

Leading with Love

The Courage to Lead with
Vulnerability, Empathy, and Compassion



Jean Claude Helou

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"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Maya Angelou

Preface — A New Way to Lead

Leading with love. The first time I heard those words, I stopped in my tracks. The words sounded beautiful; they made sense. Somehow, they captured exactly what I had been feeling about my team and the organization I was part of. At the time, I was leading a Professional Services team at a national consulting firm in Canada, and those words felt like a mirror. They described how I was showing up: with vulnerability, empathy, and care. Leading with love. The words felt defiant. A little rebellious. Maybe even revolutionary.

For a long time, leadership has been defined by direction, structure, and outcomes. So many theories have been proposed, and countless books written, each offering ways to become a better leader. And many of them work. I have leaned on several throughout my career, and they have been helpful. But even then, something always felt incomplete.

Some theories focus on the *traits of leaders*. Qualities like confidence, determination, or intelligence. Others view leadership as *a set of skills*, including communication, strategic thinking, and emotional intelligence. Then some models examine *behaviour*, how leaders act and motivate or guide others.

Eventually, the field shifted. Scholars began to look at context. *Situational and contingency theories*¹ argue that effective leadership depends on the setting, the people, the task, and the environment. Later came more values-based models. *Transformational leadership* emphasized vision and inspiration. *Servant leadership*² centred on putting others first. *Authentic leadership* is focused on self-awareness and integrity. *Adaptive leadership* enabled us to navigate change and uncertainty effectively.

Each of these models brings value. I have seen them work. I have worked within them. So why write this book, and why does it still feel like something is missing?

How are you feeling about the world of work today? I will share with you how I feel and what I have heard from colleagues, friends, mentors, and the people I have led. Something has shifted. Especially after the pandemic, the ground feels less steady. There is more uncertainty. More fragility. More people are quietly struggling with mental health and emotional exhaustion.

And something else. Disconnection. According to Gallup, fewer than two in ten adults say they have a best friend at work. The number of people with five or more close friends has been shrinking for over a decade. This erosion of meaningful relationships feeds loneliness and burnout, not only at home but

¹ Northouse, Peter G. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. SAGE Publications, 2021

² Greenleaf, Robert K. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Paulist Press, 1977

also on the job³. Conversations feel thinner. Work has become more transactional. Even isolating.

Something in the emotional atmosphere has changed, and nowhere is it more visible than at work.

This is where traditional models fall short. Not because they are wrong, but because they were designed for a world that no longer exists. A world where people were expected to be stoic and separate from their feelings. A world that kept emotion and execution in different boxes. That is not our world anymore.

What we need now is something more human. A way of leading that sees people not as job titles or performance metrics, but as whole, feeling beings.

Leading with love does not reject traditional leadership. It builds on it. It is about integrating heart and skill. It is about presence and purpose. It is about bringing humanity into motion.

Some call it *human-centred leadership*. I like that term too. Because at the end of the day, we are all human. Complex. Emotional. Imperfect. Full of fear and longing and quiet hopes. We need people who understand that. Leaders who see others that way, and see themselves that way too. Leaders who know that every person

³ Gallup. State of the Global Workplace: 2022 Report. Gallup, Inc

on their team carries a different story, shaped by different values, moving through different realities.

This book is an invitation to explore a different way to lead. A way I came to understand slowly, through years of being led and leading, of struggling, stumbling, recovering, and growing. These ideas came from experience, not theory. From honest conversations, real people, and real turning points.

And to be honest, I did not write this because I had it all figured out. Quite the opposite. It was stepping away from leadership that gave me the freedom to reflect more deeply. Without deadlines. Without deliverables. It gave me space to ask the questions I hadn't had time, or the courage, to ask when I was still in the seat.

This is a book for the next generation of leaders. The ones who want to lead with more care, more courage, and more humanity. The ones who want to build organizations where people thrive, not in spite of their well-being, but because of it. Where results are achieved through trust, joy, and meaning.

If that resonates with you, I hope you continue reading.

Part I: The Calling — Why Love Belongs in Leadership

Chapter 1 — The End of the Old Way

Why the Old Models no Longer Serve Us

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2019 and continues to impact our lives, was a turning point for society. It profoundly changed our behaviours, our values, and what we expect from work. Faced with fear and mortality on a global scale, many of us became more aware of our emotional and mental well-being. The way we work and the way we lead have changed, perhaps forever.

Many traditional leadership styles are no longer effective in today's world. They often fail to inspire people and can even cause harm. The *Grand Resignation*, a wave of resignations following the pandemic, revealed that people were not just dissatisfied with their jobs. It was also a strong signal that they wanted better work environments that value humanity.

Burnout, Disengagement, and Fear-Based Systems

One clear sign that our relationship with work is unhealthy is burnout. Burnout is more than just being tired; it is a state where we feel mentally, physically, and emotionally drained. This exhaustion takes away our energy, focus, and happiness. When burnout occurs, it causes people to feel disconnected, even disassociated, and this can lead to a breakdown in trust, creativity, and performance.

Gallup found that nearly 76 percent of employees experience burnout at least sometimes, with 28 percent reporting that they feel burned out very often or always⁴.

But burnout is not a personal flaw. I once watched a top performer come undone, not because she lacked skill or discipline, but because no one saw she was drowning. Someone who used to perform at the highest levels in the competitive consulting industry gradually became unreliable, inconsistent in her work, and even sloppy at times. She received help and support, and her career continued to progress well, in part because an exceptional manager recognized her human struggles and provided the necessary coaching and support to adjust her workloads.

Burnout is not a weakness. It is a signal, a reflection of environments and systems that are failing. Unmanageable

⁴ Gallup. Employee Burnout: Causes and Cures. March 13, 2020.

workloads, recognition that is missing and communication that is unclear. Above all, it is closely linked to leadership.

The World Health Organization defines burnout through three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. All three are more often shaped by culture and leadership than by personal capacity⁵.

It would be unfair, though, to blame leaders alone. Most are doing their best within systems they did not create. Unfortunately, good intentions are no longer enough. Leadership is the single most powerful factor influencing whether people stay or leave, whether they feel seen or ignored. Gallup and Workhuman found that employees who feel appreciated by their leaders are 56 percent less likely to be job hunting and four times more likely to feel connected to their workplace culture⁶.

Recognition, a basic expression of care, is one of the most powerful tools leaders have. When it is missing, trust and engagement begin to fall apart. When leadership does not reflect the realities people are living through, it can quietly and deeply erode emotional well-being at work.

⁵ World Health Organization. World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All, 2022.

⁶ Workhuman and Gallup. Empowering Workplace Gratitude: Global Study Findings, 2021–2023.

Through control, mistrust, emotional neglect, communication breakdowns, overload, and avoidance, I have seen leaders, often without realizing it, cause real harm. Not because they lack good intentions, but because pressure, fear, or old habits frequently take precedence. What starts as a push for excellence or a way to manage risk can gradually erode trust, safety, and connection. People may begin to feel ignored, unsupported, or even scared. Over time, this damage affects not just morale but also the core of the organization. Here are some negative traits in leadership that can impact the emotional well-being of an organization:

Control and Mistrust

Micromanaging, eroding trust. When you oversee every detail or insist on doing things your way, it sends a message of doubt. This stifles creativity and heightens anxiety, making people feel constantly second-guessed.

Displaying inconsistent behaviour, causing emotional instability. When your moods or expectations shift, you leave your team unsure of their standing. People begin to walk on eggshells, unsure of what is expected or what will trigger a reaction.

Showing favouritism and bias, fracturing morale. When recognition or opportunities are unevenly distributed, it damages trust and cohesion. People start to feel that fairness is not available to all.

Emotional Neglect

Not recognizing people, making them feel invisible. When effort goes unnoticed, people begin to question their value. Even the most driven employees lose energy and purpose over time.

Ignoring personal struggles leading to isolation. When you fail to notice or acknowledge what someone is going through, it creates distance and deepens emotional fatigue.

Not showing empathy, stripping away humanity. When you ignore emotional signals, relationships can become transactional in nature. A cold formality replaces the warmth that builds a sense of belonging.

Communication and Safety Breakdown

Communicating poorly, creating confusion. When you are unclear or reactive, you leave your team guessing. Without clarity, people struggle to align, to trust, or to feel confident in what they are doing.

Criticizing people in public breaks psychological safety. When feedback is delivered in ways that humiliate or shame, it not only wounds but also silences. People stop speaking up or taking risks.

Punishing vulnerability and shutting people down. When honesty is met with judgment or punishment, people learn to conceal their true selves. Innovation fades. Authenticity disappears.

Overload and Avoidance

Overloading teams, sending the message that people do not matter. When you allow impossible workloads to pile up without intervening, it suggests that issues of output outweigh concerns for people. That message is demoralizing.

Avoiding hard conversations and letting problems grow. When you dodge conflict, you may think you are protecting harmony, but in fact, you are allowing dysfunction to take root. Without truth, trust decays.

We have normalized many of these behaviours. But they have a cost.

What Leadership Without Love Has Cost Us

Leadership without love has cost us.

It has impacted trust. In workplaces characterized by control or fear, people tend to stop speaking openly. They protect themselves instead of collaborating.

It has reduced our sense of belonging. Too many workplaces treat people as resources rather than as humans. When care is missing, people disconnect. They show up, but not fully.

It has limited our creativity. Love in leadership creates the safety needed to take risks. Harvard professor Amy Edmondson, who coined the term psychological safety, found that teams with high safety speak up more, admit mistakes, share ideas, and grow faster. Her research shows that this is not a soft idea. It is a proven driver of performance and learning⁷.

It has prevented retention. People do not leave jobs. They leave leaders. They leave places where they feel invisible or replaceable. Leadership without love drives people away.

It has had a significant impact on our health. Emotional exhaustion and chronic stress are not personal failures. They are signals of

⁷ Edmondson, Amy C. *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Wiley, 2018.

systems that ask too much and care too little. When leaders prioritize productivity over people, the damage is long-lasting.

It has cost us meaning. Work occupies a significant portion of our lives. When it becomes disconnected from purpose and relationship, people begin to feel that their efforts do not matter.

Leadership without love might deliver results in the short term. However, the long-term cost is high, both for individuals and culture, and ultimately for achieving lasting success.

Now we face a choice. We can continue with the old way. Or we can create something more human, a way of leading where people are seen, valued, and able to grow and thrive.

This book is not about blame. It is about curiosity. If the old way is breaking down, then we can begin to imagine and practice something better.

Love in Action

Personal Reflection Questions

- In what ways have I experienced leadership that made me feel unseen, unsafe, or overworked?
- Have I ever led in ways that may have unintentionally contributed to burnout or disengagement?
- What outdated leadership habits might I still be holding onto?
- How has my understanding of “strong leadership” changed since the pandemic?

Leadership Micro-Practices

- Pause before assigning a new task to consider the team's workload and emotional state.
- Make recognition visible and regular; name contributions and their impact.
- Replace performance-only conversations with ones that include personal check-ins.
- When feeling the urge to micromanage, ask a question instead of giving an instruction.

Team Conversation Starters

- What does emotional safety look like for you in a team setting?
- When have you felt truly seen and supported by a leader or peer?
- What behaviours make it harder for you to do your best work, and what helps?

Self-Commitment Challenge

Choose one outdated leadership pattern you recognize in yourself. Name it, share it with someone you trust, and commit to replacing it with a more human, love-based behaviour this month. Notice the changes in your energy and that of others.

Chapter 2 — What It Means to Lead with Love

Love as Clarity, Care, Courage, and Accountability

Let's explore how love shows up in leadership. Leading with love takes courage. Courage to recognize that the humanity of our team comes first. It is only by valuing each individual that you can create sustainable results. It also takes courage to rise above criticism from those who still believe in older, more rigid models of leadership.

Courageous leadership shows up in everyday actions. It is not always loud or dramatic. Often, it is quiet, steady, and deeply human. It means being honest, acting with integrity, being open, and questioning what feels wrong. These acts of courage are choices we make. They shape how we communicate, hold ourselves accountable, build relationships, and seek improvement. Each choice leads to trust, growth, and dignity in leadership. Let's examine these courageous acts more closely:

Courage in Communication

Speaking about complex topics with kindness: This means directly addressing difficult or complex issues while being respectful. It involves being honest without being unkind. When we share information openly and with kindness, we create a strong foundation of trust.

Giving and receiving feedback: Feedback should be a growth path, not a tool for judgment. When you lead with love, you offer feedback with care and curiosity, and receive it with humility, setting an example of growth for the entire team.

Courage in Values and Integrity

Making value-based decisions: Choosing what aligns with your values and those of the organization, even when it is inconvenient or unpopular. It means refusing shortcuts, standing up for principles, and showing your team that integrity is not negotiable.

Taking responsibility for mistakes: Owning your missteps openly, rather than shifting blame. When people take responsibility, they encourage learning and create a culture where accountability is safe and shared.

Admitting to not having all the answers: True leadership does not mean always knowing the answer. It means being open to wisdom from others. This kind of humility creates space for people to contribute, take initiative, and feel a sense of ownership.

Courage in Relationships

Being vulnerable first: By sharing your fears, doubts, or limitations, you create space for others to do the same. Vulnerability dismantles the myth that you must always be strong. It builds intimacy and invites trust.

Standing up for people: This means protecting others when they are excluded, disrespected, or placed in unfair situations. It is using your voice and your power to uplift others, especially those who may not feel safe enough to speak up for themselves.

Courage in Challenging Norms

Questioning the status quo: Love in leadership does not settle for what has always been done. It challenges systems, traditions, and habits that no longer serve people or purpose. It pushes for change grounded in dignity and inclusion.

Letting go of control: Trusting your team enough to allow experimentation, autonomy, and even failure. People who lead with love know that micromanagement suffocates growth, while freedom nurtures confidence.

In one of my early leadership roles, I had to confront a senior team member who was quietly undermining our direction and decisions. The situation was creating doubt and tension within the group. Many managers might have avoided the conflict or handled it with authority. I decided to handle the situation with love. I began by acknowledging what they had done and inquiring about their feelings regarding the changes that had occurred. I was surprised by their answer. They felt ignored and left out. That conversation helped us understand each other better. We were able to agree on expectations and move forward together. We solved the issue not because of my title, but through caring and clear communication. This experience taught me how love can change conflict into trust.

Clarity as an Expression of Love

Leading with love means being clear. You need to be clear about your values, purpose, and vision. Be clear in what and how you communicate. Show others how to align with those ideas.

Clarity is one of the most caring things a leader can provide. It doesn't mean having all the answers or controlling every detail. It means creating an environment where people know where they stand, what matters most, and how to move forward. Clarity gives people something solid to hold on to. It builds trust, focus, and calm in uncertain times. Here are just a few ways it makes a difference for both the leader and the team.

The Benefits of Clarity

Clarity builds trust: When you are clear, people do not have to guess. There are no hidden agendas. That sense of stability deepens trust and strengthens relationships⁸.

Clarity aligns effort: A shared direction helps everyone move in the same direction. It avoids confusion, reduces wasted effort, and unites people around a common goal.

Clarity reduces anxiety: Ambiguity creates stress. When communication is vague, people often assume the worst. Clear guidance helps people feel secure and steady.

Clarity empowers decision-making: When roles, priorities, and boundaries are well understood, people can act with confidence.

Clarity accelerates progress: When teams are not stuck decoding unclear messages, they can move faster and with purpose.

⁸ Edmondson, Amy C. *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Wiley, 2018.

Care Without Compromise

One of the most valuable qualities of love in leadership is the ability to care and to show it.

In my experience, caring leadership is not complicated, but it is intentional. It shows up in the small choices we make each day: how we listen, how we respond, how we hold space for others. It is less about grand gestures and more about quiet consistency. Caring people pay attention. They act with empathy and follow through with integrity. They see the person, not just the role. Here are some of the ways that care becomes real in leadership, not just in words, but in practice.

Caring Leadership Behaviours

Listening fully, without judgment: Caring people listen with their whole presence. They allow space for emotion, for struggle, and for story, without rushing to fix or dismiss.

Taking meaningful action: Care is not just a feeling. It is what you do with it. People who care make changes, offer help, or adjust expectations when someone is struggling. Compassion must be paired with responsibility.

Investing in people's growth: A caring person looks beyond output. They want to see their team thrive long term. They offer feedback, create opportunities, and advocate for people not just as performers, but as human beings with potential.

But care does not mean letting go of accountability. In fact, leading with love calls for even deeper integrity and commitment. Kindness is not weakness. It is a force that builds trust and inspires ownership.

I remember once delaying an IT consulting project because a team member quietly admitted they were overwhelmed. I spoke with the client, explained the situation, and asked for more time to deliver something we could all be proud of. We shared the work differently across the team, and not only did the project turn out better, but it also brought the team closer together. By caring for the team and their struggles, I received in return the commitment to delivering a high-quality product, delighting a customer who would have otherwise been disappointed.

Distinguishing Love from Softness

Leading with love is not indulgence. And it is not soft. It is strength guided by care. You can simultaneously love your team and hold high standards. You can lead by example and support a shared vision through both empathy and clarity.

Leading with love does not mean avoiding discomfort or lowering expectations. In fact, real love in leadership includes the courage to be clear, the strength to set limits, and the care to tell the truth even when it is hard. It is not about rescuing or pleasing. It is about supporting people while also helping them grow. Love becomes stronger when it is paired with honesty, boundaries, and accountability. Here are some ways leaders can lead with love without slipping into indulgence.

Love without Indulgence

Pairing empathy with accountability: A loving person listens with compassion and still holds people to high expectations. As Brené Brown puts it, Clear is kind. Avoiding hard truths is not kindness. It is a matter of confusion. Compassion means being honest with respect and transparency⁹.

Setting boundaries and consequences early: Love respects limits. Be clear about non-negotiables, such as deadlines, values, or behaviours, so that no one feels blindsided when they are enforced.

Giving honest feedback with care: Withholding the truth is not kind. A loving person offers direct and respectful feedback because honesty is a sign of trust.

Rewarding effort and growth: Support people through their struggles. Celebrate their resilience. Hold space for progress while still addressing areas that need improvement.

Living by the same standards you expect: When leaders hold themselves accountable, it builds a culture of fairness. Love is not about favourites. It is about integrity.

Leaders who lead with love inspire a sense of ownership and responsibility. Ownership means stepping in, taking responsibility, and finding solutions. It means being present when it counts. Accountability and care are not opposites. They can and should coexist.

⁹ Brown, Brené. *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* Random House, 2018.

The Five Domains of Love: Self, People, Organization, Stakeholders, Society

This book explores what it means to lead with love across five essential domains. Each one reflects a different layer of responsibility, ranging from how we care for ourselves to how we present ourselves in the world. Together, they form a leadership model rooted in courage, connection, and a more profound sense of purpose.

Five Domains of Leadership with Love

Love of Self means leading from a place of wholeness. It's about self-awareness, boundaries, and care. Leaders who love themselves do not lead from ego or fear. They lead from presence and clarity.

Love for People is about how we see and support others. It grows through empathy, curiosity, and the belief that every person has value and a story worth honouring.

Love for the Organization is about purpose, culture, and long-term health. It is not naive loyalty. It is the desire to build systems where people can do meaningful work and live their values.

Love for Stakeholders means caring for all those we serve and rely on. Owners. Customers. Partners. Communities. It is about respect, transparency, and relationships that create value.

Love for Society is the recognition that our leadership choices matter beyond the organization. It is a call to act with conscience, to consider justice and balance, and to lead with the world in mind.

Love in Action

Personal Reflection Questions

- Do I lead with courage when making difficult decisions?
- Am I clear with my team about what matters most and why?
- How do I hold myself accountable when I fall short of my goals?
- Do I demonstrate that I care through both listening and taking action?
- Have I ever let softness or a fear of discomfort prevent me from taking needed accountability?

Leadership Micro-Practices

- Name one courageous action you will take this week that aligns with your values.
- Ask a team member what clarity would help them feel more confident in their work.
- Offer someone constructive feedback to support their growth.
- Reflect on a recent mistake and share the lesson with your team.
- Create one moment this week to show care through follow-up or meaningful recognition.

Team Conversation Starters

- What does accountability look like on this team?
- How can we demonstrate care while also challenging each other to grow?
- What clarity do you need from me as your leader?
- What risks do you feel safe taking, and what holds you back?

Self-Commitment Challenge

This week, I will lead one conversation where I practise love as both clarity and care. I will establish a clear standard, express my confidence in the person's potential, and create an environment that fosters both accountability and growth. I will do this not to correct but to connect.

Chapter 3 — The Gift of Vulnerability

Why vulnerability is a strength in leadership

Leading with love can be hard. It goes against much of what many of us were taught. We were told to keep emotions out of the workplace. To stay professional, which often meant keeping a polite distance. To always appear in control. Within that mindset, love can seem like something that doesn't belong at work: too soft, too emotional, perhaps even distracting. But once you witness its effect, it is hard to unsee its power.

I learned this early in my career when I was tasked with building a team from scratch. I was the first hire for a new team, responsible for planning the expansion of a cellular network. Things moved fast. I had to recruit a few key people and get the project going. I took a straightforward approach: hire capable people, define roles, and start delivering.

My first hire was someone I had known back in university. Incredibly bright, especially when it came to numbers. Technically, he was brilliant. But right away, we struggled. Our working styles clashed. Although we were friends, I felt I needed to take on a more authoritative role. I kept things formal. I avoided emotional conversations. I figured being a little distant would help establish authority. Instead, it made things tense and awkward.

Eventually, I changed tactics. I started putting effort into the relationship. We had lunch together. We talked after work about life, not just projects. I listened more and tried to understand where he was coming from. And slowly, something shifted. The tension started to lift. We began to trust each other, and the way we worked together improved.

That experience stayed with me. It taught me that leading with emotion and openness is not a liability. It is often precisely what is needed. Connection builds trust. And love, in the context of leadership, can be a quiet source of strength.

Still, it takes courage to show vulnerability, especially in environments where confidence, certainty, and control are rewarded.

I once worked with an executive who was a senior leader in a retail organization. She had just stepped into a role where the team had been through a lot. They had seen several reorganizations. Promises had been made and broken. Morale was low. At first, she did what most leaders in her position might do. She took charge. She reviewed the data, made process changes, and gave clear direction. She wanted to come across as strong and capable. But something was missing. People did what she asked, but the room always felt flat. There was no spark. No real connection.

Then one day, during a meeting with her team, she tried something different. She put her notes down and spoke honestly. She told the

team that the job felt overwhelming at times. That she was still finding her footing. That she wanted to learn from them, not just lead them.

The room went quiet at first. And then, slowly, people began to clap. That moment changed everything. Meetings started to feel different. People began to speak up, to ask real questions, to share what was actually on their minds. That team went on to become one of the most open and high-performing groups in the organization.

She did not win them over with her plans or her authority. She earned their trust by showing her humanity.

Being vulnerable does not mean sharing everything with everyone. It is not about spilling every emotion. It just means being real. It is about saying what is true for you in a way that invites others to be honest too. When you drop the act of perfection, you make room for something more meaningful to grow.

Of course, there are risks. People might misunderstand you. Some might even judge you. But more often than not, people respond with care. Vulnerability, when it comes from a place of honesty and respect, builds connection. It does not take away from leadership. It deepens it.

Love might feel risky. But it is also generous. To lead with love is to offer part of yourself: your hope, your truth, your trust. That kind of gift has the power to move people.

Still, many people hold back. Even when they believe in the idea and have seen how love can work, they still hesitate. Let's explore the reasons.

Why Leading with Love Is Not Understood

Part of the reason is that leading with love challenges what many people expect leadership to be. It invites us to bring our whole selves to work and to make space for others to do the same. And that can feel unfamiliar. Even uncomfortable. Here are some of the reasons why people often misunderstand what it really means.

Why is Leading with Love Not Understood

It challenges tradition. Most leadership models still center on control, direction, and a clear hierarchy. In those models, vulnerability is often seen as something to hide. However, genuine respect is earned not only through authority but also through honesty and consistency.

It makes people uneasy. Many of us were trained to keep our emotions to ourselves. We learned to stay in character, to perform what we thought a professional should look like. That leaves little room for authentic connection.

It gets confused with weakness. Some people think that kindness means being soft or passive. But love in leadership requires more strength, not less. It takes emotional effort. It requires courage, patience, and a genuine willingness to show up.

It shifts power. When you stop trying to control and start trying to connect, the dynamics change. That can feel threatening to people who are used to the old ways. But connection does not make you less of a leader. It makes your leadership stronger because the trust you build lasts.

Why It's Still Worth It

Even with all the misunderstandings, resistance, and moments of doubt, leading with love is still worth it. It may not be easy, and it may not consistently be recognized right away. But it works. Not only in the results it helps produce, but in the kind of culture it creates. Here is why it matters.

Why It's Still Worth It

People remember how you made them feel. Long after the metrics fade, people carry memories of how they felt in your presence. Did they feel safe? Seen? Respected? That feeling becomes part of their story, and part of yours too.

Fear does not last. You can get short-term results by pushing people, but over time, it wears them down. Fear leads to silence, disengagement, and burnout. Love, on the other hand, creates belief. It draws out effort even when no one is watching.

Love creates safety. When people feel cared for, they open up. They take risks. They own their mistakes and share their ideas. This kind of environment is where resilience grows. It is also where real innovation starts.

Google's Project Aristotle, a significant study on team effectiveness, found that the most crucial ingredient in successful teams was not intelligence or skill. It was psychological safety: the sense that you could speak up without fear of shame or punishment¹⁰.

Love brings the leader down to earth. It allows you to lead as a person, not just as a role. You show up with your whole self, not just your strategy. And that helps others do the same.

Love spreads. When you show care, listen with genuine attention, and acknowledge people in a sincere way, others take notice. That kind of leadership catches on. It creates ripple effects you may never fully see.

¹⁰ Rozovsky, Julia. "The Five Keys to a Successful Google Team." re:Work, 2015

I remember boarding a plane a few years ago and seeing someone I had worked with while leading the IT vendor management team at a smartphone company. We had worked together virtually for about a year. He was based in London, and I was in Toronto. We had only met once in person.

He recognized me, came over, and said hello. Then he said something I have never forgotten. He told me I was one of the best leaders he had ever worked with. That our time together had changed the course of his career. He was already leading a complex team back then, and I had mentored him through a transition, helped him prepare for a promotion, and given him the space to step into his leadership role. His career took off after that. But what stayed with him was not the role. It was the way I made him feel. The confidence I had in him helped him believe in himself.

That moment meant a lot to me. It reminded me how lasting these quiet acts of care can be.

Recognition is one of the simplest and most powerful things a leader can give. A study by Workhuman and Gallup showed that people who receive regular and meaningful recognition are far less likely to feel burned out and much more likely to feel connected to their workplace¹¹.

Leading with love is not the obvious choice. It might feel uncertain. Some leaders are deeply loving outside of work but still struggle to bring that part of themselves into the professional world. But when they do, something begins to shift. Because love changes not only what gets done, but it also changes how it feels to do it.

It lifts teams. And more than that, it transforms the leader.

¹¹ Workhuman and Gallup. Empowering Workplace Gratitude: Global Study Findings, 2022.

Love in Action

Personal Reflection Questions

- When have I hesitated to lead with love because I feared being misunderstood?
- What beliefs have I internalized about love being unprofessional or weak?
- Have I ever seen someone lead with love and create extraordinary outcomes?
- What has it cost me, or my team, when I held back love in my leadership?

Leadership Micro-Practices

- Share one story this week where leading with love made a difference.
- Take one emotional risk this week, a moment of appreciation, honesty, or vulnerability.
- Reflect on a complex relationship at work and ask: How can love help?
- Acknowledge one leader you've worked with who inspired you through care.

Team Conversation Starters

- What makes leadership feel safe for you?
- How do you define strong leadership? Has that definition evolved?
- What would a culture rooted in love look like in our team?

Self-Commitment Challenge

This week, I will take one loving risk in my leadership. I will act not from fear of perception but from the clarity of my intention. I will choose to lead with care, even if it is misunderstood. And I will pay attention to what that opens up in others and myself.