Leadership Without Humanity Is Failing — Here's How to Fix It in 3 Steps

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Key Takeaways

- Despite high technical connectivity, real human connection is essential and increasingly elusive in modern workplaces.
- Leaders who prioritize face-to-face meetings and live by company values create a more engaged workforce.
- Fostering genuine relationships and listening to employees can combat burnout and prevent the loss of humanity in the workplace.

We've never had more ways to stay connected at work. Yet, genuine connection feels more difficult to find. Slack and AI can keep you online, but they can't replace culture. If leaders don't unplug, they risk losing the heart of their business.

That's why I trade screen time for a "walk and talk" meeting. Beyond the obvious health benefits and beautiful backdrops of Silicon Slopes, those walks provide insights no dashboard can deliver. In a time where AI dominates the headlines, the smartest thing a leader can do is to show up and listen to the humans doing the work.

BambooHR platform data shows we are seeing the highest employee satisfaction scores in years. However, beneath that

optimism, a quarter of employees admit to quiet quitting, 15% say they make an effort to look productive, nearly three-quarters are working harder just to be noticed and 44% (especially Gen Z and millennials) are staying online after hours. Those aren't signs of thriving engagement; they're signals of burnout and fear.

You can't prescribe an antidote to solve for the erosion of human-ness in the workplace. But we can talk to each other about what's working.

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Ground culture in values

When I started at BambooHR, I asked every team member to send me an email about why they were excited to be at the company. More people pointed to the company values than anything else, by far. Since then, company values have remained the top three considerations to happiness as identified in our internal eNPS.

We've always been intentional about leading with our values, using them to guide how we work because of their powerful uniting influence. Regardless of how their job function might be further enabled with AI or if they're fearing the stability of their role given geopolitical happenings, values help to ground team members in how their work is contributing and how the company views those contributions.

Our commitment to our values has helped us keep turnover low, sparing the steep costs that come with replacing key team members, which research shows can reach 150-200% of their salary. This employee stability also supports BambooHR's sustained high customer satisfaction scores. While the true value of people is unquantifiable, the impact of shared values clearly is.

Build genuine connections

Human connection has quietly been at the forefront of any good leader’s playbook, despite it being so difficult to prescribe. It makes sense, though; humans are unquantifiable.

When he accepted the role as CEO of Microsoft, Satya Nadella had to figure out how to restart a company that had once ruled the tech sector. Rather than proclaiming changes, he flipped the usual process by undertaking “listening tours” with managers across the company, making connections throughout the organization, and helping surface ideas from the ground level.

What I love about human connection is that something so simple can be quite profound. Listening without distraction or sending a handwritten note can go so far in shaping the lifecycle of a team member.

At BambooHR, one of my favorites was “Breakfast with Brad,” where I sat down with small groups of team members over their favorite cereal. We debated which sugar-filled cereal from our childhoods is the best. Even though it’s not business talk, it’s where the trust-building happens. These conversations help us connect on a personal level, so when we face tough business challenges, we already have a foundation of understanding.

Conversely, imagine if your manager only interfaced via a messaging app or a performance review platform. You don’t need data to tell you how much of a chasm that creates.

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Embrace your strengths

There is no template for great culture. Patagonia leans into environmental responsibility. A fertility benefits company

might center its culture on family support.

For me, it’s about helping HR leaders strengthen the relationship between employees and employers and, in doing so, help organizations achieve their unique missions. At BambooHR, our strength lies in our HR insights and leadership, so it only makes sense that we build a workplace that reflects the same principles we share with others.

Ensuring an HR organization has a prominent seat at the table is the tie that connects your unique strengths to company-wide programs that drive positive engagement. One way we do this is by hosting quarterly leadership summits with senior leaders. These sessions are intended for professional and leadership development, with a mix of business updates, learning a new leadership skill and solving a business challenge.

The path forward

Leading with humanity creates connection and prevents problems better than any tech solution. The key is finding your company’s identity in the context of what your team members value. So ask yourself: Are your values visible in how your people work? Do your leaders build connection before correction? Are you using technology to enable your people or replace touchpoints?

What’s undeniable to me is that we will all be better served in our businesses by putting humanity back in human capital. This isn’t about perks; it’s about unlocking the power of human potential.

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