened the door for therapists, coaches, and wellness experts offering education and advice via social media, online courses, and do-it-yourself workbooks.

As more people became familiar with the connection between our experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors, the alarming depth of harm from toxic work environments came into clearer focus.[2] The newly expanded genre of high-quality, do-it-yourself wellbeing resources educated us on topics that were long considered taboo in most conversations. Childhood trauma, complex PTSD, generational trauma, dysfunctional family dynamics, personality disorders, attachment styles, nervous system responses, self-acceptance, body image, emotional abuse, and personal boundaries became part of the vocabulary – even at work – as we started to see the direct link between our experiences, personalities, and decisions.

Discussions about the limitations of our human bodies also gained momentum around this time. Some proposed we had been treating workers like mechanical objects with linear, predictable levels of output instead of human beings whose performance levels fluctuate and are influenced by a host of factors, both internal and external. I call this *honoring our humanness*, and I believe it to be one of the critical paradigm shifts of this era. For decades, we somehow lost sight of what was necessary for humans to function at optimal levels while working.

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Part of the optimal human performance equation includes limiting emotional exhaustion, so it was perfect timing when workplace civility and psychological safety became popular priorities. Just like physical safety in the workplace was regulated in the U.S. under the Nixon Administration with the signing of the Occupational Health & Safety Act, requirements for protecting employees from the psychological hazards of the workplace were getting closer to becoming law at the time this book was written (2023).[3]

A portion of the focus on psychological safety in the workplace centered on reducing burnout and overwork. The U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, included "Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being" and "Health Worker Burnout" as two of his top six priorities for 2023.[4]

Citing statistics from the American Psychological Association, the U.S. Surgeon General shared that, in 2022, 81% of employees reported that they "will be looking for workplaces that support mental health in the future.[5]" To curb burnout and improve wellbeing, talk of reducing the workweek from five days to four also gained traction in other countries and some U.S. states.

In parallel to the burnout and psychological safety discussions, the term "duty of care" started to appear more often in the context of leadership

responsibilities.[6] Historically, it was primarily used as a legal or medical term to define an individual's obligation to avoid careless acts that could harm others. In the context of workplace wellbeing, "duty of care" signified a mind shift where leaders at all levels would be expected to intentionally protect the mental health of their employees.

Trend #2: Technology expanded our options.

Remote work became increasingly more convenient as the availability and features of video call and collaboration tools continued to expand during and after the pandemic. This allowed many employees to gain greater flexibility and control over when and where they worked. However, it also opened the door for the Great Resignation and Great Reshuffle as droves of employees left their positions to join new teams with hopes of finding better work experiences.

Unfortunately, the reshuffle didn't mean people redistributed evenly across open positions. As a result, many organizations faced long-term staffing shortages and found it difficult to fill empty roles. That translated into unmanageable workloads for the employees left to juggle the responsibilities of multiple positions as companies scrambled to fill vacant slots.

That's when a series of non-human heroes entered the picture. Widespread access to machine learning, robotics, and artificial intelligence arrived just in time to alleviate a portion of the growing workload. Adoption of this type of technology rose rapidly as businesses used it to help boost productivity, cut costs, and reduce the pain from prolonged staffing shortages.[7]

Technology replaced some functions and enhanced others by partially automating certain tasks like information gathering for business intelligence teams and order fulfillment in distribution centers.[8] It also freed up employees' time to focus on more "human" activities like creative thinking, deepening relationships, artistic expression, imagination, innovation, and applying instinct over logic.

Trend #3: Gen Z entered the workforce.

While I would typically recommend that we avoid using sweeping generalizations about specific generational cohorts, it's fair and helpful to do it in this situation.

As Gen Z continued entering the workforce during the pandemic and Millennials moved solidly into leadership positions, these groups started shifting the expectations of what today's work experience needs to be.

Millennials, the oldest of whom were in their early 40s, were looking for meaningful work, to be involved in discussions and decisions, and to be treated fairly. "More than any other generation, [Millennials are] seeking equity, transparency, flexibility and purpose. And they're not afraid to quit if an employer doesn't meet their needs," wrote Great Place to Work in 2021.[9]

The top priorities for Gen Z, the oldest in their mid-20s, included working in a positive culture, wellbeing, financial stability, and performing meaningful work that makes an impact. Unlike Gen Xers and Baby Boomers, Gen Zers weren't as interested in having the corner office or the "badge of honor" from burning out.[10] Generally, Gen Z employees were starting their careers the way many people from older generational cohorts were trying to adjust theirs – by choosing a life well lived over a life dominated by work.

Business Insider called this a "slow up" – "a purposeful shift in slowing down productivity with the aim of a better work-life balance."

In my interviews and focus groups with Gen Zers, I asked for their reactions to the accusations from older generations that Gen Z employees took too much time off and didn't work as hard as older generations did at that age.

Their responses often made me take shorter breaths.

They described watching their parents – especially their moms – suffering through chaotic, exhausting, stressful years of overwork. It strained relationships in the family, created a tense climate in the household, and left kids feeling emotionally abandoned and neglected. "I needed my mom," one woman told me. "I really, really needed her, but she didn't have anything left to give to me. I knew right then that I would never be like her.

Chapter 3:
That Can't Be Right

"The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –"

~ Emily Dickinson
from "Tell all the truth but tell it slant"

W hile working as a researcher and consultant, my primary responsibility was to uncover the root causes of culture, engagement, and communication challenges so I could advise executives on how to fix the problems and improve performance.

As I examined the conditions that led to high performance over the long term, one of the things I studied closely was the difference between the leaders of top-performing employees and the leaders of poorly performing employees.

I wanted to know, specifically, what caused individuals to thrive in one environment but struggle in another.

The top-performing employees were consistently high-drive, high-energy, and high-impact. That meant they were quick to solve problems, eager to innovate, and first to volunteer. They had a growth mindset and a can-do attitude. They were also resilient and enthusiastic. They loved the work they did and the people they did it for. And they were the employees who reliably hit their performance targets and produced strong results.

I should point out that they weren't like this 100% of the time. They were human beings, so that's not realistic (or healthy). However, overall, on average, this is how they were at work.

Compare that to the poorly performing employees who were overall low-drive, low-energy, and low-impact. You might describe them as withdrawn and disengaged. They were cynical, negative, resistant, and slow to take action. They struggled to complete their work on time and barely met the requirements of their jobs.

But that wasn't the whole story.

What was interesting about this group of poorly performing employees was that many of them *wanted* to perform better and they often *did* perform better when they worked with different leaders. So what was causing the people with the potential to be high performers to stay trapped at the bottom?

In early 2023, I was preparing to give a presentation on employee burnout at the annual conference of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology when "love" unexpectedly revealed itself as the antidote to toxic cultures, burnout, and bad bosses.

I thought I might break out in hives. I knew "love" was an unwelcome term in most business settings.

Yet, there it was. Beautiful, symmetrical, like a perfectly formed Valentine's Day heart – the desire for the experience of love in work life.

Let me quickly clarify that love of the Cupid's arrow type was not what I found. Instead, it was love employees defined as an experience that left them feeling connected, protected, and appreciated.

> Let me quickly clarify that love of the Cupid's arrow type was not what I found. Instead, it was love employees defined as an experience that left them feeling connected, protected, and appreciated.

And it was a perfect match to the experiences that leaders of high-performing employees were creating for their teams. I need to tell you more about those leaders, but let's talk about the bad bosses first.

There's so much to learn from good bad examples.