Treating love for work like a virtue can backfire on employees and teams

Mijeong Kwon, Assistant Professor of Management, Rice University

Published: November 25, 2025 8:23am EDT

Loving your work is one thing; insisting that colleagues love it is another.

Natalie McComas/Moment via Getty Images

It’s popular advice for new graduates: “Find a job you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life.” Love for one’s work, Americans are often told, is the surest route to success.

As a management professor, I can attest that there is solid research supporting this advice. In psychology, this idea is described as “intrinsic motivation” – working because you find the work itself satisfying. People who are intrinsically motivated tend to experience genuine enjoyment and curiosity in what they do, relishing opportunities to learn or master challenges for their own sake. Research has long shown that intrinsic motivation enhances performance, persistence and creativity at work.

Yet my and my co-authors' recent research suggests that this seemingly innocent idea of loving your work can take on a moral edge. Increasingly, people seem to judge both themselves and others according to whether they are intrinsically motivated. What used to be a personal preference has, for many, become a moral imperative: You should love your work, and it is somehow wrong if you don't.

Moralizing motivation

When a neutral preference becomes charged with moral meaning, social scientists call it "moralization." For example, someone might initially choose vegetarianism for their own health reasons but come to view it as the right thing to do – and judge others accordingly.

The moralization of intrinsic motivation follows a similar logic. People work for many reasons: passion, duty, family, security or social status. But once intrinsic motivation becomes moralized, loving what you do is seen as not only enjoyable but virtuous. Working for money, prestige or family obligation starts to look less admirable, even suspect.

In a 2023 study, fellow business researchers Julia Lee Cunningham, Jon M. Jachimowicz and I surveyed over 1,200 employees, asking whether they thought working for personal enjoyment was virtuous.

People who did, we found, tended to believe everyone else should be intrinsically motivated, too. They were also more likely to see other motives, such as working for pay or recognition, as morally inferior. They tended to agree, for example, that "you are morally obligated to love the work itself more than you love the rewards and perks."

These employees had internalized the idea that you work either for love or money – even though most people, in reality, do both.

Costs for you

At first glance, treating love for work as a virtue seems to offer nothing but benefits. If a job's mission or day-to-day tasks are personally meaningful, you may persist through challenges, because quitting could feel like betraying an ideal.

But this virtue can also backfire. When intrinsic motivation becomes a moral duty rather than a joy, you may feel guilty for not constantly loving your work. Emotions that are normal in any job, such as boredom, fatigue or disengagement, can prompt feelings of moral failure and self-blame. Over time, this pressure can contribute to burnout if you stay in unsustainable roles out of guilt.

By idealizing your “dream job” when you’re applying, you may overlook security, stability and other important life needs – risking financial strain and underusing your talents. This unrealistic standard could also lead you to leave a job too soon when reality disappoints or initial passion fades.

Costs for a company

Moralizing intrinsic motivation doesn’t stop at the self; it also reshapes how we judge others. People who moralize intrinsic motivation often expect it from everyone else.

In a study of nearly 800 employees across 185 teams, we found that employees who moralized intrinsic motivation were more generous toward teammates they perceived as loving their work. However, they were less willing to help out colleagues they considered less passionate. In other words, moralizing intrinsic motivation can make employees “discerning saints” – good to some, but selectively so.

Seeing intrinsic motivation as a virtue affects how people view colleagues, too.

Moyo Studio/E+ via Getty Images

This dynamic can create problems for work teams. Leaders who strongly moralize intrinsic motivation may adopt leadership styles aimed at igniting passion in their teams – emphasizing workers’ autonomy, for example.

While inspiring on the surface, this approach can alienate employees who work for more pragmatic reasons. Over time, I would argue, this can breed tension and conflict, as some team members are celebrated as “true believers” and others are quietly marginalized. Expressing love for one’s work becomes a kind of commodity – one more way to get ahead.

Embracing many motives

People all around the world experience intrinsic motivation. But if that feeling is universal, its moralization is not.

My current research with management researcher Laura Sonday suggests that moralizing intrinsic motivation is more pronounced in some cultures than in others. Where work is viewed as a means of service, duty or balance, rather than a source of personal fulfillment, loving one’s job may be appreciated but not treated as a moral expectation.

I would urge office leaders to recognize the double-edged nature of moralizing intrinsic motivation. Expressing genuine love for work can inspire others, but enforcing it as a moral norm can silence or shame those with different values or priorities. Leaders should be careful not to equate enthusiasm with virtue, or assume that passion always signals integrity or competence.

For employees, it may be worth reflecting on how we talk about our own motivation. Loving one’s work is wonderful, but it’s also perfectly human to value stability, recognition or family needs. In a culture where “do what you love” has become a moral commandment, remembering that it’s not the be-all, end-all reason to work may be the most moral stance of all.

Mijeong Kwon does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.