

LOVE ADVICE

I've just been sent the summary of what four speakers said at a recent conference about 'inspirational leadership'. I bear no ill will towards conferences in general nor these speakers in particular. This conference, a regular one, is revered for being at the cutting edge of best practice when it comes to 'the people thing'. I'm choosing this one – I could have chosen any one of very many – precisely because the advice, by business leaders to an audience of their peers, is the 'best of its kind'. And I want to point out what is hollow at the heart of it.

This particular event had the theme of Love as a business driver, not just because it was held near Valentine's night, but because of this:

Passion-themed cocktails from the bar, heart-shaped eats and music ('the food of love', of course) all helped focus our minds last night as the [audience] gathered to distil out a love potion of our own: the formula for making your people passionate about their work and turning 'I love my job' from a rarity into the norm.

Now Love, even in 2003, may be a fairly unusual word in relation to business, so let's take a moment to review how we got here. How did we get to a point where businesses want this for their people?

Prior to the eighties, business was largely about Strategy, Structure and the efficient Management of resources. Then the Tom Peter's Excellence effect brought two ideas to the fore: that we have these things called customers, they are important and we ought to treat them that way. And that we have these things called people, they are important and we ought to treat them that way.

The two ideas are linked by a third idea: that if people are resentful, unmotivated and unskilled in their job, it will be impossible for them to treat the customer well, no matter how much our *technology* is up to date or how well are *processes* are engineered (these being the other two major concerns of the 90s).

And from these three ideas (plus changing social mores and historical events like the fall of the Wall etc) came the concentration on making sure that people at work are happy, creative, passionate, smart, collaborative and so on – so that they can serve customers better.

And who can argue with that?

Me. I can.

Because it does not matter now that what we want has changed from fear to love; what matters is that the mechanism for producing what we want is still the same:

**Bosses have a problem, they need to fix it;
here's what they should do.**

In all the advice given at this conference – and inevitably generated from this way of thinking about leadership – the boss is centre stage. The boss is told that certain beliefs, attitudes and behaviours will, once activated, have positive impacts on employees. Do this and passion follows in someone else. Do that and love is produced in someone else. *Do we really believe that life is that simple?* In all this advice, the boss is the lever for change: the cause of things.

That we are striving now with apparently more 'humane objectives (passion, love, creativity as opposed to Efficiency, Quality, Productivity) does not excuse the dismissal of the freedom and power of a whole community – 'the people' – to simply being the effect of bosses' behaviour. The Generic Employee (*Hi I'm Genny!*) was 'solemn' thirty years ago, and is now 'passionate' – but nothing has fundamentally changed.

Genny is still compliant. Still doing what she think her bosses want. Still dependent on leadership to think and feel on her behalf (does no-one stop to ask Genny if she is already passionate without her boss needing to model it for her?). Maybe Genny's turning on the passion because that's what pays the bills (it's in her appraisal for goodness sake).

[And in fact I'd argue that nothing's changed either on a surface level let alone a fundamental one – I don't meet any more of these 'passionate' people than I did ten years ago, despite masses of this advice going about, but I do hear and read a lot more about bosses being told that their people ought to be that way].

Let's look again at the conference objective:

... to distil out a love potion of our own: the formula for making your people passionate about their work and turning 'I love my job' from a rarity into the norm.

Note this *making*. It's your job as boss to make them do things and feel things. And making *your* people. You own them. That's why you can make them do things, because you own them.

Whether the gift I'm being given at work is Love or Fear, it is still done within a structure of compliance. Someone else decides what I need to be, and then I do it.

Have a look at some of the other traditional beliefs and assumptions embedded in this 'good advice', and let's imagine what Genny, the generic employee, might say in response:

[italics are direct quotes from conference summary]

1. Advice: Change is inside out

Bosses are told this:

And, since only half a dozen hands went up in answer to the question 'Do you love your job?' the very first thing I'd ask you to do is start, as Gerry Farrelly said, with YOURSELF before you try turning your people on to the idea that work (surprise, surprise) could be the fulfilment they've been looking for elsewhere in their lives...

Genny replies: Work as a medium for fulfilment – I'd go for that.

But not because of what a boss might do for me. I don't think a sense of self-fulfilment is dependent on someone else's behaviour. That makes my fulfilment conditional on you being what I need you to be for me to be fulfilled.

Now that makes me put a great deal of expectation on you which you probably can't sustain – so I'm engineering my own disappointment here. And it may even depend on me behaving in ways that make you what I need you to be for me to be self-fulfilled. So, for example, if my definition of fulfilment at work requires you never to be stressed, I may decide only ever to tell you what you want to hear. In other words, I will learn to create you as the boss I want, as opposed to the boss you may need to be given the realities of the world in which we are operating.

2. Advice: Bosses are models for what is required

Bosses are told this:

IT STARTS WITH YOU

Managers are very good at asking others to change. But, it's your behaviour that has to change first. I can't expect a disciplined approach from others if I haven't first displayed a disciplined approach to living our values myself.

Genny replies: Why do I need someone else to get me to behave correctly? I'm not my boss's child (unless I think, say and do that I am...) How come I'm waiting for you to be wonderful *first*? And how long should I wait before I start on me?

3. Advice: Make Work Fun!

Bosses are told this:

WORK AS DRUDGERY SUCKS

I came across a survey in 1998 that said: 21% of people enjoy going to work 48% blame long work hours and their managers for no longer having the time to read, reflect or even maintain relationships with loved ones.

So, I asked the staff how they saw their jobs and the answer was as a struggle.

Genny replies Of course. But that's not your fault. I've been trying for years to prove that work is a struggle. It's what I focus on and moan about with my peers. Maybe I do it because it feels like I'm doing something worthwhile and noble with my life that way. I have a cause, like a revolutionary. Join the struggle! Don't let the bastards grind you down!

4. Advice: Trust is a Good Thing

Bosses are told this:

THE SEE-THROUGH LEADER

Historically, people don't trust management because decisions are made

behind closed doors. So, we opened ours.

Genny replies: You can take them off the hinges for all I care but if I think that bosses are untrustworthy, nothing bosses do will make a difference. The closed door is in my head and is my creation.

Look, if there's a closed door then I can't make a difference. There's no point offering up my ideas. There's no point in letting my voice be heard. Nor will I ever have my ideas and performance tested in the harsh light of reality. Thank goodness. That certainly reduces the risk for me. If there's a closed door, I will never find out that I'm nowhere near as clever or insightful about this business as I sound in my head or in the bar. Or that I am. This openness is a bit of a gamble.

I think if you don't mind, I'll keep the closed door there, even though you tell me it's open.

5. Advice: being a great leader is a Great Thing to be

Bosses are told this:

I discovered the majority of people would take less money to work for a great leader.

Genny replies: Me too. Give me a great leader please. Thank you. That feels better. Oh, time has passed and she's not so great as she was. Can I have another please? Thank you. Hang on, this one is not as great as the last one. Get me another one will you please? Ta.

[Same conversation, funnily enough, had by employees of their bosses and shareholders/the City of CEOs].

Do you know what? I'm learning something here. I'm learning that I like great leaders much more than I like poor leaders.

That's what I've learned. So see what you can do for me on the leader front, will you?

Thank you for listening.

Actually, don't bother. Give me a crap boss again and I'll take the increase in pay...(besides, what sort of trade-off was that anyway? Greatness costs?)

The only reason I feel able to question these five pieces of 'good advice' is because I've given them myself time and time again. And I wondered why things weren't changing.

It's me I'm railing at as much as you.

Everyone in an organisation needs to be responsible for what they are experiencing and producing, and we all need to let go of the fantasy that it's the Leader's job or fault.

Finally, notice that the email summary sent out from this conference is headed **Action Required** – manifesting that other great assumption: *what you do matters* - when in fact no more action of this sort by bosses is going to help at all – but thinking by all of us might.

We don't need more leaders, we need more awareness.
Arnold Mindell
