

The Four-Letter Word that Makes You and Your Work Irresistible

by Mark Sanborn, CSP, CPAE

LOVE is a four-letter word in the business world. It makes us uncomfortable. It seems inappropriate or even taboo.

It can also make you and your work *irresistible*.

Let me explain:

Some years ago I wrote a book about an extraordinary individual who loves his work. My editor at the time deleted the word *love* every place I used it. Instead, he suggested using the phrase "generosity of spirit."

"Why not *love*?" I inquired.

"Because the word *love* freaks out businesspeople," he responded.

In my estimation, he was half-right. I think the word *love* freaks out most people, especially when applied to work. That's because more often than not it is associated with sugary sweet emotion or sentimentality. "I *love* my colleagues." "I *love* my customers." "I *love* the daily grind." Hollow. Superficial. Cliché.

Nobody I know loves every aspect of her or his job. I don't know of any perfect jobs in this imperfect world. I wish they existed. But I know that it is possible to love the work we perform, love the people we work with, and love the people we ultimately serve. We can do it without going over the top or becoming saccharine.

What does love look like when it shows up for work? If you pay attention, you'll notice it more often than you think.

A few months ago, I spent time at the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Atlanta. Everyone you'll meet at the Ritz is typically on top of his or her game. The staff refers to you by name and exhibits the attitude of "ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." Their unique brand of service will ruin you for all other hotel chains. But it also makes it challenging for a Ritz-Carlton employee to truly stand out.

After a night's rest, I entered the hotel restaurant and took my place in line at the breakfast buffet. A chef named Jeremy staffed the omelet station. "What can I prepare for you, sir?" he asked.

I ordered an egg-white omelet with lots of vegetables, ham, and a little cheese. "You've got to add a little cheese to an egg-white omelet;" I shared with Jeremy, "otherwise it's just too boring."

"Not my omelets!" he boomed. "They're never boring. That's because I add a special ingredient. He paused for effect. "I make my omelets with loooovvvveeee!"

His unorthodox pronouncement got my attention, but I smiled politely and took the plate. With one bite, I could tell that Jeremy had created an extraordinary dish for me. A few moments later, he came by the table to see how I liked it. I told him it was terrific, probably because it was made with love. Jeremy got serious for a moment and said, "If you can't do it with love, why do it at all?"

Chef Jeremy gets it. He understands that when we allow love to define who we are as we work, we become irresistible leaders with a contagious passion for what we do.

Defining the Irresistible Ingredient

To begin, we must reorient our conventional understanding of the term *love*, defining it as finding a deep-seated passion for what we do, the people we do it with, and the people we do it for. Regardless of the type of work we do, we can find fulfillment and meaning in at least one of these areas.

Take Sam, for instance.

One hot South African afternoon, a stranger photographed him carrying a frail 75-year-old man down the side of a busy road. The rescued man had missed his bus home and collapsed outside the Pick n' Pay where Sam Tsukudu has worked for twenty-plus years.

Sam's heroic act of kindness is just part of who he is. He walks a blind man home from the store every week and helps him unpack his bags. Over a decade of friendship, Tsukudu decodes what groceries Chandler needs, using bits and pieces of empty cartons and labels.

According to one of Sam's customers, "We can't imagine Pick n' Pay without him. He always comes to our rescue and says, "Don't fear; Sam is near."

I don't know Sam, obviously, but I'd be willing to wager he loves his work and his customers. When I first read the story, I was reminded of Duke

Ellington. He used to end his performances with "Love you madly!"

Can you say-or at least *think*-something like that at the end of your "performance" each day? Do you find satisfaction or fulfillment in your daily responsibilities? Do you enjoy working with your colleagues on specific projects or for a common cause? Do you desire to see your business or company have an impact on your town, city, or country? And if no, *why not?*

Our lives and work are marked by love when we seek to give instead of receive, focus on how we do something rather than just doing it, see a task as a privilege rather than an obligation, make relationships a priority, and move beyond simple action to the accompanying emotions.

Adding the Irresistible Ingredient

Kahil Gibran famously said, "Work is love made visible." That probably sounded exotic when back in seventh grade when we didn't have a job . . . but after a few years of employment, I wonder how many of us could quote him with a straight face?

But there are those who love-whether it be what they do, who they do it with, who they do it for, or all three-and they "make love visible" in variety of ways.

For love to make any difference it needs to be *demonstrated* and not simply *felt*; it needs to be both *attitude* and *action*. To remember what can be done to infuse the irresistible ingredient into any type of work, I use the acronym "P-R-A-C-T-I-C-E-S." If you can understand the powerful upside of adding love to your work, here's a way to do it regardless of your job or title or lack thereof:

Patience

I don't think Mother Theresa woke up in the morning and mourned, "Oh Lord, not more lepers!" She did some of the hardest work on the planet, and she seemed to be far more fulfilled and content than we who sit comfortably in our air-conditioned offices. How could that be?

Love is choosing to accept someone-imperfections, weaknesses, demands, and all-no matter his or her circumstances or needs. We need to meet our coworkers and customers where they are, not where we want them to be. Patience requires us to set our own expectations aside without indulging in frustration or negativity.

Recognition

According to Mary Kay Ash, founder of the eponymous multi-million dollar cosmetics company, "There are two things people want more than sex and money-recognition and praise."

Love is paying attention. We don't ignore that which we love, whether a person or an activity. Focus equals fondness.

Recognition motivated by love moves beyond the casual acknowledgment of existence; it does more than focus on *what is*. It focuses on *what could be*. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be." Not surprisingly, the recognition of another's potential often starts him or her toward its achievement.

We have to recognize the specific needs and desires of those with whom we work and those whom we serve. Applying the irresistible ingredient requires us to move beyond small talk to the deeper issues in people's lives. It's far too easy to judge a coworker or customer by how he or she looks or acts rather than doing the hard work of understanding why. Challenging ourselves to really know people is unusual in our culture, but the relationships we build will measure our success in the long run.

Appreciation

Friends of mine just launched an Internet company called Propadoo (www.propadoo.com). The idea is insanely simple: use the web to make it easy for people to give and receive "props" online. Want to give a service provider a recommendation? Do it instantly at Propadoo. Want your clients to know about the rave reviews others give you? Use Propadoo. Yes, there is a monetary payoff-referrals, buzz ,and increased search engine optimization-but the social driver is more interesting to me. Propadoo is about recognition and appreciation. Propadoo lets people use technology to send a message that says, "You matter. Your work matters. I appreciate you."

Appreciation comes from looking for what's right rather than being hypersensitive to what's wrong. It is about choosing to focus on the positive even when you can't ignore the negative.

Too often we forget to stop and express our appreciation to the people who serve alongside us and the people who serve us. From the smallest gesture-a smile or a quick internet "prop"-to the largest bonus or award, people need to know that their work matters to us. Our customers and coworkers will

respond positively every time we offer genuine appreciation . . . guaranteed.

Counsel

Don't tell people what they want to hear. Tell them what they *need* to hear. Just make sure you tell them in a way that they will listen!

I recall being put off by a highly incentivized sales professional in an electronics store until he confided in me that the DVD player I was about to purchase was inexpensive but laden with problems. He would have made a commission had I bought the unit, and yet he demonstrated his concern for me by sharing that insight instead. His interest in helping me make a good buying decision instantly changed my attitude about him.

Love is offering wise and insightful advice that is in the best interest of the receiver rather than the giver. When asked, it is easy to criticize or suggest the first thought that comes to mind, no matter its validity. A thoughtful input or response shows that we value the individual and care about his or her need.

Time

Love is taking time to address another's needs. In our lightning-fast world where the average attention span is less than two minutes, time is a valuable commodity and should be handled as such. By giving the gift of time to a coworker or customer, we show that we value them above all of the other things that cry out for our attention.

One of the most powerful love practices at work is the pause, making time to be fully present with another person. We ask each other "How are you doing?" all the time and never really mean it. How tragic!

Take the time.

Instruction

Teacher Tom Lewis started The Fishing School decades ago in downtown Washington, D.C., hoping to give children from a disadvantaged background a chance to succeed as adults. Recently, the team from ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* stumbled across Tom's school while working in the area. The camera showed shot after shot of bright-eyed children studying, working with their teachers, and playing in a broken-down building with heavy bars every window and door.

Interviewers asked the kids where they thought they might be if they didn't have the Fishing School. "On the street. . . . In jail with my brothers. . . . Maybe dead like my dad." Next, they asked what the kids wanted to be when they grew up. "Mr. Lewis said I can be a doctor someday if I study hard." "I want to be a pilot." "I'm gonna be the president!"

Best of all were the comments, "I want to be Mr. Lewis. I asked him to be my daddy because I never had one. I want to build my own school and teach kids just like he does."

One of my favorite teachers from high school taught a subject for which I initially had little regard. However, it soon became clear that he was as interested in his students as he was his subject, and he taught it in such a way that they would truly benefit from his instruction.

Love is teaching someone else with gentleness, discernment, and selflessness. By offering up our experience and hard-won knowledge, we can help others to avoid mistakes that we've made, achieve results that we've been able to achieve, and improve beyond what we've been able to accomplish. The most effective teachers walk alongside their students as they learn, appreciating their accomplishments rather than emphasizing their shortcomings.

Compassion

Of course we can all go through the motions-do the right things, implement the right practices and believe in the right ways-but *how* we do our work makes all the difference. Acting with passion and out of compassion is the difference between mundane and memorable.

Over thirty years ago I heard a highly successful entrepreneur speak. The only point I can remember is his comment, "Everybody hurts." As professionals, we carefully cultivate a slick, confident veneer with our Armani suits. But in truth, we are all broken, hurting, wounded people. That's life. My pal author and speaker Ken Davis encapsulated our situation well: "I'm not okay, you're not okay, and that's okay."

Acknowledging our weaknesses, mourning our losses, and comforting each other through difficult times will strengthen our relationships like nothing else can. True compassion requires us to be vulnerable and to admit our own struggles even as we offer empathy and support to others.

Encouragement

Love is offering heartfelt words of affirmation, inspiration, and motivation to our customers and coworkers. We all need someone-not something-to root us on from the sidelines of our lives. We should seek to notice when others do well and hold them up when they fail. Often neglected, encouragement is probably the easiest way to incorporate the irresistible ingredient into our lives and relationships. If we just look around, opportunities to encourage others are everywhere.

Service

Love is serving others without expecting anything in return. Service is part of nearly every job description, but the concept goes far beyond making sure that a customer's questions are answered or requests are fulfilled. Irresistible service happens when we anticipate needs and respond with insight and excellence.

Becky Rand owns a small short-order diner on the wharf in Portland, Maine. The tony area held several upscale restaurants-all of whom charged high prices and didn't want a blue collar crowd. Nearly twenty years ago, Becky scraped together her savings and opened a democratic little place where lobstermen and captains of industry, cops on the beat and paranoid schizophrenics, university professors and cab drivers rub shoulders at the counter.

All of her meals are backed by a no-strings-attached guarantee: *If you don't like it, you don't pay.* Better yet, every customer quickly becomes a regular . . . and a treasured friend. Many folks in the area eat at Becky's daily. When regulars don't show, they call in beforehand. Otherwise, Becky or one of her staff is on the way with a bowl of homemade soup and a muffin straight from the oven.

Her outstanding service has inspired countless publicity offers, franchise opportunities, and more. But there is only one Becky, and she's motivated by one thing: love. She loves what she does, the staff she does it with, and the customers she does it for.

The Offspring of Love at Work

Ernest Dimnet in *The Art of Thinking* wrote, "Love, whether it be the attraction of Truth, or pure, simple, elemental love, always opens up the intellect and gives it freedom of genius."

We all work. Whether we cook omelets, prepare taxes, sell cars, or lead corporations, we spend more than one-third of our lives in the workplace.

We can choose to blend in, putting in our time with one eye on the clock, or we can take part in something bigger than ourselves. We can find satisfaction and meaning in our jobs every single day, but perhaps even that is aiming too low. Maybe we ought to be pursuing and living out genius.

When we add the irresistible ingredient of love into every element of our work, a job becomes an occupation, then becomes a career, and then becomes a successful career. We will build meaningful relationships with our colleagues. We will cultivate solid, trustworthy business relationships with our clients. And we will develop a very real, satisfying connection with the actual tasks at hand.

A positive cycle develops quickly, greatly impacting the effectiveness of our business. When we deliver them with love, our products and services become more attractive, leading to better customer response, greater employee retention, and more. Best of all, the results will invariably lead to a sense of personal fulfillment and renewed motivation.

Anyone can add love to his or her work, but nobody has to. The imperative benefits as much the individual-the lover-as it does the object of its practice. Yet while the irresistible ingredient is there for the taking, not everyone partakes.

According to an article in *USA Today*, a Dutch psychologist investigated the differences between chess masters and grand chess masters. He found no difference in IQ, memory, or spatial reasoning. The only difference he could identify: the grand masters simply loved chess more. He concluded that they had more passion about and commitment to the game.

I've observed that you don't have to love what you do to be very good at it. I know very competent and successful individuals who have developed the skills to succeed at their work. By their own admission, they see what they do as a means to an end. They don't love their work, nor are they passionate about it. They are, however, good at it.

But when it comes to greatness, I intuitively concur with the Dutch researcher. The inspired performers, the über-achievers and the grand masters of life seem to share a common denominator.

Love is the difference. This four-letter word will make you and what you do quite irresistible.