

# THE CASE FOR BEING HUMAN AND LEADING HUMAN

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**T**hink of a time a leader made you feel seen at work.

Maybe you received recognition for a job well done. Or perhaps leadership took your suggestion and praised you for a good idea. Or maybe a boss noticed you having a hard time and asked if a day off would help.

What would the world be like if these actions were standard expected behavior from our leaders? Imagine what kind of work environment would have this as the norm.

I can count on one hand how many times I felt a leader truly saw me in the span of my career. Each of those rare instances made all the difference in my development.

In my research on how leaders drive performance, I've found the key to successful leadership is becoming technically proficient in the human element.

Prioritizing the human element means shifting focus away from profitability or processes to put people first.

That's why I created the Human Leadership operating model. Human Leadership is a radical disruption of the conventional leadership practice we've all been taught (or, more likely, learned by osmosis). It shifts the workplace paradigm from a profit- or productivity-centered approach to a people-centered model.

By putting people first, I mean meeting their needs. Not just their needs for financial security and a physically safe environment, but their universal human needs to be heard, seen, understood, appreciated, inspired, and feel they matter.

In my book *Be Human, Lead Human: How to Connect People and Performance*, from which this article is adapted, I propose the HUMANS framework for building better work relationships to meet these needs. Each pillar (Hearing, Understanding, Mattering, Appreciating, iNspiring, and Seeing) describes a fundamental human need, as shown in Figure 1. Through anecdotes, data, and real-world events, I explain each need's influence in the work environment, share common behaviors that get in the way of meeting it, and offer strategies for more effective approaches.

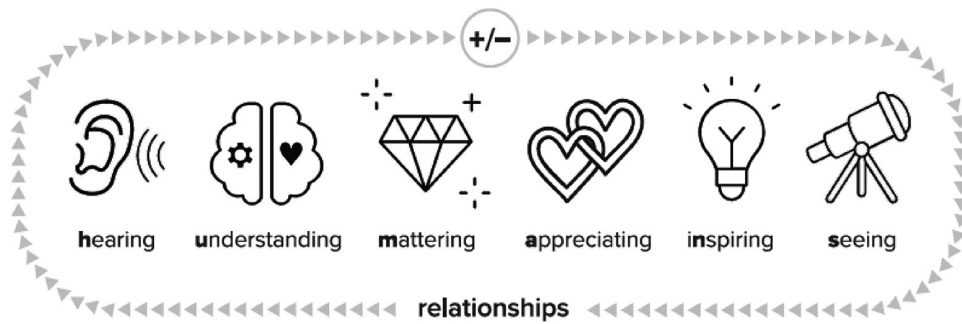


FIGURE 1. HUMANS FRAMEWORK.

## Hearing

Hearing someone isn't just a matter of physically listening to their speaking sounds. It's receiving their words with an open mind to understand their perspective.

Leaders who make time to hear others and help them feel heard retain talent and drive outstanding results. Business performance and leadership success depend on your ability to hear people.

When people feel heard, they feel respected, valued, and validated. Engagement increases and they become more willing to accept change, making new ways of working the status quo.

## Barriers to Hearing

Many behaviors hinder us from truly hearing the people around us. My research with executives and leaders points to a triple threat of barriers: advocacy, assumption, and attention.

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When I say advocacy, I mean selfish advocacy, which occurs when leaders focus on promoting their own beliefs rather than genuinely listening to others. It's about persuading others to adopt your ways of thinking or take positions for your validation or benefit.

Assumptions form when leaders fill in information gaps without seeking clarification or understanding. For example, a manager might assume a team member is slacking when actually they are not receiving the support they need to deliver results. If the manager doesn't ask, how are they to know the real circumstances? When we don't know what's going on, we draw uninformed (and oftentimes incorrect) conclusions.

Lack of attention also hinders hearing. When someone isn't mindfully present, people tend to withdraw from the interaction and relationship. When we fail to pay attention, we pay dearly in missed opportunities to create connection, build understanding, and strengthen relationships.

## Strategies to Hear Better

Three strategies to overcome barriers to hearing are inquiry, fact-checking, and paraphrasing.

Inquiry involves asking questions and using the Socratic method to deepen understanding and challenge assumptions. Asking open-ended questions leads to deeper information and data points, serving to inform your thinking about others. Curiosity about people expresses an interest in who they are and what they're doing. This creates a sense of togetherness rather than divisiveness, counteracting the advocacy barrier.

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## *Lack of attention also hinders hearing.*

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Fact-seeking involves gathering accurate information to challenge assumptions and biases. Ask questions and check credible data sources. When you collect data about a specific topic or situation, you use evidence to support or disprove the other person's position. This prevents you from making unfounded assumptions about the other person. It also keeps you from diving straight into problem-solving without sufficient data.

Paraphrasing helps you correctly interpret what someone says. It involves repeating back your understanding of their points throughout the conversation to ensure you're processing them correctly. Paraphrasing eliminates attention barriers because it requires laser focus on the speaker to be able to repeat your takeaways back to them.

## Understanding

Understanding means gaining insight into others' reality and viewing the world from their perspective. You listen to what they say and comprehend the meaning and essence of their words.

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## *Paraphrasing helps you correctly interpret what someone says.*

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This is important because understanding others leads to effective communication, authentic relationships, and higher performance. It gives you the knowledge to build an effective team of people who cover each other's weaknesses with their individual strengths and who empathize with each other and the people their work is serving.

## Barriers to Understanding

Per my research, three common behaviors that block understanding are failing to listen, being an empathy miser, and emotional hijacking.

Failing to listen means listening with the intent to reply rather than the intent to understand. When you listen only to respond, it keeps your focus on you, not the speaker. Oftentimes, this leads to neither party feeling understood.

Being an empathy miser means lacking empathy for others—or at least failing to demonstrate it. Failing to show understanding of how a situation impacts someone erects connection barriers between you and them.

Emotional hijacking refers to when our emotions get the better of us and override our impulse control, often by going into flight/fight/freeze mode. We've all experienced this takeover from our brains at some point. In this highly triggered state, your focus is again solely on you, hindering your ability to understand others.

## Strategies to Understand Better

Tools you can use to move the needle on understanding are active listening, empathy, and emotional self-management.

Active listening means using your brain, body, and intuition to be present in the conversation and hear the other person's words beyond a surface level. Search for, identify, and interpret various cues from the other person. These cues can be verbal, vocal, tactile, visual, or nonverbal. Connect these cues to the words the

speaker is—and *isn't*—saying and how they relate to the context in which they're spoken to understand their true meaning. When you listen with your brain, body, and intuition, you don't have the bandwidth to focus on how you would reply.

Empathy is the act of setting aside assumptions and putting yourself in someone else's shoes to learn who they are and what makes them tick. Using empathy in your interactions with others helps you understand them *and* helps them feel understood.

Emotional self-management means understanding yourself so you can regulate your emotions and maintain control of your actions and behavior. Disruptive emotions are inevitable, but they don't have to control you when they occur.

## Mattering

Everyone wants to feel that they are important and significant to others. It's a universal human need to feel valued for our contributions to the world as well as for our humanity.

It's important for you and your team members to understand how you matter because it helps you add value. For example, diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals understand the value of interactions and understanding between people who have fundamentally different lived experiences. They add value by advocating for and facilitating access to those different voices.

When employees feel they matter, they are engaged, loyal, and productive. People care when they see how much you care.

## Barriers to Mattering

In my research, leaders mentioned multiple behaviors getting in the way of helping people feel they matter. Passing judgment and prioritizing process over people topped the list.

Passing judgment refers to the human tendency to compare others' actions, behaviors, and beliefs to our

own—and judge them negatively when they differ from ours. This judgment rejects people as human beings. Rejecting someone and judging their “imperfection” gets in the way of recognizing that they matter. It also creates an “us vs. them” mentality, which fosters divisiveness and a sense of not belonging.

Prioritizing process over people means placing a higher emphasis on following established procedures and achieving goals efficiently, often at the expense of considering the needs and well-being of the individuals involved. This can lead to disengagement and a lack of connection.

## Strategies to Show People They Matter

Effective ways to help people feel valued are to suspend judgment and prioritize people.

Resist the urge to place value judgments on others' beliefs, thoughts, actions, and behaviors. Suspend judgment by bringing an open mindset to conversations and refraining from adding meaning or making assumptions about what people say.

Prioritizing people means valuing individuals as human beings and taking into consideration their needs, preferences, and well-being. When you prioritize people, recognize their unique value, and foster a sense of unconditional acceptance, they can perform at their best and contribute meaningfully to their work and the world around them.

## Appreciating

Expressing appreciation involves recognizing and thanking others for generating positive outcomes. It feels good to appreciate others. It also helps them feel good about themselves, creating positive emotions and heightening relational energy.

Employees who feel appreciated and valued stay with their employers. This decreases flight risk and attrition costs. Additionally, research shows that employee health and well-being are linked to leadership's ability to appreciate others.

The more people feel appreciated, the more they bond and engage in their work and with others. Increased engagement elevates relationships and work performance. Appreciating others and helping them feel appreciated creates virtuous cycles of performance and engagement, which are critical to individual well-being and organizational survival.

## Barriers to Appreciating

My research reflects two key behaviors that act as barriers to helping others feel appreciated: withholding gratitude and taking credit for others' work.

Withholding gratitude is self-explanatory. What's less easily apparent is why. Factors that seem to play a role in leaders choosing not to express appreciation include a belief that salary and benefits are thanks enough, fear of being vulnerable or taken advantage of, or viewing it as coddling employees. There is also the risk of coming off as inauthentic if you're unaccustomed to thanking others. Expressing inauthentic gratitude is just as damaging as withholding authentic appreciation.

We all know what it means to take credit for someone else's work. And if you've had someone do it to you, you know how discouraging and diminishing it feels. It's one of the quickest ways to destroy relationships and trust. Taking credit for others' work prevents you from acknowledging someone else's contributions to the greater good. Worse, it diminishes them as a human being.

## Strategies to Appreciate Better

There are many tools you can use to help others feel appreciated. However, you have to use the right method for each individual. Everyone prefers to receive appreciation in different ways. The best thing to do is to ask—and then do that.

Some examples of effective appreciation methods include publicly acknowledging someone's accomplishments and efforts, authentically thanking them one-on-one, writing and delivering a thank-you note, and gifting items or experiences that express your gratitude.

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Appreciating others how they want to be appreciated honors their humanity. And people are willing to go the extra mile when you appreciate their strengths and accommodate them.

## Inspiring

To inspire others propels them to act of their own accord. A leader's inspiration creates direction and shapes follower efforts toward a desired outcome. It facilitates agency.

Inspiration is important because it creates pictures of possibility. Leaders who inspire their employees create a thriving work environment that drives individual and organizational success. Through inspiration, leaders can unlock the full potential of their teams, leading to increased motivation, engagement, productivity, and innovation.

## Barriers to Inspiring

During my research, four behaviors hindering inspiration came to the fore: lack of vision, inability to tell stories, inauthentic leadership, and lack of trust.

Leaders who lack vision fail to provide a clear direction and goals for their employees. Without a compelling vision, employees may feel lost or lack a sense of purpose, hindering inspiration.

Stories have a profound impact on inspiring and engaging people. Leaders who struggle to tell stories miss opportunities to connect emotionally and make



their messages memorable. Effective storytelling helps to capture attention, evoke emotions, and inspire action.

When leaders are inauthentic, they create a disconnect and erode trust. Behaving in a manner that goes against your true self or adopting a persona that doesn't align with your values and personality leads to inconsistency and a lack of trust, which hampers inspiration.

Leaders who fail to build trust with their team create an environment of uncertainty, skepticism, and disengagement. Trust is essential for fostering collaboration, open communication, and a sense of psychological safety, all of which are vital for inspiration to thrive.

## Strategies to Inspire Better

Four strategies you can use to be more inspirational are crafting your vision, telling stories, leading authentically, and giving trust first.

Visionary leaders create goals that inspire people to collaborate toward a common end. Craft clear goals, then use those desired outcomes to shift your team members' thinking about their work. Pinpoint what sustainable, positive impact they want their work to have and actively engage and support them in making that happen.

To build your storytelling skills, identify your audience and craft the message you want to share with them. Make the story memorable by including emotion and using personal examples of overcoming obstacles to make the story relatable. Authentic stories that detail vulnerability and surmounting challenges inspire people.

Leading authentically means being yourself. Lose your ego, communicate honestly even when it's hard, be open to newness, and stay human. Don't be afraid to let your team see you vulnerable. It frees them to show vulnerability as well.

Trust is reciprocal in nature, built through a process of giving before receiving. By demonstrating trust in others, you can encourage them to reciprocate. Proactively give trust to others before expecting trust in return.

## Seeing

To see someone means to view them as the multifaceted human being they are. You recognize their strengths, flaws, hopes, dreams, challenges, and goals.

Seeing people as human at work counteracts the notion of people as resources. When we don't see others' humanity and help them feel seen, they disengage and their performance and well-being suffer.

## Barriers to Seeing

Many of us have been trained to engineer our humanity *out* of the workplace. Consequently, behaviors that get in the way of seeing the human in the beings around us are all too common. Three barriers I identified in my research with executives are ignoring people, creating division, and dehumanizing others.

Ignoring someone demonstrates a lack of interest and devalues their humanity. When people are ignored, they feel invisible and unimportant. This behavior is demeaning and hurtful. It makes people think you don't care about them.

Creating division involves behaving in a way that emphasizes your opinion and disregards others' perspectives. This separates people into "right" and "wrong" groups, leading to division and invisibility. Division narrows our vision and biases how we view others, stripping them of their equal human importance.

Dehumanization occurs when people are denied their human attributes, often by likening them to animals or objects—or as resources with the sole purpose of output. Ignoring, belittling, or surveilling employees are all acts of workplace dehumanization. It removes humanity from the equation, denies autonomy, and undermines the human spirit.

## Strategies to See Better

To see people better, practice acknowledgment, inclusivity, and seeing people as human. Three strategies to do this are mirroring, being inclusive, and being human.

Acknowledgment combats willful ignorance by recognizing and honoring presence. Mirroring someone involves closely observing their body language and verbal choices so you can reflect that back to them. This effort helps you notice and observe their communication behaviors and results in others feeling acknowledged and seen.

Being inclusive means creating an environment where all individuals are welcomed, valued, and have opportunities to connect. Foster a sense of belonging and empower people to grow and develop as individuals. Treat everyone with respect and ensure they feel safe to express their opinions.

When you show your humanity, others feel safe to show theirs as well. Show empathy and understanding toward people's needs, thoughts, and emotions. Attend to human needs such as hydration, nutrition, rest, and well-being. Being yourself, embracing vulnerability, and accepting imperfections can help others see you as human and create a more humane workplace.

## Use HUMANS to Improve Work Relationships

Nurturing these six elemental needs improves work relationships and culture exponentially. The Human Leadership operating model connects people to performance by using the HUMANS framework to build better relationships in the workplace.

When people feel seen, heard, understood, appreciated, inspired, and know they matter, they will go above and beyond to contribute. It's up to us as leaders to go above and beyond by bringing humanity back to the workplace.

This article is adapted from the book *Be Human, Lead Human: How to Connect People and Performance*, by Jennifer Nash (Lioncrest Publishing, 2023).



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