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Love, Language and Working Relationships

BY MANUEL MANGA



Manuel Manga

In order to create more harmonious societies, humans desperately need to discover better ways to relate to each other. Doing so will foster more loving relationships, and the creativity, dialogue, and learning we need to create a sustainable and prosperous environment for future generations.

This may sound utopian to some, given the current state of our world. But despite all its problems and unintended consequences, the scientific knowledge of our modern world can also provide us with a new base of understanding. Scientists and thinkers such as Humberto Maturana, Ximena Davila, Ashley Montagu, Riane Eisler, Daniel Goleman, Thomas Lewis and others have created a body of knowledge that can impact how we construct working relationships, teams, and organizations. Together, these thinkers examine the often-forgotten dimensions of human love. Their analyses help us to see that when these important dimensions are not incorporated into our work situations or communicated to others, we are often left feeling incomplete and unable to bring forth our full human potential in our work and lives.

In *The Biological and Cultural Matrix of Human Understanding*, Maturana and Davila depart from the standard Cartesian-mechanistic ontology, in which mind and body are separate, rationality and emotions are seen as antagonistic, and a subjective and objective fragmented view of reality prevails. Maturana and Davila offer a different perspective from which we can expand our understanding of the range of human possibilities. Their work invites us to consider ourselves as multidimensional beings, playing varying roles as:

- Living systems
- Emotional – Loving animals
- Linguistic and rational beings
- Relational and social animals
- Part of the whole human family

Each of these dimensions has implications for how we want to interact with other individuals, teams, organizations, and cultures.

If we begin to understand ourselves as living systems, then our sense of self begins to expand, revealing our interconnectedness with all living systems, including the planet's biosphere. From this we can also begin to imagine our organizations and institutions evolving from machine-like systems to living institutions, as Peter Senge and others have proposed.

If we examine our relationships from the perspective of ourselves as emotion-loving animals, then the pull of our emotions strongly impacts our relationships, teams, and organizational culture. Dr. Edwards Deming claimed that

the organizations in which we spend most of our time working are ruled by the emotion of fear, which impedes learning and productivity. In order to improve working relationships (and, consequently, productivity) he asked that managers work to build positive relationships that reduce fear in the workplace, and replace fear with more nurturing aspects of human interactions.

Humberto Maturana offers an abstraction of love that can help guide us in creating loving relationships. In his article, "The Biology of Business: Love Expands Intelligence," written with Pille Bunnell, he notes, "Love is the domain of those relational behaviors through which another (a person, being, or thing) arises as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself." In addition, Maturana states that love is visionary and expands our intelligence. As such, incorporating love in our relationships not only improves them, but also expands the dimension of the self.

Author Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence* and Thomas Lewis in *A General Theory of Love* also encourage us to integrate love into our daily lives. They invite us as leaders, managers, and parents to pay attention to how our emotions shape our conversations, our behavior, and our interactions with others. And they also invite us to transform our negative emotions, such as anger, into more constructive interactions with other people.

Another important dimension of being human is language. Language has been used primarily as a descriptive tool, or a tool for communication of words and symbols. The full power of language in its capacity to be generative, and to have generative conversations, has been underutilized. The prevailing conversation in meetings tends to be one of debate and confrontation, or abdication to the leader or person in authority. Generative dialogue among the team members that challenges the existing mental models or brings forth breakthrough thinking is the exception.

Language and conversations are the foundation of all human relationships. The quality of our conversations determines the quality of our relationships, and the quality of our relationships determines the quality of our work. This systemic nature of language and human beings is how we construct our relationships and our societies. Given that conversations are so important to successful interactions, how can we use them to help us construct loving and productive relationships?

The following types of conversation can bring about better and more productive human relationships, used individually or all together.

- **The Relationship Builder** The most important conversation to have is a conversation for building a relationship based on mutual understanding, trust, and some sense of shared concerns. The relationship is the foundation to all types of human conversations and activities. These are the conversations that are often taken for granted in professional or project teams and organizations.
- **The New World-opener** This conversation allows people to explore new ideas, new possibilities and new visions. Human beings are uniquely equipped with the capacity to use our imaginations to expand our horizons. But because humans find it comforting to stay within the bounds of familiarity, often people settle into repetitive conversations that keep them stuck in the same reality. Having the "new world-opener" type of conversation helps to nurture creative relationships, expanding intelligence and creating possibilities.

- **The Making Things Happen Conversation** This conversation encourages action. Most of our institutions are driven by people committed to some kind of action or project. This conversation is perhaps the most common conversation in daily life. However, while we all engage in this type of conversation, we often leave out certain key elements that diminish its effectiveness, such as the specific time when something is to be done or completed or the conditions of satisfaction attached to the action. For example, if I ask someone for a cup of coffee and I forget to say my conditions of satisfaction (i.e. decaf coffee, skim milk, and no sugar), then my request for this action will not produce the desired result. Given that most of our working relationships are based on conversations for action, becoming effective in this conversation could produce greater amount of satisfaction and results.
- **The “I-Thou” Conversation** Our culture does not give us many examples of people engaging in dialogue, a thorough, two- (or more) sided conversation that facilitates the fluid exchange of ideas. Most of our TV shows are designed for debate and most of our public leaders engage in monologues. Our educational system fails us in teaching us the importance of dialogue, instead focusing on how to construct one side of a debate. This creates polarity: winners and losers only. Instead, the “I-Thou” conversation is based on a foundation of love, in which the other person is perceived as a legitimate other. Without this foundation of love, we listen to the words but not the other person’s goals and aspirations. Based on the capacity to see the other as a legitimate other we can listen deeper to the other persons’ concerns and together build or generate a new reality and/or relationship.
- **The Mirror Conversation** This conversation encourages feedback and learning. Everyone talks about the importance of giving and receiving feedback, but in reality this conversation seldom takes place, because of the emotion of fear in our workplaces, and our lack of emotional intelligence. The stronger the relationship’s foundation (based on conversations of relationships) the greater the capacity to listen to feedback and to learn from each other. Knowing that the feedback is being offered on a foundation of love improves the chances for accepting the feedback and for reflecting on its potential for learning and development.

These conversations are the foundations for building effective and productive relationships, and can provide a deeper understanding of where emotions and conversations come from. Thomas Lewis and his colleagues (in *A General Theory of Love*) have given us a map of our limbic brain, and its direct influence in the operation of our daily lives and its implications for our relationships. Without this emotional understanding, we will continue to misunderstand ourselves and misunderstand others, creating suffering in the world.

The biology of cognition developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in their book *The Tree of Knowledge* offers a new way for each of us to understand how we perceive and bring forth our human worlds. According to Maturana, each of us is a unique observer that perceives *our own* world, but not necessarily the whole world. It is this understanding of human cognition and its implications for our relationships that are needed in order for us to construct positive working relationships. Take the case of receiving feedback from another person. If we understand that the person giving us feedback is sharing their perspective of a situation and that this is not necessarily the truth of the situation, in the context of a loving relationship, chances are both of us are going to be more open to giving and receiving feedback, as well as engaging in more generative conversations.

This is the essence of what it means to be human. We are loving animals, but often don't use our emotional intelligence. We are linguistic animals, and often we don't take the time to listen or to converse with each other. We are relational-social animals, yet we pretend that we are isolated individuals.

The new scientific knowledge offered by thinkers such as those mentioned above provides us with hope for the possibility of building new organizations and new human relationships, and to imagine living institutions, loving cultures in our organizations, and cross-cultural dialogue. The future that we can build together depends on our ability to love each other, and to have generative conversations that produce loving and productive relationships in every aspect of our lives.

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