

The leadership of Love

Author: Emmanuel Toniutti (Ph.D.)

The title of this article, "The Leadership of Love," might seem nonsensical at first glance. How can leadership and love be associated? What could leadership possibly have to do with love? In a corporate world where executives constantly talk about financial performance and return on investment for shareholders, how could love have a place? Would it be foolish to think so? To believe in it? Is it a utopian ideal detached from reality? A leadership model with its head in the clouds and feet in the air, rather than firmly grounded?

To answer these questions, we must first define leadership itself. Then, we must explore what love truly is. Finally, we will concretely express what the leadership of love entails and how it represents a new leadership model for the twenty-first century in the Western world.

1. Leadership

If leadership is about leading, guiding, and inspiring, it requires the implementation of three key capacities: the ability to influence, to be followed, and to provide meaning.

1.1 The Capacity to Influence

Influence operates along four concrete axes:

- First, the ability to influence oneself in managing personal fears. Under stress, we become our own worst enemy. Through twenty years of experience in the field, I can testify that impulsive decisions never address the immediate problems we face as leaders; rather, they are responses to deep-seated fears. While these decisions may seem legitimate, they are far from objective. Self-influence requires distancing oneself from fear to avoid projecting it into decision-making. To lead others, one must first lead oneself.
- Second, the ability to influence one's team by developing true authority in the etymological sense—helping others grow. This form of authority contrasts sharply with power, which compels others to obey. Power in this sense is not leadership but dictatorship.
- Third, the ability to influence peers by convincing them to work for the common good of the organization. This requires strong listening skills and constructive dialogue, balancing between perpetual conflict and passive consensus.
- Finally, the ability to influence one's superiors, persuading them of the validity of one's positions in alignment with the organization's values and strategy.

1.2 The Capacity to Be Followed

This aspect of leadership focuses on finding the right pace in decision-making and execution. Leaders often operate at a much faster pace than their teams. To be followed effectively, a leader must synchronize their speed with the slowest and fastest members of the team. This balance is difficult to achieve, as leaders tend to anticipate extensively, creating a gap between themselves and their teams.

1.3 The Capacity to Provide Meaning

Leadership also involves explaining the seemingly absurd. Whether it's contradictory directives (such as doing more with fewer resources), remote leadership via virtual meetings requiring enhanced listening and dialogue skills, or short-term strategic decisions within long-term visions, leaders must provide meaning to what appears meaningless. This requires that they first find meaning for themselves in their own actions.

2. Love

2.1 In Greek philosophy, there are several degrees of love, including *eros* and *philia*, particularly synthesized by Plato.

Eros defines passion. He is the god of passionate love, both constructive and destructive. Constructive because he represents the love that fosters creative madness, innovation, and fusion between individuals. *Eros* pushes us to surpass ourselves, granting us the enthusiasm necessary to convince others. Destructive because it is a narcissistic love tied to an idealized self-image that does not reflect reality.

Eros presents us with a fundamental question for self-leadership and leadership of others: Do I love myself as I am, or as I wish to be? Do I love myself as I am, or as I believe others want me to be? Do I love others as they are, or as I want them to be? The narcissism of *eros* can lead to the arrogance of believing in our own omnipotence and infallibility. Therefore, we must have the ability to bring *eros* back down to earth.

This grounding happens through the second degree of love, called *philia* or friendship. The opposite of pride is humility, and *philia* is rooted in it. Through *philia*, we become aware of the gap between who we believe we are and who we truly are, as well as between who we think others are and who they really are. This friendship consists of respecting ourselves as we are and respecting others as they are; it is about honoring differences. However, Latin friendship takes on a different connotation than the one defined by the Greeks.

2.2 In Latin culture, one of the degrees of love considered fundamental for leadership is *amicitia*, particularly developed by Cicero, who gave full recognition to *humanitas*, or humanism.

In his treatise on friendship, focused on political relationships (as Cicero was closely acquainted with Pompey and Caesar), he defines three inseparable elements that structure the ethical foundations of society.

The first is *utilis amicitia*, useful friendship, which is about establishing the right relationships necessary among political leaders to ensure the proper functioning of the Republic. The second element nurtures the first: *omnium bonorum*, the sense of the common good. Not only must the relationships we build be useful, but they must also be oriented toward the collective interest; we must always ensure that our relationships uphold responsibility and the common good.

The third and final element is the time for active rest, known as *otium*, which refers to each individual's ability to retreat in order to reflect, cultivate themselves, and recharge. Friendship reaches its peak in what Cicero confided to his brother: "Know that at this moment, nothing is missing more in my life than someone with whom I can speak without pretending, without concealing anything, without hiding anything."

In all these aspects, Cicero develops the concept of solidarity: the pursuit of success for the common good is the highest priority. The individual steps aside in favor of the collective, the community: "Solidarity stems from the fact that one human being cannot be a stranger to another human being, simply because they are human."

2.3 In Christian culture, which originated in the Middle East, the highest degree of love is *agape*—love given freely, expecting nothing in return. It is associated with the two other theological virtues: faith and hope.

It is a moment of grace, a gift that arrives as a *kairos*, an irruption of eternity into the present moment. Naturally, it is embodied in the figure of Jesus, whose presence is diffused throughout the Gospel.

Western and Middle Eastern cultures are rich in resources in this regard, and we will explore together how they concretely shape a leadership rooted in love.

3. Leadership of Love: A New Path for the West

The leadership of love requires several key attitudes that can be developed through self-work, constructive confrontation with others, and relationships that embrace and integrate contradictory dialogue.

3.1 Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm, from its etymology, means "to be in the breath of the gods." In other words, it characterizes inspiration—not just the energy we generate within ourselves, but also an external force that propels us forward. Enthusiasm is driven by passion, *eros*. Without this passion, we lack both our internal energy and the divine force that gives us the strength and courage to move mountains, to inspire others, and to instill confidence in them.

3.2 Charisma

Charisma literally means "grace granted by the gods." In leadership, it refers to the right person, in the right place, at the right time. This concept is crucial for the leadership of love: no one can be a leader 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Charisma manifests in specific situations. Some leaders are meant to navigate crises, others to stabilize post-crisis environments, some to drive transformational change, and others to support and care for people. Charisma prompts us to reflect on the type of leader we are and the leadership model that best aligns with our nature.

3.3 Optimism

The Latin root *optimus* means "to see the best in things." An optimist does not deny reality; they acknowledge, understand, and analyze it. This process allows them to recognize that within every rupture, change, or crisis, there are not only threats but also opportunities. These opportunities serve as the foundation for hope. Thus, we are not speaking of naive optimism, but of realistic optimism.

3.4 Respect for Stakeholders: The Art of Reconciling Contradictory Dialogue

Respect for stakeholders aligns with the Greek concept of *philia* and the Latin concept of *amicitia*. This respect first requires an understanding that stakeholders affected by leaders' decisions are naturally interdependent. Shareholders are useful to employees—without shareholder investment, no company can create jobs. Employees are useful to shareholders—without the intellectual and manual productivity of employees, shareholder investments cannot grow and may even become useless. Customers are essential to both shareholders and employees—without customers purchasing products, a company generates no revenue, making it impossible to pay salaries or distribute dividends. Conversely, without shareholder investment and employees' production talent, customers would have no products to buy. In this context, we can also include suppliers and other stakeholders connected to society as a whole. All of these actors are unconsciously linked in a necessary relationship that serves the common good. The art of leadership based on love is to make this interconnection conscious, ensuring that leaders' decisions are not driven by immediate selfish interests but by a sense of the common good.

This awareness leads to the practical application of *philia*, or respect for differences. Shareholders seek a return on investment, which at times may conflict with a long-term strategy of customer and employee loyalty. Employees seek fair wages or performance bonuses, which may be at odds with temporary declines in sales. The art of leadership based on love lies in reconciling these contradictory interests to find the best and most just solution for all stakeholders affected by decisions.

Through twenty years of hands-on experience guiding leaders worldwide, I have identified, with the help of my clients, key ethical behaviors that ensure the effective implementation of leadership based on love.

3.5 Key Ethical Behaviors of Leadership Based on Love

- **Empathy** comes from the Greek word *empateia*, which refers to one who is affected or deeply moved (*pathos*, meaning suffering). It is the ability to feel another's suffering within oneself. Practicing empathy means understanding, acknowledging, accepting, and feeling the suffering of others, but it also means unity and mutual love.
- **Lucidity** originates from the Latin *lucidus*, meaning clarity or foresight. The first aspect of lucidity is accepting that we are our own worst enemy. It involves not being led by fear but taking enough distance to perceive reality as it is, not as we wish it to be. The second aspect of lucidity is the ability to connect elements of a context that may initially seem contradictory. Lucidity requires thinking in complexity.
- **Authenticity** comes from the Latin *authenticus*, meaning "one who can be trusted, of unquestionable value," or "one who acts independently, the author of their own work or actions." It is associated with truth, expressed simply and directly. Authenticity requires courage, which, as Aristotle put it, means being "neither cowardly nor reckless." Cowardice is fleeing from difficulty, while recklessness is attacking without reason. Authenticity requires clarity with oneself and self-acceptance as we are, not as we wish to be. The opposite of authenticity is falsehood—whether in deceiving ourselves or others.
- **Humility** derives from the Latin *humus*, meaning "the disposition to lower oneself voluntarily." It is the ability to accept that we do not know everything, that we can make mistakes, and that we can learn from others in any situation. Humility also involves knowing when to delegate leadership, recognizing when we are not the right person for a given context. A leader ultimately bears responsibility for the final decision but surrounds themselves with the best competencies that they may not possess themselves.

- **Listening:** The Art of True Presence. The word "listening" comes from the Latin *ascultare*, meaning "to lend an ear to, to welcome favorably." I define it as follows: "Listening means not knowing what you are going to say to the other person until they have finished speaking." This requires the ability to step back in order to understand and analyze the problems we face. It involves listening not only to others but also deeply to oneself—to one's own emotions, such as fear, anger, sadness, and disgust.

These five ethical behaviors require profound self-knowledge. First, the recognition and acceptance that human beings are capable of both the best (*homo sapiens*) and the worst (*homo demens*), echoing the harmony of opposites defined by Heraclitus. We all have an inner balance to find between these two poles. Then, the recognition and acceptance of our fears. As human beings, we face two unconscious anxieties every day. The first is the fear of death—we are constantly in biological survival mode. The second is the fear of love—we are perpetually seeking recognition. Of course, this remains unconscious; we do not wake up every morning thinking, "Oh, today I might die!" or "Oh, I really want to be loved today." Thankfully, because otherwise, we wouldn't be able to live. However, these fears create stress, making them active in our conscious minds.

With over 25 years of experience coaching more than 4,000 executives worldwide, I have gained unique insights that I summarize as follows: under pressure, the first impulsive decision we want to make is always a response to our fears, not to the actual problem we need to solve. We believe we are being objective, but in reality, we are not. I have conducted over 500 case studies on this subject, and the results are unequivocal. Under stress (except in life-threatening situations, which have never been the case in my work), we make decisions based on fundamental fears that shape our beliefs and convictions—convictions that keep us trapped. Although we believe we are making a responsible decision, we are actually responding to personal concerns that have nothing to do with the issue at hand.

Here, love calls us to recognize ourselves as we truly are, with both our strengths and weaknesses. It demands that we not deceive ourselves and that we respect who we truly are. It also requires us to respect others as they truly are. Only under these two conditions can we begin to practice a concrete form of leadership based on love. This process requires defining the leadership model that is most coherent with our true selves by identifying our greatest talents and understanding what we are truly meant to do.

In ancient Greece, when someone entered the Temple of Delphi, they could read the inscription: "Know thyself." The art of this knowledge lay in turning around to see what was written on the other side of the temple's door: "Then you will be able to use your genius with moderation." Each of us has a unique talent, a particular gift. If we find ourselves in the right place at the right time, we can use it wisely. This requires both self-love and love for others.

Each of these behaviors can be developed and adapted to the leadership challenges we face daily. Ultimately, the greatest obstacle to leadership based on love is fear.

3.6 Agapè: Love for Nothing in Return

Agapè, or love for nothing in return, is instead a moment of grace that is given. No leader can decide when agapè will occur, but they can create the conditions for its emergence. Early in my career, I believed this kind of love was impossible in business and corporate environments. *How can one love another without expecting anything in return?* I wondered. *At the very least, we expect them to achieve their goals.*

And yet, I have experienced extraordinary moments where agapè appeared unexpectedly, in ways I never anticipated. Moments where leadership teams loved each other freely, without

expectations, in pure generosity. Of course, such moments do not last, but they are given as a form of grace. However, these leaders unknowingly created the conditions for such moments by embodying the five key ethical behaviors mentioned earlier. They also facilitated this through seminars that fostered self-awareness, understanding of others, and crisis-management training through both simulated and real-world scenarios.

The West at a Crossroads: A Call for a New Leadership Model?

Today, the Western world stands at a critical crossroads for its survival. After addressing the 2008 subprime crisis, managing (with varying success) the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022, and now facing the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the new election of Trump, the West is being forced to rethink its economic, political, and social models.

The shareholder-value model, which prioritizes generating returns as quickly as possible, has run its course. The political democratic model is facing an unprecedented crisis of confidence among citizens—many disengage entirely, while others turn to extremes. Elites are increasingly disconnected from real-world issues. Rising poverty and the declining middle class challenge the legitimacy of a social model based on deregulated market economies and the accumulation of immediate, often meaningless, pleasures.

Our leaders will likely need a great deal of humility to rebuild this model—with far less arrogance and without the assumption that the West represents a singular and universal truth. Leadership based on love offers an alternative path, not only within corporations but also within our democratic and political systems. Not to dismantle them, but to restore their true purpose.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Ethicist, graduated with Ph.D. in theology from [Laval Université](#) in Canada, Emmanuel Toniutti has spent over 25 years advising boards of directors and executive committees of publicly traded companies and privately owned businesses worldwide. His work focuses on developing and implementing ethical and responsible leadership models aligned with humanist values. He also teaches at [HEC Paris](#) Executive Education and [SUPSI](#).

Email: contact@emmanuel-toniutti.com

