

Humanising workplaces in Aotearoa



How do we make workplaces more human?
Leanne Holdsworth,
Associate with Cultivating Leadership,
offers her suggested practical actions.

At the absurdly young age of 27 I decided to throw in the towel on corporate life. The year before, I had won the Young Chartered Accountant of the Year for Auckland/Northland, and so had what seemed to be a stellar career in front of me. But I couldn't stand another morning of getting into the lift at the office and leaving most of me in the lobby to pick up on the way back down. I couldn't understand how the leaders didn't comprehend that if all of me were welcomed in the workplace, if I was invited to contribute and was listened to, I could add so much more value to the business and feel

more true to who I was. It didn't feel very human. And I thought it was just me. Until I had a lightbulb moment a few years later where I realised that this was a systemic issue, it wasn't personal at all!

What if we could make our workplaces more human, I wondered?

Nearly 30 years later, I've spent most of my career supporting organisations to make their workplaces more human and their organisations more sustainable.

An **average person spends 80,000–90,000 hours over their lifetime at work**, more time than

we do at anything, other than sleep. By default, those 80,000 hours have a significant impact, not just on those 80,000 hours at work but also on who we are for the rest of our lives.

If we put ourselves in the shoes of someone we love: an adult, child, mother, brother, good friend, ourselves, what sort of work experience do we want for them over those 80,000 hours? And is it conceivable that this might be possible for all our fellow humans?

LEADERSHIP MINDSETS FOR HUMAN WORKPLACES

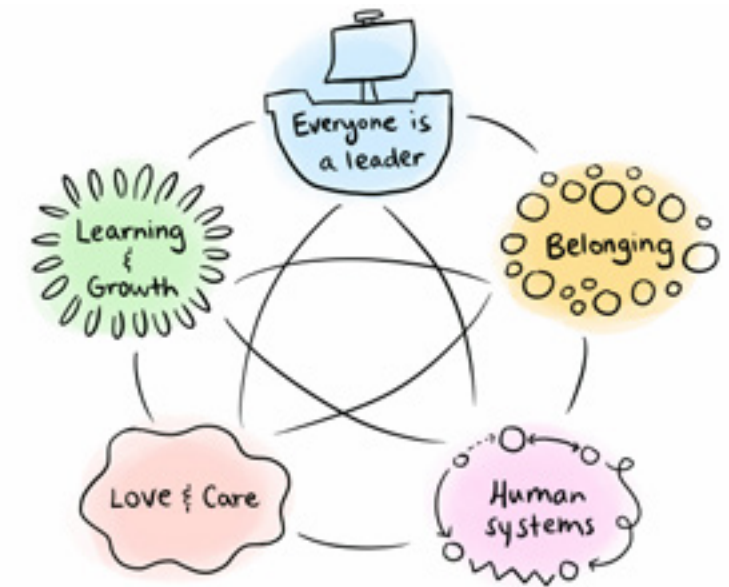
For the past three years, my co-author of *Human Work: Five leadership mindsets for humanising the workplace* and I have interviewed business leaders from around the world who are intentionally creating human workplaces, *ones that support people to be at their best at work, whatever that means for them, for the benefit of every aspect of their lives and the achievement of the organisation's purpose.*

Many organisations make helpful moves towards humanising their workplaces, like wellbeing initiatives, DEI policies and hybrid work policies. All these help. And it is not the same as being intentional about creating a human workplace. Policies are part of humanising a workplace. At its core, a human workplace has an intentional decision by the executive to move in this direction, including practising their way into the mindsets that support human work.

“Imagine the positive ripple effect on families and communities if all our workplaces were truly human.”

What we learned was that, rather than a checklist of the top 10 things to do to create a human workplace, there were mindsets that enabled leaders to create the conditions for humans to truly thrive.

Let's take one of those: learning and growth. Here,



we heard from all leaders, rather unsurprisingly, that leaders doing their own developmental work was crucial to creating a human workplace. Here we are talking specifically about developing more sophisticated ways of thinking and self-knowledge (vertical development). This differs from how we often hold development, which is about adding more skills, knowledge and capabilities.

And how does a learning and growth mindset make a workplace more human? Have you encountered leaders in organisations who don't know how to listen deeply to others? Or they don't seem able to think reflectively about their own behaviour. Or they focus all on the task and very little on relationships? Who are blind to the impact they have on others? A human workplace makes sure that learning and growth is just the water we swim in here. In a workplace that leans heavily into this mindset, you could walk around the workplace and ask anyone what their learning edge is (the place at which you don't know what to do next, what decision to make, or how to think about something), and they would be able to tell you.

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, in their book *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*, help us understand the cost of not taking this mindset on as an organisation:

“In most organisations, nearly everyone is doing a second job no one is paying them for – namely, covering their weaknesses, trying to look their best, and managing other people's impressions of them. There may be no greater waste of a company's resources. The ultimate cost: neither the organisation nor its people are able to realise their full potential.”

With a learning and growth mindset, it is safe not to have it all together, to mess up and not get it right the first time.

Let's take one more of the mindsets: Everyone is a leader. This is what you might think of as the opposite of the old-school mindset of leadership existing only in those with formal power to direct others. Leaders in more human organisations often see leadership as the ability to take action to positively influence the organisation from anywhere. From this perspective, it is in the organisation's best interests to increase everybody's leadership capacity. And on this basis, everyone can be a leader, regardless of whether they have positional power or not.

From a human perspective, autonomy is a basic human need. Human organisations create the conditions for as much autonomy as possible, to enable everyone to do

and be at their best. The very nature of how we relate to power as humans often makes it hard to give up the power to give others autonomy. So this mindset involves being intentional about how we use power and how we enable others to do their best with a sense that they have a say over how they do it (to the extent that their role allows this).

WHY SHOULD ORGANISATIONS CREATE MORE HUMAN WORKPLACES?

This is the easy question. It's good for the individual, the organisation and our communities.

FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

Levels of workplace stress and burnout are high. In the latest Gallup State of the Global Workplace Report, 47 per cent of the New Zealand and Australian workforce experienced stress during a lot of yesterday.

A human workplace not only looks to reduce high levels of stress and burnout but also creates the conditions for:

- more connection and understanding
- more devolved leadership
- more belonging
- greater connection to organisational purpose
- more human systems
- stronger self-awareness and empathy.

FOR THE ORGANISATION

Just 23 per cent of the New Zealand and Australian workforce are engaged at work. And engagement is not contentment. True engagement means your people are psychologically present to do their work: they understand what to do, have what they need and have a supportive manager and team. They know why their work matters. They are work ready.

Then the rest of us are either quiet quitting (just putting in the least effort), while 11 per cent of us are actively disengaged. At the same time,



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HUMANISE YOUR WORKPLACE?

So, we have a sense of what a human workplace is and why it's vital to move in this direction. But what can you do in a practical sense to nudge your organisation in the direction of human work? Chances are you are already supporting this move in some ways. If you take a systemic approach to humanising workplaces, choose a few of these actions.

- Build the business case for humanising workplaces. Use the statistics in this article as a start.
- Use all your influencing skills to ensure the executive are engaged in their own vertical developmental leadership work, so they can walk the talk of a learning and growth mindset.
- Find others who care about this, even outside of HR. You won't be on your own. Then keep talking about it together, supporting each other in your nudges.
- Make your own growth edges more visible.
- Ensure human work is included in your leadership development initiatives.
- Look for creating more agency around when, where and how people work.
- Keep championing authentic moves toward DEI and wellbeing.
- Make organisational purpose real for people. Ensure everyone knows how they contribute toward purpose.
- Make sure people feel seen.
- Ensure listening to learn is a way of being.
- Look for ways to walk the talk of humanising work; not unintentionally excluding others, listening to learn and acknowledging others.
- Use every interaction as an opportunity for someone to leave feeling better about themselves (even in tough conversations).
- Review your systems against the human work mindsets and see where you might be able to amend policies or systems (formal and informal). For instance, what policies might be working against creating the conditions for trust in the workplace?

43 per cent are watching for or actively seeking a new job.

And all of this costs an organisation in lost productivity and recruitment costs.

In March 2022, MIT Sloan Management Review published the research of Donald Sull, Charles Sull, William Cipolli and Caio Brighenti on factors causing the Great Resignation in the USA. Toxic culture was the most significant factor pushing people out the door during the Great Resignation (10.4 times more likely to contribute to attrition than compensation). And what toxic culture means to people is 'disrespectful', 'non-inclusive', 'unethical', 'cut-throat' and 'abusive'.

One of the leadership mindsets for humanising work is 'belonging'. What we know is that employees with a lower sense of belonging have a 313 per cent stronger intention to quit compared with those with strong social connections

and a 34 per cent lower goal attainment at work.

FOR SOCIETY

With 60 per cent of us believing our jobs are the most important factor influencing mental health and believing our managers have just as much of an impact on people's mental health as their spouse (both 69 per cent), and even more than their doctor (51 per cent) or therapist (41 per cent), we can use our workplaces to turn this global mental health epidemic around.

Most of us have experienced how we show up at home when we are working in unhealthy or toxic workplaces or for a manager who just doesn't get human workplaces, compared with how we show up at home with good workplaces. Imagine the positive ripple effect on families and communities if all our workplaces were truly human.



Leanne Holdsworth helps organisations become more human. She is an Associate at Cultivating Leadership where she designs and delivers immersive, transformational experiences (leadership programmes, strategic facilitation, consulting, executive coaching) in Aotearoa and around the world. She is the co-author of *Human Work: Five Leadership Mindsets for Humanising Workplaces* and author of *A New Generation of Business Leaders*. She has spent 15 years advising organisations predominantly in the private sector (across most industries, including banking, primary sector, FMCG, tech, pharmaceuticals) as well as the public and not-for-profit sectors in leadership, sustainability and human work. You can learn more about Leanne's work at www.holdsworth.nz and www.cultivatingleadership.com or contact her at leanne@cultivatingleadership.com.

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