



# LOVE AS A BUSINESS STRATEGY



Resilience, Belonging & Success

UPDATED EDITION

MOHAMMAD F. ANWAR | FRANK E. DANNA  
JEFFREY F. MA | CHRISTOPHER J. PITRE



## **Praise for *Love as a Business Strategy***

*“Love as a Business Strategy* is a must-read for anyone embarking on the path to create Loving Organizations! Mohammad’s gripping first-person perspective is so open, vulnerable, and touching. His journey to becoming a loving leader will inspire everyone to dig deeper within themselves to ask themselves ‘Do I love my people? Do I love my organization?’ The answer may be unsettling as it was for Mohammad and the leaders of Softway, which is exactly what is needed for each of us to embark on our own transformational journeys. I am truly grateful that my colleague recommended this book to me; it is definitely on my list of top organizational culture change books to read!”

“Our Loving Organization Consortium in collaboration with Compassion Café held a book club around *Love as a Business Strategy*. We were fortunate that Mohammad himself was able to attend, and shared incredibly profound insights about the degree of courage and humility, self-forgiveness, and compassion that he had to gather in the course of becoming an incredibly loving leader, as well as the nuanced interchange between personal and organizational transformation.”

**—Dr. Apurv Gupta**

*Vice President of Business  
Development, Premier Inc.*

*“Love as a Business Strategy* provides a brutally honest yet inspiring roadmap for transforming higher education institutions into cultures of care where every student is supported to achieve their goals. By connecting with students as whole human beings and addressing the challenges they face, *Love as a Business Strategy* compellingly argues colleges can boost completion rates while cultivating change makers. As an administrator seeking to serve all students, I found practical strategies and motivation in the book to call to dismantle inequitable systems and lead with empathy, understanding, and commitment to student success.”

**—Dr. Frances Villagran-Glover**

*President, Houston Community  
College-Southeast*

“The real-life examples documented in *Love as a Business Strategy* teach the incredible value of introspection and make this book a transformative guide for healthcare leaders. The principles shared within this book prove to us the power of compassion and empathy in both patient care and employee relationships. By embracing love as a strategic cornerstone, we can elevate the experiences of those we serve and foster a culture of kindness and support within our healthcare teams.”

**—Nick Marsico**

*President and CEO, Magruder Hospital*

*“Love as a Business Strategy* is needed now more than ever. Positive changes to culture and organizations will change lives, and this book gives you a roadmap on how to do it. We need to change the narrative that success in business can’t come with love and compassion. In fact, it is necessary. With many examples, insights, and practical tools, this is the book for the leaders of our organizations.”

**—Judy Le**

*CEO, TakeRoot Leadership Consulting*

*“Love as a Business Strategy* is a critical read for any team and business leader interested in establishing a resilient culture built on trust, accountability, and empathy for all.”

**—Jeff Mechlem**

*Principal, Managing Director, Page*

*“Love as a Business Strategy* completely changed the way we approach leadership and culture in our company. A totally honest and vulnerable account of how Love can lead to real success.”

**—Robert Gondo**

*Director, Tokyo Gardens Catering*

“As a career public school educator, principal, and now superintendent of schools, I never suspected I would find the secret sauce to transforming school culture in a book titled *Love as a Business Strategy*. However, that is exactly what happened! Authors Mohammad, Chris, Frank, and Jeff led our leadership team of 40 on a journey of self-discovery toward a horizon of love for those we serve.”

**—Michael A. Amadei, Ed.D.**

*Superintendent of Schools,  
Community Consolidated School District 62*

“Organizations founded on greed, power, control, and self-centered shareholder-maximizing strategies have not served us well. We need responsible and humanistic organizations that focus on human dignity and societal well-being. In this book, through the case transformation of Softway, the authors show us a compelling way to centralize humanity in the workplace. *Love as a Business Strategy* is real and much needed to transform the way we organize and lead our organizations. Through their examples and practical tips, the authors weave a story of ‘love in the workplace.’ This transformation is possible! It can be done. *Love as a Business Strategy* shows us how. A must-read for all managers, leaders, and C-Suite executives!”

**—Dr. Shaista Khilji**

*Professor of Human and  
Organizational Learning at The George  
Washington University*

*“Love as a Business Strategy* elevates what it means (and takes) to create a truly successful company. This is a raw, honest book filled with practical insights and inspiring stories.”

**—Marc Effron**

*President of The Talent Strategy  
Group and Harvard Business Review author*

“Love is wanting nothing but the best for another person. Love is more than feelings and emotion. Love is action. Love is a verb. And *Love as a Business Strategy* provides a proven approach with simple actions any organization can apply to maximize their future growth by empowering their people to become the best version of themselves.”

**—James Robert Lay**

*bestselling author of  
Banking on Digital Growth and CEO of  
the Digital Growth Institute*



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**WILEY**

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*To the past, present, and future employees and customers of Softway.*



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## Foreword

When you first hear the title *Love as a Business Strategy*, you might feel skeptical. Believe me, I get it. Love doesn't often fit into spreadsheets, quarterly reviews, or boardroom discussions. But what if it could? What if real, authentic care for people was the missing piece to achieving the outcomes we've all been chasing?

Leadership is both a continuous learning experience and a tremendous responsibility. I have experienced this responsibility not only in my personal leadership at Amegy Bank, but also in the challenges I've observed among the business leaders we serve. There is an inherent contradiction when we try to balance discipline, accountability, results, and yes, even love. I've spent decades focusing on processes, metrics, and systems to drive performance, often keeping emotions at bay. It was safer, and honestly, it worked—until it didn't.

That's where *Love as a Business Strategy* comes in. Encouraged by a trusted friend, Donna Cole, I picked up this book, and I'll admit—I was hesitant. "Love" felt too soft, too personal. But by the second chapter, I was hooked. Mohammad Anwar and his team at Softway share their journey with a raw honesty that's rare. Their stories aren't just about profits or strategy; they are about leading with vulnerability, transforming their culture, and ultimately thriving through adversity.

Their reflections resonated with me, especially in my own work at Amegy Bank, where we face the challenge of building a culture that's both resilient and invested in each other. This book doesn't just present theories. It offers actionable steps for leaders to navigate the tension between driving results and fostering deep connection. It's an approach that aligns with what many of us are trying to achieve: a workplace where people show up as their full selves, invested not just in their work but in each other.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its ability to quantify the link between culture and business results. Mohammed and his leadership team's willingness to share their setbacks reminds us that we often learn more in failure than in success. This authenticity and passion to help others reflects an exemplary commitment to personal and professional growth.

*Love as a Business Strategy* stands out as one of my all-time favorite books. It's a must-read for leaders who strive to understand the interdependencies of strategy, culture, and behavior. The Culture+ team offers more than just advice—they offer a roadmap to creating a thriving business environment where results naturally follow. At Amegy, we're already seeing the shift as we apply these lessons to our own journey.

If you're ready to lead differently, I encourage you to read *Love as a Business Strategy* with an open mind. It's a call to transform how you lead, without abandoning discipline or strategy. Instead, it shows how combining these traits with empathy and connection can lead to truly sustainable success. The more I engage with the Culture+ team, the deeper my gratitude grows for their insights and support.

—Steve Stephens, CEO, Amegy Bank



## Our Darkest Day

The last few people filed into the large conference room, and the director shut the door behind them with an ominous *click*.

The crowd of employees looked around, confused. No one knew why they were there. After a pause that felt like an eternity, an HR manager began handing out folders. One woman peeked into her folder and started reading. She looked as if she was going to cry.

A second director cleared his throat from the front of the room. "You're probably wondering why we called you here today," he said awkwardly. "Unfortunately, the company is going through a downturn. Effective immediately, everyone in this room is being let go."

Twenty voices erupted at once in shock and disbelief. The director gestured for silence, then continued. "In a few minutes, security will arrive outside the room, and you'll be taken out in small groups to pack your things. Then you'll be escorted out of the building."

A man in the front row scowled. Another asked, "Can I say good-bye to anyone?"

The director shook his head. "No. Anyone who is staying with the company is in a separate room. This is for everyone's protection."

"You can't just escort us out like criminals!" someone shouted.

The director's face was set. "The folder in your hands has all the details you'll need. We appreciate your work. Thank you."

Angry voices flooded the room once more. But as security arrived to escort the first group out, their protests gave way to resigned silence.

A woman came up to the director, hugging herself. "Why me?" she asked. "I'm good at what I do. I made it through the performance audit last month. Can you at least tell me why you picked me?"

The director looked at the woman and then toward security, but they were occupied. Reluctantly he turned back to her. "We needed to select a certain number of people. We did the best we could. There wasn't a reason you made the list. You just did."

“No *reason*? This is my livelihood! What do I tell my children?”

The director didn’t feel good about brushing her off like that. *But this is how they told me to do it*, he told himself. *This is how you lay people off*.

He got security’s attention, waved them over, and had them escort the woman out with the next group.

The director let out a small sigh of relief. He wouldn’t get a wink of sleep that night, but at least the hard part was over.

It had been a sleepless few weeks for many of the higher-ups at Softway, especially for Mohammad, the company’s founder, president, and CEO. Since 2003, Softway had been nothing but successful by all the standard metrics—revenue, profitability, year-on-year growth, you name it.

And yet, about a month prior to the layoffs, Softway’s executive leadership team called a meeting with Mohammad to deliver some shocking news: Softway was in a bad place. The industry was in a downturn, the company was losing contracts, and they weren’t bringing in enough new clients to make up the difference. For the company to survive, Mohammad would have to cut ties with over a third of the company’s 260 employees.

Mohammad slumped in his chair, stunned. “Okay,” he said. “Tell me what I need to do.”

The executive leadership team walked him through the standard corporate layoff procedure: no one-on-one conversations, no apologies, no good-byes, and, above all, no actions or behaviors that might make Mohammad or Softway look sympathetic to their situation.

Mohammad swallowed hard, reminded himself of why he had hired this leadership team in the first place, and decided to take their advice.

Then he assembled his management team—including Frank and Jeff—to share the news and seek their help in deciding which employees to let go. This was going to be tough. To hit their quota, they would have to lay off some great performers.

Then came the day of the layoffs. The directors led one group to be laid off, while Mohammad, Frank, and Jeff led the remaining group to another room on the other side of the building—where no one could see what was happening to their coworkers.

Once all Softway's remaining employees were assembled, Mohammad addressed the group. "You've probably noticed that some of your friends are not in this room with you today. That is because they are no longer with the company."

Mohammad explained the tough situation Softway had found itself in. If the company hoped to remain in business, it would have to downsize. "But don't worry," Mohammad said, trying to sound upbeat. "If you're in this room, that means your job is safe."

"Yeah, for now," he heard a team member grumble from the back.

An hour or so later, the surviving team members emerged from the room and staggered back to their desks. All traces of their former colleagues were gone. Their desks were all cleaned out. Their tech accounts had been shut down. Even their lunches were missing from the fridge.

It was only eleven o'clock in the morning. On a Monday.

And Softway had just endured the darkest day in its history.

## **Business as Usual Sucks**

If you picked up this book, our story probably sounds familiar. In fact, we're willing to bet that you or your organization have had at least one darkest day. Maybe you've had several. Or maybe one is on the way.

If so, know this: You're not alone.

Layoff stories like ours are far from unusual. In fact, all around the world, they're the norm. Just ask the executive leadership team who advised Mohammad. Every step was carefully planned to be as cold and dispassionate as possible. They knew exactly how to handle this process because they'd been down this road many times before.

But if the story of Softway's darkest day represents business as usual, then business as usual *sucks*.

Mohammad sensed this immediately as he oversaw the layoff process, and he began to question everything. What had his company become? Had he failed as a leader? Did Softway even deserve to continue?

These weren't easy questions to ask. After all, Mohammad loved being in business for himself. He'd grown the company from nothing to an eight-figure company with offices in America and India. But he

knew he wasn't perfect. After all, he founded the company when he was only twenty, and he'd learned how to be a CEO on the fly. He knew he'd missed a lesson or two, which is why he'd recruited his executive leadership team to help him guide the company to the next level.

But that team was focused only on boosting the bottom line. The more aggressively they pursued this strategy, the more the company lost something far more valuable: its humanity.

Now, to be fair, culture had never been Softway's strong suit. But in the months leading up to our darkest day, the environment was so lifeless you could hear a pin drop. Softway employees saw their jobs as purely transactional. They would show up, get their work done, and then pack up and go home. We didn't know it yet, but we were living on borrowed time. Business as usual may have kept our doors open and our bank accounts healthy for a while, but eventually our balance came due.

Fortunately, since our darkest day Softway has learned not just to survive but to thrive—all thanks to an approach we call Love as a Business Strategy. Through it, we have rediscovered our humanity, put people at the center of work, and completely pivoted our business.

## Love Is Good. . .for Business

In the chapters to come, we're going to share the story of how we discovered and adopted Love as a Business Strategy, what that pivot has created for us, and how you and your organization can do the same.

But first let's address the elephant in the room: What is *Love as a Business Strategy*? You'll get a complete description in Chapter 1, but in its simplest form, Love as a Business Strategy means creating a workplace that puts humanity first.

Here's why that matters: The average person spends more time with coworkers than with their own families. Work is the center of their lives. Far too often this sacrifice goes unacknowledged and unrewarded. Many organizations put little thought into the workplace environment they create, which often results in an indifferent or toxic culture. Eventually this culture seeps into other aspects of their employees' lives, affecting their health, family life, relationships, and happiness.

It doesn't have to be this way. People and profit don't have to be mutually exclusive. They can be complementary. After all, there is not one number on a balance sheet that isn't connected to a human being. If you want to produce better numbers over the long term, then it makes good business sense to support and empower the people *behind* those numbers.

Throughout this book, we explain how a culture of love leads to stronger, higher-performing teams; clearer, more attainable objectives; better business outcomes; and a healthier bottom line. This isn't just idle talk or well-intentioned theory. Both Softway and the organizations we consult with have seen firsthand how a people-first approach can drive quantifiable improvements across the board.

But while these results are both real and important for an organization's long-term success, they're only part of the story. In our experience, Love as a Business Strategy is worth pursuing if for no other reason than it's the right thing to do. If the only impact a culture of love has is that it improves workers' lives both inside *and* outside of work, it would still be worth it.

## **Lessons Grounded in Experience**

This is not the first business book to discuss love, culture, or the importance of people. We acknowledge the input of so many others on our thinking, and we are indebted to their contributions. However, our journey has also helped us see things a little differently.

Since our darkest day in late 2015, Softway has become an entirely different company. We recognized that something needed to change, we committed to that change, and then we worked tirelessly to make that change a reality. Whatever we did before, we committed to doing the exact opposite—and that decision saved our company.

Along the way, a funny thing happened.

Inspired by our transformation, our clients began asking whether we could spark the same transformation within *their* organizations. Suddenly Love as a Business Strategy wasn't just something we practiced but something we taught as well. These early pilot programs eventually led to an inclusive leadership experience called Culture Rise, part of our offerings from Culture+, which we have shared with thousands of leaders and executives around the world.

Teaching Love as a Business Strategy was never part of the plan, but it has become a natural outgrowth of our work as our company. Our mission is to transform businesses the human way through technology, culture, and communications.

With this book, we share that mission with you.

This book is a collection of our lived experiences pursuing Love as a Business Strategy both at Softway and in our work with others. In the chapters to come, we offer practical approaches, sensible solutions, and immediate applications for creating a culture of love within your business. These understandings, mindsets, and behaviors are realistic and achievable, if not immediate. Each chapter is designed for you to understand and apply what you have learned in a real and tangible way.

To begin your journey, we start with the basics. In Part I, we take a deep dive into what we mean by Love as a Business Strategy—what it means, what it means for your culture, and why individual behaviors lie at the center of it all. Then in Part II, we introduce our Six Pillars of Love. Finally, in Part III, we put everything together and demonstrate how these concepts apply to different areas of your organization, such as leadership, teams and individuals, human resources, process and technology, business and people outcomes, and change management.

To bring these lessons to life, we share stories of our own journey of discovery, both before we embraced Love as a Business Strategy and after. Some of these stories detail our proudest moments, and some reveal our most unfortunate misbehaviors.

We share these stories not to brag—and certainly not to embarrass anyone—but to build empathy. We’ve experienced the cultural issues you’re facing at your workplace, and we know what works and what doesn’t. By telling our story human to human, employee to employee, leader to leader, our goal is to help you connect with our message so that you can apply it to your own situation and behavior. By understanding the emotional component of our journey and what is at stake, you will develop a clearer understanding of what is needed to make lasting behavior change within your own organization.

Do we have the data to make a business case for Love as a Business Strategy? Absolutely. But here’s the thing: No one changes their behaviors because of data. They change when they understand

the experience *behind* the data. When you lead with numbers, you neglect the people behind them. But when you lead with people, you allow the numbers to take care of themselves.

Finally, this is a book for both leaders and aspiring leaders—for anyone who manages people or who expects that they might one day. We've taught these lessons to organizations of all kinds—startups, midsize businesses, multinational corporations, private and public school systems, governments, and even nonprofits. Each has applied these lessons in its own different way. All have benefited.

But while Love as a Business Strategy has the power to transform organizations, the stories, lessons, and strategies laid out in this book can help at the individual level as well. We've especially found this to be true of middle managers, who occupy a unique position in their organizations. To those middle managers we say this: You may have the most to lose by standing up for change, but you also have the most to gain. After all, adding love to your work is a universal good, and the culture you create within your team can create a ripple effect throughout the rest of the organization.

Talking about love is easy. But delivering a culture of love in the workplace is hard work. Change doesn't happen overnight, and you *will* see a few setbacks along the way. We certainly did.

But although change doesn't happen overnight, it *is* possible—and it begins by embracing your own ability to affect that change. Whether you're the CEO of your company or the newest team member, you have influence. If you can learn to wield that influence in the service of a culture of love, you will find value both for yourself and for your organization. In fact, you may even find, as we did, that the impact you have is far greater than you could ever have imagined.

## Welcome to the Second Edition

We first released *Love as a Business Strategy* in April 2021. Since then the journey this book has taken us on has been more rewarding than we ever could have imagined. It's led us to speaking opportunities at conferences, workshops, and other events all around the world. It's led us to surprise meetings with presidents of foreign countries. And it's led us to completely rethink our company, our products and services, and the value we bring to the world.

Most important of all, it's helped us to connect with people and to hear their stories at a scale we never could have imagined. There's nothing quite like receiving an email or seeing a post on LinkedIn and learning how the principles in this book impacted someone. One letter, from a man in Indonesia, described how this book led to him on a journey that would completely transform his life. That's powerful stuff, and it means the world to us.

This edition still contains all the same stories and lessons as the first edition (and Mohammad is still just as embarrassed about it as ever). But, like Frank, it's slimmed down a little since 2021. We've learned to get to the point just a little bit faster this time around.

We've also added a book club facilitation guide to the end of each chapter. When we published the first edition of the book, we hosted a book club at Softway to discuss it as a company. The conversations from those meetings helped set the stage for us to level up again, reassert our company's vision, and solidify our expectations for how we treat each other.

We believe it can do the same for you.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find an extensive list of questions crafted to maximize full-sentence answers rather than yes-or-no responses.

To be honest, we included a lot of questions. You're probably not going to walk through each and every question or conversation starter, but we wanted to give you options. Feel free to add, adjust, omit, refine, and/or use as is.

If you're a facilitator, here are a few things to keep in mind to keep the conversations running smoothly:

- ◆ Lead by example and share from a place of vulnerability. Setting the stage for others will also help them stay vulnerable, open to sharing, and leaning in.
- ◆ Take some time before your book club meeting to think through your own personal stories that you can connect to the stories and themes in the book.
- ◆ Consider the voices in the room (in person or virtually) who aren't being heard or may not feel comfortable speaking up. As facilitator, do your best to create equity in speaking time among book club members. If a few voices dominate the



conversation, make sure to prompt folks who haven't gotten a chance to share.

We hope the conversations that stem from your discussions are refreshing and empowering.

---

## Questions for "Our Darkest Day"

- ◆ Have you experienced a "dark day" like the one described? If so, what happened? How did it impact morale?
  - ◆ If you could wave a magic wand, how would you have run those layoffs?
  - ◆ Why do you think Mohammad listened to the advice of his executive team?
  - ◆ Why do you believe business can be so heartless?
  - ◆ Based on what you know now (having read this section), how can love be good for business?
  - ◆ What were some of your takeaways from this introductory chapter to the book?
  - ◆ After reading this chapter, are you skeptical about how we define "Love as a Business Strategy"? If so, share those thoughts with the group.
  - ◆ What were some of your biggest *ab-ba* moments from this chapter?
  - ◆ Share a moment of self-awareness about your leadership after reading this chapter.
  - ◆ What, if anything, will you change or adjust about how you lead or behave based on what you've read?
-