



THE BUSINESS CASE FOR LOVE

Marcus Buckingham

Twenty-five years ago, I wrote a book summarizing Gallup's study of eighty thousand great managers. We called it *First, Break All the Rules* because so many of the world's best managers broke so many of the rules of conventional management wisdom. They didn't treat every employee the same. They didn't identify and then correct people's weaknesses. They played favorites. And no, they didn't think you could ever get too close to your people.

I wrote it not just because I loved rigorous research into human behavior and was frustrated that so much management advice was devoid of it. The research had also revealed something deeply human and, to me, inspiring: the best managers in the world saw each person as unique, and all their strategies were, fundamentally, an effort to capitalize on this uniqueness. While so many corporate systems, when laid bare, were designed to grind uniqueness down and make each person conform, the best managers in the world rejected this notion. They saw each human's unique talents as a feature, not a bug. As something to be curious about, to engage with, to bring together into a team, where the team became well-rounded precisely because each human within it wasn't.

These insights, and the picture of work that they paint, have informed all of my work since. If work will always be a part of our lives—and, notwithstanding the more extreme predictions of an AI-saturated world, it will be—then we need methods and insights that ensure work works for us humans, and that find common ground between the goals of the organization and the yearnings of the person.

These great managers showed us this common ground and, in doing so, launched a revolution in how the world of work viewed the strengths of each person. Today, it's become conventional wisdom that the best managers focus on strengths and manage around weaknesses, and almost thirty million people have taken the two strengths assessments I helped create: StrengthsFinder and StandOut.

But today is also, in so many ways, a different day.

Although some of these original findings remain true—that people grow most in their areas of greatest strength and that the best managers treat each person differently and stay close to their people—the world we live in is clearly not the same. The digital revolution, the explosion and intrusion of social media, the pandemic, the proliferation of employee behavior-tracking software, advanced robotics, and now the onslaught of AI—all of it has utterly changed work, and our relationship to it.

Today your workplace reaches into your life far more deeply than twenty-five years ago. Your employer can not only see the personal opinions you express on social media, it can, and often does, police those opinions. The pandemic showed we could be just as productive working remotely, and yet many, if not all, corporate leaders didn't trust this finding—and so the current trend forces all employees back to the office, where devices track their entrances and exits, their keystrokes and choices at the vending machine, the number of their emails and the sentiments expressed in them, and even the movement of their pupils as they stare at, or, God forbid, look away from, their screens.

Our expectations as customers have changed too. We now demand immediate fulfillment of our desires, immediate delivery, see it/buy it/get it/return it, move on to the next desire. And since everything is digital, our expectation for one class of products has become our expectation for all. If Amazon gives us a certain kind of online experience, that becomes our expectation for all kinds of online experience. “Best-in-class” or “industry-leading” are now meaningless aspirations, since the best in one industry has upleveled our expectations across all industries.

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Counterintuitively, as our expectations have risen our levels of trust have fallen. Back in the 1990s the team at Gallup was measuring how much trust people had in various organizations and institutions. The levels varied across the decades, but last year was the first year that no large organization—not government, not the armed forces, not schools, not media, not tech, not healthcare—had more than 15 percent of people expressing trust in them. Most of us feel we are moving through a world that isn't made for us. Yes, we can get what we want with one word to our phone, but no, we don't feel safe in our world.

Everything is available to us, but nothing protects us. Nothing has our back. It is an abundant but amoral world. Efficient but unloving. It all works, but in many important ways, it is broken.

Faced with this world, what now must leaders do?

What mindsets, behaviors, and actions must they change in order to deserve the best people? What skills must they develop in order to deliver value to customers who are at once more demanding, and more distrusting? How can leaders leverage AI and robotics to maximize efficiency, and yet still build deep reservoirs of goodwill and loyalty within employees and customers? What genuine things can they do to move people to productive action in an increasingly artificial world? Faced with shorter attention spans, little patience, and dwindling faith in one another, what can the best leaders do to rally people to a better future.

My new book, a sequel twenty-five years in the making, addresses these questions.

Specifically, it will define the one hidden skill at the heart of all the best leaders today—and what you can do in your own working life to cultivate it. Simply stated, the skill is this: *the deliberate design of the most powerful force in business*.

To bring it to life for you, and, I hope, give you guidance and inspiration for your own leadership, let me show you what this skill can look like in the real world. As you'll see, it's not beyond your reach. It's one of those skills that, while hard to master, is easy to start.

LEADING LOVINGLY

Stay with me. This isn't about kumbaya. But, have you ever worked for someone who got the very best out of you? Someone you'd run through walls for? Someone who built the kind of team you desperately wanted to be on?

Maybe it was at school—your band leader, your sports team coach. Or maybe it was in the working world—it was a leader who attracted the best people, and who lifted them up to extraordinary success. Everyone clamored to be on that team. People excelled on that team; people thrived. They were extremely productive, but not burned out.

This leader delivered great results too, didn't they? It wasn't just all rah-rah, happy-happy, they also created great performances, won games, served customers, delivered amazing products, the best service, got things done. As if by magic, they made everyone feel alive—heart pounding, great work, daily progress, all of it.

I hope you come across a leader like this at some time in your life. If you have, I bet you would agree that they created genuine love in the hearts of employees and customers alike. All excellent leaders know that this love doesn't come about by accident—that if you want to be one of those leaders whom people say they love working for, they'd walk through walls for, you have to design it in to the way you lead.

Just as if you want your customers to say they love your product, or your service, or your brand, you have to design it in.

A company that puts love at the center of all they do—not to be soft, but instead because love is the most powerful driver of extreme positive business outcomes. Currently we’ve lost our fluency in the language of love. At the most reputable business schools there are no classes on how to deconstruct business’s most powerful force, nor on how you, the leader, can channel this force for productive ends. It’s absurd, when you think about it. This force, properly marshaled, creates everything good a business wants—and yet we’re virtually blind to it.

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In the years to come I’m going to do everything I can to change this failing. Specifically, my focus will be to educate as broadly as possible the millions of folks who’ve taken my strengths assessments that the only places deserving of their strengths are companies that design love in. I can these DLI companies. You have only this one life: Why devote your precious strengths to a loveless organization? Why work for a place that sees you as merely an element in a transaction, to be maximized and discarded at will? You wouldn’t want yourself—or your kids—to work for a place like this, would you? No, me neither.

So, together let's commit ourselves to highlighting how unwise loveless companies are, the kind that operate efficiently and make their numbers each quarter by hiring, then laying off, large swaths of their workers; the kind that create spans of control so large that one supervisor has to manage sixty team members; the kind that treat their customers like hostages, and their employees like headcount.

These companies are unworthy of you. They are ubiquitous, but uninspiring. Let's define what a DLI company looks like, how it operates, what its nonnegotiables are—and then, together, as a unified voice, let's teach as many talented workers as possible that a loving organization is the only one they should accept.

Let's set up DLI as the gold standard. And let the others drift away into mediocrity. 📌



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcus Buckingham is a researcher and bestselling author known for his pioneering work on human excellence and human uniqueness. For more than thirty years, his data-driven insights have shaped how people discover their strengths at work and in life. He led the development of StrengthsFinder, coauthored the international bestseller *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, and has written numerous *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestsellers, including *First, Break All the Rules*, *StandOut*, and *Love + Work*.

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