

2014

# Love as a Replacement for Fear in the Workplace

Debby Thomas

*George Fox University*, [dthomas@georgefox.edu](mailto:dthomas@georgefox.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfsb>



Part of the [Business Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Previously published in *Emerging Leadership Journeys*, Vol. 7 Iss. 1, pp. 27-33. © 2014 Regent University School of Business & Leadership. <http://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/elj/vol7iss1/home.htm>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - School of Business by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolf@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolf@georgefox.edu).



# Love as a Replacement for Fear in the Workplace

Debby Thomas  
*Regent University*

---

Fear is routinely used in organizations and interpersonal relationships as a source of motivation. Some research supports the use of fear to motivate employees to work and to change. However, fear has long lasting negative effects that outweigh the motivation that it produces. This paper proposes and supports the notion of love as a central motivator in place of fear. Inner texture exegesis of 1 John 4:18, along with recent research on love in organizations, supports the move from fear to love. Love produces long lasting effects of inspiration and heart level motivation, increased creativity and effectiveness, and a release of energy. It offers holistic health and growth to individuals. Although replacing fear with love requires a paradigm shift, the effort produces an organizational environment that is more productive and more attractive to employees.

---

Fear is used regularly in organizations to produce motivation and change. Fear is also regularly used to motivate people in families, churches, and in one-on-one settings. Some research shows that fear is a good motivator and if used wisely can produce positive results. This present research delves into the concept of fear as a motivator, and its opposing force love. Love and fear are considered as motivators and the results of their usage are examined. Inner texture exegesis of the biblical concepts of love and fear in 1 John 4:18 bring further clarity to Christians desiring to motivate others through love or fear.

## **Fear as Motivation in Organizations**

Fear is commonly used as a motivating force in organizations and in relationships. Tanner, Day, and Crask (1989) present projection motivation theory which concerns how individuals who process threats choose responses to cope with danger brought on by the threats (p. 267). Tanner et al. use projection motivation theory to study fear appeals used in marketing. They propose that fear appeals are most effective when subjects are presented with a coping strategy. Welbourne (1994) applies this research to organizational change and proposes that fear tactics may be used effectively in organizational change, but only when coupled with coping strategies that aid individuals in identifying behavior that will help them adapt to the change and avoid the fear-inducing consequences of the change. Welbourne advocates the use of fear in organizational change and suggests that fear is the primary motivator of change, which should be used by organizations facing change to motivate cooperation by the members. There is a stream of research that encourages the use of fear in organizations as a way to motivate their organizational members to change.

Secretan (2009) agreed that society has “embraced fear as a weapon to coerce others to do their bidding” (loc. 71). Secretan believes that in a vast majority of organizations and institutions (marketing, leadership, coaching, politics, education, health care, parenting, and religion), fear has

become the “base operating system” (loc. 71). However, there is evidence from Secretan and many others that fear may not be an ideal form of motivation.

Ryan and Oestreich (1998) declare that, “fear doesn’t motivate toward constructive action. On the contrary, it nourishes competition within an organization, fosters short-term thinking, destroys trust, erodes joy and pride in work, stifles innovation and distorts communication” (p. xiii). They acknowledge that fear is the primary motivator employed by many organizations. However, they find that fear consistently undermines “the commitment, motivation, and confidence of people at work” (Ryan & Oestreich, 1998). They believe that the key to breaking the power of fear is to create environments where trust, productivity and innovation can flourish, and that banishing fear is the only way to accomplish this goal.

Although some previous research such as Welbourne’s (1994) advocates the use of fear to motivate people towards change, other authors disagree. According to Ryan (1998), fear breeds the absence of motivation and ideas; in fact, fear crushes enthusiasm and creativity. Fear causes people to live in silence, afraid to talk about issues that need to be discussed. Fear discourages communication, creating an environment where individuals are reluctant to speak up, causing negativity, anger and frustration (Ryan & Oestreich, 1998, p. 5). Helliwell (2009) finds that individual fear undermines trust and often manifests itself in “territorialism, aggression, depression, and escapism” (loc. 1476). Furthermore, fearful people are unable to do their best work since much of their time and energy are spent watching their backs, covering themselves, and playing it safe (Helliwell, 2009, loc. 1524). People are unable to fulfill their potential; they are miserable, and only able to give a fraction of what they could if they were not controlled by fear (Helliwell, 2009, loc. 1524). Helliwell also found that when under the influence of fear even irrational fears appear rational. People under the influence of fear are in an unbalanced emotional state and lose their sense of perspective. Fearful people tend to see the negative side of things, tend to see visions of doom and generally feel that their lives are covered in a murky gray cloud (Helliwell, 2009, loc. 1493).

It is evident from this research that fear, while widely used in the work place, does more harm than good. Fear creates an environment where people are less productive causing individuals and the organization as a whole to suffer. Fear makes people not speak up, not give their whole selves at work, but rather act in ways that are self-protective. While used to motivate people, fear often falls short and ends up demotivating them. Ryan and Oestreich (1998) propose that the way to dispel fear in the workplace is through fostering trust. Trust encourages people to talk about problems and is in opposition to fear. Secretan (2009) proposes that love is the psychological, emotional and spiritual opposite of fear (loc. 74). Secretan believes that although fear can produce some kind of motivation, but only love can inspire. He proposes that, “love is the place that gives rise to inspiration” (2009, loc. 74).

## Fear and Love in 1 John 4:18

A biblical passage that talks directly about fear and love, 1 John 4:18, speaks of perfect love that casts out fear. A closer exegesis of this passage illuminates the biblical concepts of love and fear and gives further support to love as the central motivator replacing fear.

The author of 1 John wrote the book in the context of Christians who had left the church and were denying that Jesus was the son of God (Elwell & Beitzel, 1988). In response to this, the author of 1 John introduced a theme of love, which permeates the book with over 40% of the verses in 1 John dealing directly with the subject of love (Bartling, 1958). The author made the case that anyone who does not act in love does not know God (4:8). The logic is this: God is love and so those who love know God and those who do not love do not know God. 1 John 4:7-21 urges Christians to accept God's unconditional love for them and in turn to show love to one another. It is in the midst of this appeal to embrace God's perfect love and love one another that 1 John 4:18 states: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love" (New Revised Standard Version).

There are two kinds of fear spoken of in the Bible in regard to God. There is fear that refers to the reverence of a son in obedience to his father, which is *eulabeia*. This form of fear is often used in regard to Christians fearing (or respecting, obeying, humbling themselves before) God. However, in this verse fear refers to the fear and dread that a bond-slave may have, *phobos* (Robertson, 1933). This verse states that fear has to do with punishment. This is true from the literature on fear; punishment or threat of punishment is used to cause fear, which then motivates people to do things they would otherwise not do. Fear and punishment in the Bible and in the literature are always bound together.

From this verse, we find that fear and love are mutually exclusive (Jackman, 1988; Marshall, 1978). When God's perfect love is present, fear is cast out, forcefully removed, because the two cannot coexist together. If there is fear, perfect love is not present. If there is perfect love, fear cannot be present. This verse establishes that perfect love is the opposite of fear and that the two cannot coexist together. However, God alone can live out perfect love. Perfect love is not an option for every person because of human nature; humans are unable to enact perfect love as God does. As 1 John 4:18 shows, Christians must live in a state of love, mirrored after God's perfect love, and it is God's perfect love that casts out fear. Christians, therefore, should not use fear as a relational tactic, but rather love, love that is modeled after God's perfect love.

The Greek word used to describe the love that Christians are to have for God and for others in this passage is *agapao*. *Agape* love and *agapao* love are often seen as interchangeable, but Winston (2002) makes a distinction between them. *Agape* love, which is used in this passage only to describe God's love "is a self-sacrificing love that references total commitment even unto death" (Winston, 2002, p. 5). The statement "God is love" made in 1 John 4:16 is an example of the usage of the word *agape*. *Agapao* love, on the other hand, is defined as "a moral love, doing the right thing at

the right time for the right reason. To love in a social or moral sense, embracing the judgment and the deliberate assent of the will as a matter of principle, duty, and propriety” (Winston, 2002, p. 5). *Agapao* love is the kind of love that Christians are to have towards God and towards their neighbors. Every instance of a person loving God or loving others in this passage is *agapao*, a human love that mirrors God’s love, but is not the same as God’s love.

This passage advocates the act of *agapao* love as the central place for the Christian. Love (*agapao*) of God and love (*agapao*) of others is expected as an act of knowing and accepting God’s (*agape*) love. Christian leaders need to make their foundational approach to leadership enacting love as it is described in this passage. The work environment then becomes permeated with love, rather than the cultural norm of fear. *Agapao* love as described by Winston (2002) is a moral love that does the right thing at the right time for the right reason; it is the foundation of relationships between people and produces motivation at the heart level, even inspiration. In an environment permeated with love, fear has no place. And conversely in an environment permeated with fear, love has no place.

### Love and Respect as Replacement for Fear in the Workplace

A number of authors advocate love as a replacement for fear in organizations and relationships in general. Secretan (2009) proposes that a leader who is humble, forgiving and loving is more authentic and is more inspiring and effective as a leader. He believes that love should take the place of fear and defined love as “the place where my heart touches your heart and adds to who you are as a person” (loc. 81).

Regine (2009) believes that vulnerability is power; feeling vulnerable is "letting yourself feel the love and be in the love" (loc. 173). Vulnerability is described as an "incredible connectedness" with other human beings, in the moment of communication, in which each person is heard and validated. In essence Regine advocates love and vulnerability to unleash authenticity and to promote deep level communication and understanding (loc. 172).

Ryan and Oestreich (1998) believe that the opposite of a fear-based organization is a trust-based organization. Covey (2006) also proposed that trust is the foundation of changing everything in an organization. Covey (2006) delineated a process for fostering and increasing trust in organizations that involves self-trust, relational trust and stakeholder trust. Covey (2006) believes that trust fosters good communication, respect, transparency, and justice; overall, trust helps organizations to be much more efficient in every way. Trust, as these authors present it, can best be fostered by a loving environment, but trust is destroyed by fear.

Caldwell and Dixon (2009) advocate that to promote employee ownership, commitment, and individual initiative, employees need to be inspired by their leaders. A review of the organizational leadership research finds that love, forgiveness, and trust are essential values for leaders who desire to maximize the value of organizations and at the same time enable individuals to become the best they can be.

Argandona (2011) argues that the mechanistic view of organizations that focuses primarily on the procuring of resources, making of goods and services, and selling of goods and services leaves no room for love. In this view of an organization people are another resource and the relationships between people are governed by contractual agreements. Instead, Argandona presents organizations as many individual people connected by relationships and motivated (or demotivated) to work. Each action is motivated by extrinsic reasons (reward or punishment), intrinsic reasons, and external reasons (how the action effects others in the organization). Argandona proposes that transcendent values also affect people because they want to act in moral ways that have positive effects on the organization and especially on other people. In order to create an organization that is effective, attractive, and that grows and changes over time, people must be treated as whole people in the organization. Argandona argues that contractual agreements do not inspire, but love enacted in different ways throughout the organization produces inspiration and releases human motivation in a way that contractual relationships cannot.

Ahiazu and Asawo (2010) conducted a quantitative study in Nigeria, which measures altruistic love in the workplace with worker commitment. Their study provides evidence that altruistic love practiced in the workplace leads to high affective and normative commitment on the part of workers (p. 97). This study lends quantitative evidence that at least one aspect of work (worker commitment) is increased in an environment of altruistic love. Further quantitative research such as this could be conducted to measure multiple outcomes of altruistic love in the workplace.

Ferris (1988) proposes that organizational love is the foundation of all that organizations seek to accomplish. Employees today are interested in life values, fulfillment, and a sense of wholeness, all of which Ferris believes are founded in love (p. 41). Furthermore, leaders are expected to have creative insight, sensitivity, vision, and connection with employees, which Ferris argues are all based on love. Argandona (2011) defines love as “a feeling of caring or deep respect for yourself and others, of valuing and believing in yourself and others, and of helping to achieve the best of which everyone is capable” (p. 42). Ferris (1988) notices that love does not fit well with the modern notion of how organizations are run, and yet for the underlying needs of employees to be treated holistically and for organizations to be productive, love needs to become an acceptable norm. Love in an organization means caring for the health of individuals: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health. It means sharing power, and truly caring and desiring the best for others. Ferris believes that focusing on love in organizations demands a paradigm shift away from our present cultural norms for organizations. However, Ferris also believes the rewards are great: releasing a vast amount of human energy through inspiration, creating a deeper and more holistic organizational alignment, releasing energy for productivity and creativity, and creating stronger and more empowering leadership.

Bakke (2005) shares lessons learned from many years of leading a multi-national energy company. Bakke’s passion is “to make work exciting, rewarding, stimulating and enjoyable” (p. 13). Bakke’s philosophy of leading is to care deeply for those he works with and to do everything in his power to make them feel in control of their work and capable of making decisions. Bakke believes that the biggest determinant of an employee’s effectiveness is not intelligence and education, but rather

an organizational culture that “treats people of every background as creative, capable, responsible, and trustworthy” (p. 182). Bakke promotes a work environment of love, concern and respect for every individual. In Bakke’s personal experience, when he purchased a power plant and implemented his principles of love and respect in the workplace, the power plant could be run with approximately half the employees and produce approximately double the electricity. Bakke found this to be consistently true no matter what country the power plant was in. Bakke’s experience shows that an environment of love and respect unleashes creativity, initiative, effectiveness, and efficiency that is stifled in an environment of contractual agreements, or worse yet, an environment of fear.

This literature builds a strong case for love to replace fear as the basis of the work environment. Love fosters inspiration, harnesses the full capacity of the person, and releases organizational members to realize their full potential. Although fear has a motivational effect, it also has devastating and limiting consequences. Love empowers, creates, and releases; most of all it inspires people to apply themselves fully and frees them to realize their potential.

## Conclusion

The default motivator in organizations and relationships is fear. It comes naturally, is easy, and has immediate effects. It seems to fit nicely into the mechanistic view of organizations and the contractual relationship between employees and their supervisors. Many modern organizations use some sort of fear to control or motivate members. However, fear also has negative effects. Although it may produce motivation, it also undermines trust, crushes creativity and at best offers only moderate amounts of motivation.

The inner texture exegesis of 1 John 4:18, as well as current research on love and fear in organizations, supports the notion of substituting love for fear in the workplace and in personal relationships. Love creates the foundation for trust, creativity, openness, and living up to one’s full potential. Love has the capability of motivating from a heart level, motivating through inspiration. Where fear has crippling consequences for a mediocre boost in motivation, love produces positive results and motivates through heart level inspiration, unlocking potential that would be crushed by fear.

---

### About the Author

Debby Thomas is a third-year Ph.D. student at Regent University where she is studying organizational leadership. For the last 17 years, she has been involved with the Friends Church of Rwanda as a missionary especially focusing on whole life transformation through a relational discipleship process in Rwandan communities.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Debby Thomas at [debdavethomas@yahoo.com](mailto:debdavethomas@yahoo.com)

---

## References

- Ahiazu, A., & Asawo, S. P. (2010). Altruistic love culture and workers' commitment in the Nigerian manufacturing industry: A study in workplace spirituality. *Journal of Management Policy & Practice*, 11(5), 97-105.
- Argandoña, A. (2011). Beyond contracts: Love in firms. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 99(1), 77-85. doi:10.1007/s10551-011-0750-z
- Bakke, D. (2005). *Joy at work: A revolutionary approach to fun on the job*. Seattle, WA: PVG.
- Bartling, V. (1958). We love because he loved us first (1 John 4:7-21). *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1-17.
- Caldwell, C., & Dixon, R. D. (2009). Love, forgiveness, and trust: Critical values of the modern leader. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 93(1), 91-101. doi:10.1007/s10551-009-0184-z
- Covey, S. (2006). *The speed of trust: The one thing that changes everything*. New York : Free Press.
- Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Ferris, R. (1988). How organizational love can improve leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 16(4), 41-51. doi:10.1016/0090-2616(88)90011-3
- Helliwell, T. (2009). Overcoming fear and building trust: Creating healthy organizations. In J. Marques, S. Dhiman, & R. King (Eds), *The Workplace and Spirituality*. Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Pathes Publishing.
- Jackman, D. (1988). *The message of John's letters*. IVP Academic.
- Marshall, H. (1978). *The new international commentary on the New Testament: The epistles of John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Regine, B. (2009). Letting the heart fall open: Spirit, vulnerability, and relational intelligence in the workplace. In J. Marques, S. Dhiman, & R. King (Eds), *The Workplace and Spirituality*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing.
- Robertson, A. (1933). *Word pictures in the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.
- Ryan, K. D., & Oestreich, D. K. (1998). *Driving fear out of the workplace*. Jossey-Bass.

- Secretan, L. H. K. (2009). Love and truth: The golden rules of leadership. In J. Marques, S. Dhiman, & R. King (Eds), *The Workplace and Spirituality*. Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Pathes Publishing.
- Tanner, J., Day, E., & Crask, M. (1989). Protection motivation theory: An extension of fear appeals theory in communication. *Journal of Business Research*, 19(4), 267-276.
- Welbourne, T. M. (1994). Fear: The misunderstood component of organizational transformation. *Human Resource Planning*, 34.
- Winston, B. E. (2002). *Be a leader for God's sake*. Virginia Beach, VA: School of Leadership Studies Regent University.