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Eselan, Big Sur, California

Human Centered Leadership

More Important Than Ever

Welcome back to the Ocean Beach Consulting newsletter! After an extended hiatus, we are back with monthly pieces designed to inform — and hopefully inspire — employees and employers around ideas and practices for leading and influencing change.

A lot has happened over the past nine months. Generative AI for business is burgeoning, the tech sector is facing multiple waves of layoffs, the world of social media is in flux and employee engagement has faltered.

As the work landscape continues to evolve, many business leaders are focusing their attention on adopting the latest technologies rather than supporting their workers. The latest [Gallup Employee Engagement Report](#) found just 32% of employees are engaged at work, suggesting leaders have an opportunity to be more present with their employees. When I reflected on this stat, I thought of my new friend Matt.

I remember sitting on an aged brown painted bench by a matching solid wood table, looking out a large window at a green lawn that dropped off into the the Pacific Ocean. The white capped waters flowed into the horizon of a sun filled sky, creating an endless panorama of blue, green, white and yellow. I felt blissful and at peace.

“How did you like the yoga class this morning?” I looked up to see Matt, who I first noticed during the orientation circle for our three day “create your own experience” session at Eselan, the epicenter of the Human Potential Movement located in Big Sur California. His short dark hair framed bright eyes, a warm smile and just a bit of facial hair to convey his presence as a youthful tech leader. After 10 minutes of chatting over coffee, we realized both of us had a year of dealing with our own forms of cancer: his, thyroid cancer and mine, breast cancer.

I felt immediately connected to Matt, illustrating the power of common experiences and challenges. We talked about his life: high achieving student, AP classes, Stanford Business School grad, recruited to one of the world’s largest tech companies, leading a cutting-edge group within the social media space, and as he put it, living his life “achieving according to a pre-defined system”. As I listened to him describe how he thinks about leading his group, I realized he was displaying qualities of a human centered leader during a time of ongoing uncertainty and change.

I caught up with Matt over the phone a few weeks later to ask him questions about human centered leadership in a fast paced, ever changing, technologically focused environment. He talked about how his cancer diagnosis was a stark reminder that we never truly know what someone is going through behind closed doors, and how those experiences impact

their work performance. As he said, “Life Impacts Work”. He described how he avoids surface level questions and dives deeper by encouraging others to voice their feelings and concerns about the work they’re doing, providing solutions when he can and asking questions about their personal lives. By taking a genuine interest in team members’ lives inside and outside of work, Matt shows his workers that he is a compassionate, attentive and authentic leader.

We talked about how these conversations require a mindset shift away from the work tasks and toward the person. We talked about the distinction between Empathy (feeling the same emotion as the other person) and Compassion (giving space for the other person to express their emotion) and how being Compassionate is a more scalable, realistic way to be a human centered leader. You can’t always fix the issues, challenges and fears an employee is dealing with, but you can always create space to listen and help them think through how they can work toward a solution. We also discussed the importance of identifying problems or obstacles that he could take action on, like better defining roles and removing roadblocks. Some of the top reasons employees lack engagement at work are clarity of expectations, opportunities to grow and feeling cared about. Considering this fact, Matt’s leadership approach is an effective way to promote employee engagement and wellbeing.

In order to foster a positive work environment, leaders at every level of the business must show up for their workers and show that they care about them as human beings. Leadership qualities such as relating, self-awareness, authenticity, curiosity, results orientation and compassion ensure that leaders prioritize the wellbeing of everyone in the organization, leading to improved retention, reputation and performance. These qualities, which we work on developing in our [Managing Success](#) program, are more important than ever as automation becomes more deeply ingrained in our work culture and employees seek out companies and leaders with heart.

As Matt put it, “if you want to be interesting, be interested.” Making genuine connections with employees is a mutually beneficial alternative to the traditional leadership styles that prioritize profits, surveillance and discipline. Human centered leadership is better for workers and, therefore, better for business.

The behaviors and actions Matt and I discussed are not complex and they don't take a lot of time to implement, but they can completely shift how you make employees feel and how employees feel about you. I left my conversation with Matt feeling hopeful that human centered leaders do exist. I felt affirmed that the behaviors, skills, and self-awareness we focus on building in our Managing Success solution are still relevant and very much needed. And lastly, I recalled this Maya Angelou quote:

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Human-Centered Leader Questions to Reflect On:

- What do you know about your employees outside of the work they perform?
- To what degree do you know how organizational changes are affecting the lives of your employees?
- Do you leave space in your team meetings to ask questions about what is or isn't working, and what employees need more or less of in order to fully engage and succeed with their work?
- Are you transparent with company information sharing (Here is what I know. Here is what I am hearing. Here is what I know for sure. Here is what I do not know)?
- Do you have one on one conversations with your employees to solicit their hopes, concerns and fears? Do you listen to what they're feeling without defensiveness?
- Do you follow through on removing barriers that your employees bring to your attention in order to clear the path for them to get their work done?
- Do you give appreciative, positive feedback more than critical feedback?
- Do you authentically care about your employees as human beings?

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