

“To help build a human-centered organization, you have to reach within yourself, reach across to your colleagues and reach out to those you serve. This book can show you how.”

**MICHAEL BUNGAY STANIER**, author, *The Coaching Habit*

# HUMANITY WORKS BETTER

5 Practices to Lead with  
Awareness, Choice and  
the Courage to Change

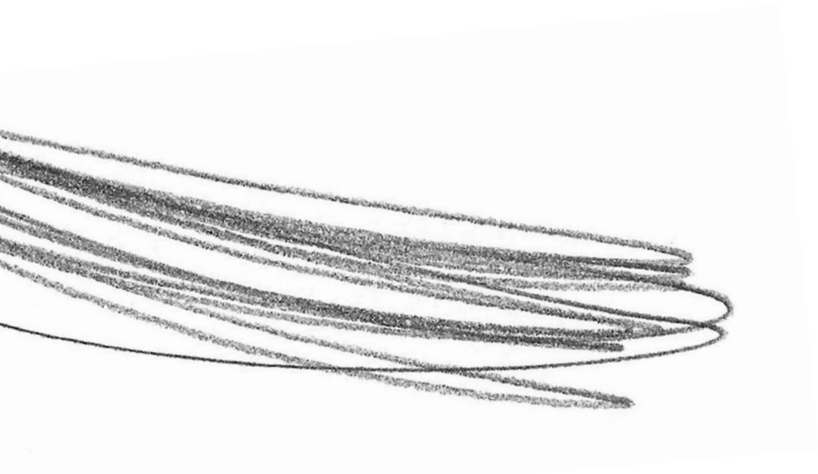


**DEBBIE COHEN & KATE ROESKE-ZUMMER**



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**productivity—  
it's all  
about people**





A GREAT DEAL OF business focus in the 1990s and early 2000s was on efficiency: cut the fat, work lean. This created solid business results. As Michael Mankins writes in his article “Great Companies Obsess Over Productivity, Not Efficiency”: “Earnings growth for the S&P 500 ran at nearly three times the rate of inflation over this period, despite tepid top-line growth in many years.” In effect, companies reduced the cost of doing business and found financial gains. Around 2015 this strategy stopped working. Mankins continues: “Without top-line growth, continuing to wring out greater profits through efficiency has become the managerial equivalent of attempting to squeeze blood from a stone.”<sup>1</sup>

So, business pivoted from a focus on efficiency to a focus on productivity. If efficiency is about “less is more,” productivity is about “doing more with the same.” Productivity is the rate of output per unit of input. The concept harkens back to a time when people worked on factory lines and their value was measured by the time it took to produce a single item. Envision being a factory line worker where the speed of the conveyor belt is turned up and you are expected to turn up your output accordingly. Those who could not keep up were replaced. While humans may not have benefited, this approach served business well during the manufacturing and mass production era.

In today’s knowledge-based economy, productivity faces at least two challenges the earlier era did not: a shortage of

talent and a burgeoning awareness that the intellectual capital of talent walks out the door when they leave at the end of each day—or when they quit for good. In March 2019, pre-pandemic, Vox reported a widespread worker shortage in the United States. In the decades leading up to 2020, there had been more available workers than available jobs. However, by the end of January 2020, things were beginning to shift. The US economy had 7.6 million unfilled jobs, but only 6.5 million people were looking for work, according to data released by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>2</sup> This was the eleventh straight month that the number of job openings was higher than the number of job seekers. Each month the gap grew. Recovery from the historic unemployment rates experienced during the pandemic will slow the effect of the labor shortage for a while, but the reality of the shortage remains and is looming. There are too few people for too many jobs. With baby boomers retiring en masse and a replacement workforce in short supply, it is no longer a viable approach to productivity to simply demand that fewer people produce more.

Since the push for heightened productivity began in 2015, the unrelenting demands to get more out of people are taking mental and physical tolls on the humans doing the work, at tremendous costs to both employees and companies. Humans are reaching their breaking point. The effect is a burned out, demotivated, detached, overworked workforce. You've seen them. You might even be part of this group.

In this type of workforce, it's hard to get work done because people go in and out of the organization through a revolving door. People just don't care, and they deflect responsibility, which makes it really tough to get good work done. The politics of fear and competition becomes toxic and cutthroat, making it feel unsafe for people to raise up their heads, much less share an idea or take a risk.

Micromanagement happens because failure to deliver is not an option. Members of this group do not feel seen, heard or recognized; they just do what is needed until they see a clear path to somewhere else. The human spirit detaches. Folks might show up, but their minds and hearts and souls are somewhere else. When self-interests overtake principles, uncivil behavior seeps into the lifeblood of an organization and civility is lost.

Civility is a mindset you hold about other human beings. Marilyn Price-Mitchell notes in *Psychology Today* that civility is a personal attitude that acknowledges other humans' rights to live and co-exist in a manner that does not harm others.<sup>3</sup> Civility calls for tolerance of differences and respect for one another.

This concept of civility might sound lovely on paper, but we have all worked in too many places where the “no-asshole rule” was simply given lip service. Debbie recounts a time when she was part of a post-merger integration team. She and a colleague from “the other company” were tapped to conduct diversity and inclusion (D&I) training for the newly formed top of the house: C-suite and senior executives. As the day proceeded, the participants were nice, even polite. They dutifully went along with what was asked of them. From Debbie's perspective, they were biding their time until the clock ran out.

As they neared the end of the session, she couldn't resist; she had to put the elephant on the table. “I'm curious. If our top salesperson exhibits toxic behaviors in violation of these standards, what actions will happen?” Without blinking, a top executive in the room looked right at her and stated, “Nothing.” Unfortunately, this is not an isolated story. When folks simply go through the motions, checking the box of compliance and giving lip service to its meaning, the outcome is harmful. And for too many, the outcome of tolerated toxic behavior in the workplace is all too familiar.

Christine Porath is a professor of management and the author of *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*. Her research in nearly every industry and type of organization has disclosed rampant, widespread incivility. In the past twenty years, she has polled thousands of people: 98 percent report experiencing uncivil behavior and 99 percent have witnessed it. More than half of respondents do not report issues of incivility out of fear or a sense of helplessness. “We all want to come to work and be treated with kindness and respect,” she notes.<sup>4</sup>

When insecurities have no constructive way to evolve, they erupt into threats, intimidation and bullying. In April 2017, the Workplace Bullying Institute studied the prevalence of abusive behaviors in the workplace. Their findings indicate abusive behaviors in the workplace are at an “epidemic level”:

- 30 million American workers have been, or are now being, bullied at work; one in five US workers is a victim.
- Another 30 million American workers (again, one in five) have witnessed bullying behaviors in the workplace.
- 63 percent of respondents are aware that workplace bullying happens.<sup>5</sup>

In his article “Diagnose and Eliminate Workplace Bullying,” Baron Christopher Hanson claims, “Whether it’s an entrenched dinosaur or extreme ladder-climber, anyone who manipulates selfish outcomes or seeks unfair advantage must be confronted expediently. Bullies are tremendously expensive for corporations in terms of productivity and talents lost. When C-suites overlook blatant bullying, work is sabotaged, progress is blocked, and company value may be lost or stolen.”<sup>6</sup>

The impact of all of this on productivity? According to Gallup’s *State of the Global Workplace* study, “85% of employees worldwide are not engaged or actively disengaged in their job.” Disengaged employees are harmful to the workplace.

They complain constantly but aren't interested in resolving problems or improving things. They are frustrated and openly share their feelings through destructive passive-aggressive behaviors, gossip and lying. On teams, they dodge attempts at outreach and are unwilling to help others.

Disengaged employees tend to separate themselves from others, going rogue and acting on their own. Tension swirls around them and erupts, with their manager, their team, their leadership. Gallup estimates actively disengaged employees cost US companies between \$450 billion and \$550 billion in lost productivity per year.<sup>7</sup>

## **A Workplace Where People Thrive**

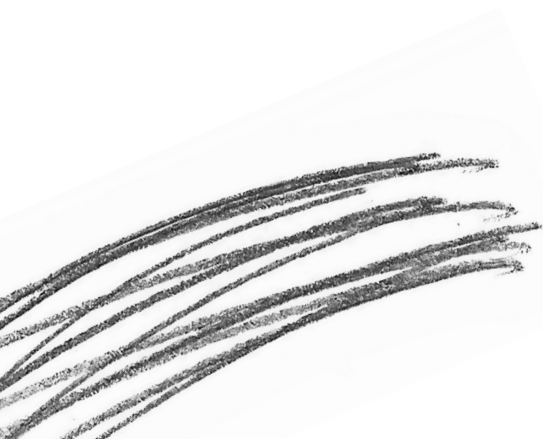
Working with others is messy. Most people don't know how to navigate it well. This results in wrong behaviors that create roadblocks and toxicity that can stall productivity. As a leader of your team and in your organization, it's important to pause and reflect on how you, yourself, may create roadblocks or enable toxic behavior. Your people are watching you all the time, taking cues from what you do and say. They look to you to make work deeper and more connected, and when it is, people give more of themselves and business wins. The 2015 Gallup report *State of the American Manager* notes that managers account for at least a 70 percent variance in employee engagement.<sup>8</sup> The question we ask at HumanityWorks is how to amplify your impact, how to deepen the connection between you and the humans in your organizations, so together you can achieve more.

Emma Seppälä and Kim Cameron highlight the importance of this movement in their article “Proof That Positive Work Cultures Are More Productive.”<sup>9</sup> Their work advocates for employee well-being and its impact on productivity. They





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assert that well-being comes from only one place—a positive workplace culture. Their research identified six essential characteristics of a positive and healthy workplace culture:

- Caring for, being interested in and maintaining responsibility for colleagues as friends.
- Providing support for one another, including offering kindness and compassion when others are struggling.
- Avoiding blame and forgiving mistakes.
- Inspiring one another at work.
- Emphasizing the meaningfulness of the work.
- Treating one another with respect, gratitude, trust and integrity.<sup>10</sup>

Seppälä and Cameron note: “When organizations develop positive, virtuous cultures they achieve significantly higher levels of organizational effectiveness—including financial performance, customer satisfaction, productivity, and employee engagement.”<sup>11</sup> Adam Grant, in his book *Give and Take*, further highlights productivity gains found from cultivating a positive workplace culture. He showcases the connection between team and organizational outcomes and the need from leaders to demonstrate positive human characteristics such as kindness and generosity.<sup>12</sup> In today’s dramatically reconfigured world of work, success is increasingly dependent on how we interact with others.

In the fall of 2019, we participated in a fascinating “disruptor” dinner party. A disruptor dinner is when you invite folks with different backgrounds and perspectives to discuss a particular topic that you want to think about in a different way—in other words, to disrupt! At this disruptor dinner the focus was

human potential. Folks talked about the time continuum and new ideas that would help organizations with just-in-time learning, as well as ideas for robotics and artificial intelligence. It was fascinating.

The guy whose product was about just-in-time learning, a platform designed to improve communication and build human connection, gave an example of what that might look like. He illustrated one use of the tool—it could inform a manager based in one country about an upcoming statutory holiday in a different country where the manager had an employee. Without the prompt, the manager would not know that the employee should have time off and would proceed with business as usual. With this prompt, the manager could proactively inquire about the employee's plans and coordinate time away accordingly. We loved that idea. What a simple way to help two people connect.

Someone in the group challenged him, asking, “Great, that would definitely help their relationship, but how does it help improve productivity?” The guy whose product this was paused before answering the question. Kate had been listening quietly up until that moment. Then it was like someone lit a fire under her. She erupted, “Because people are more likely to work harder if they feel like their boss gives a shit about them! Productivity requires people working at their best. If you have a better relationship with the people around you, you are more likely to work harder if asked. We all think that people should just work harder, but the truth is, sometimes they will and sometimes they won't.”

CHG Healthcare is one example of a large organization that created an environment for employees to thrive by putting people first. During the recession from 2008 to 2011, while the profitability of its industry peers declined, CHG Healthcare grew revenue and profits. With turnover less than half

the industry average, it is the most profitable company in the healthcare staffing industry—and it is known as a great place to work.<sup>13</sup>

From our experience with organizations of all sizes around the globe, we know there is unrealized potential inside your organization, and likely in your team. To fully realize that potential, a shift needs to occur. Attention needs to turn away from using processes and procedures as the levers to productivity and focus first on the people who make those outputs possible. Companies need people who are resilient and can work constructively to navigate and thrive through any change an organization experiences.

## **What Is at Risk?**

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You cannot open the news without reading about a leader's impending dismissal for not being a good human: Intel and Priceline CEOs were let go because of inappropriate relationships with women employees, American Apparel's CEO was let go for sexual harassment, Best Buy's CEO Brian Dunn was let go for indiscretions with a female employee.<sup>14</sup> In mid-2020, Greg Glassman of CrossFit was let go because of his conspiracy theories and denial of systemic racial discrimination. Then there's the story of the CEO of Away, the luggage and travel company, who, it was reported, "was infamous for tearing into people on Slack," leaving people in tears.<sup>15</sup> We dive into this dramatic example of toxic workplace culture further in chapter 3. When poor behavior starts at the top, the effects are felt all the way through the organization.

Unfortunately, this may be an all-too-common situation, where those at the top are too distanced from the humans who are doing the work of the company. And the effect is not

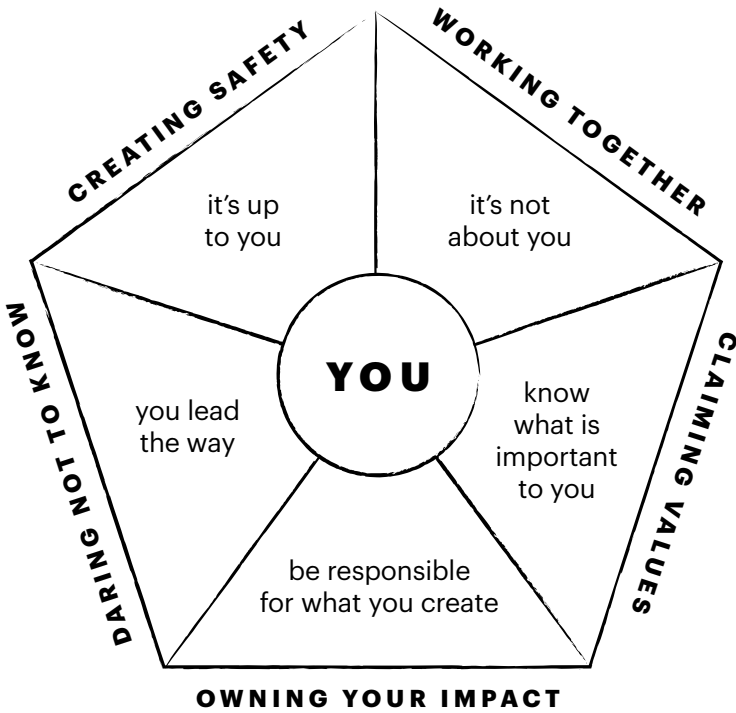
just emotional or interpersonal. IBM, in combination with WorkHuman, published a white paper called *The Financial Impact of a Positive Employee Experience*. After compiling previous surveys and interviews from nearly 24,000 people in forty-five countries, they found:

- Organizations that score in the top 25 percent on employee experience report nearly three times the return on assets compared to organizations in the bottom quartile.
- Organizations that score in the top 25 percent on employee experience report double the return on sales compared to organizations in the bottom quartile.<sup>16</sup>

It is time to look for a different way to drive productivity. Productivity is about people. Enough with efficiency and process reinvention. There is nothing more to squeeze out of folks, and the data proves it. Folks are burned out, disengaged, unwell and just don't care. It doesn't have to be that way. As a leader of your team, and in your organization, you and your team contribute to the workplace culture. If things are not quite right, you are part of the solution. Which is *why you* are at the center of our movement where humanity works better.

Change starts with you because the only thing you can actually control in life is yourself. You can become more aware of what you do and how you are with others. With this insight, as a leader, when you shift how you interact with others, you will ignite change in them.

In part 2, our Five Practices provide straightforward techniques to develop insight into your behaviors, and practical skills and tools for action. Our Five Practices are:



- **Creating safety:** The most important aspect of working with people is to create an environment that feels safe, physically and psychologically. And it's up to you.
- **Working together:** A big perspective shift is to let go of your personal agenda and focus on the common goal. The secret to working together is it's not about you.
- **Claiming values:** Claiming values means knowing what you stand for, your nonnegotiables. Know what is important to you.

- **Owning your impact:** This is how people experience you, what makes you compelling and what people say about you when you are not in the room. Be responsible for what you create.
- **Daring not to know:** This is the practice of surrender—it paves the way for deeper engagement and loyalty from others. You lead the way.

These practices increase your self-awareness, and from this place you can stand in choice about how you are behaving with the people you work with. You show the way. When you have the courage to change, you help your organization be more human, and by doing so, you make humanity work better.

Before we look at the Five Practices in depth, however, we need to look at an essential quality for fueling human potential and possibility: a growth mindset.

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