human edge
insights

The Power of Humanistic Leadership

How Human-Centered Leadership Builds Stronger
Teams and a Future-Ready Culture

A NOTE FROM THE FOUNDER: HUMANISTIC LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

We are navigating a time when complexity is the norm, not the exception. Teams are dispersed. AI is reshaping our workflows. Disruption is constant. And amid this acceleration, we face a critical leadership question:

> **How can we preserve our humanity - and develop leaders with compassion - in a world driven by speed, scale, and technology?**

At Human Edge, we believe the answer lies in **humanistic leadership**, not as a philosophy, but as a **strategic imperative**.

In my book *The Human Edge Advantage, Mastering the Art of Being All IN*, I explore what it takes to lead in this environment: courage, presence, and an "**All In**" mindset that engages both head, heart, and gut. This means building deep self-awareness, showing up with empathy and strength, and fostering environments where people feel seen, heard, and empowered to contribute.

Humanistic leadership is not about being soft. It's about being **deeply aligned and fiercely real**.

It means creating space for transformational or mutually beneficial relationships over transactional interactions, especially when the pressure is high and the pace is fast.

In this white paper, we examine what humanistic leadership entails in practice and how it benefits leaders and teams. We draw on original research conducted by Human Edge, led by **Davide Cannata, Head of Research**, which involved 25 teams that completed the CORE™ Fusion assessment and a follow-up survey. Their experiences show a clear pattern: the most effective teams are led not by heroic individuals, but **by shared power, psychological safety**, and **human synergy**.

We invite you to discover how humanistic leadership unlocks performance, and how CORE™ Fusion can help you put it into practice for your leaders and teams, at scale.

Lisa Danels,
Executive Director, Human Edge

RESEARCH IN ACTION

By Davide Cannata, Head of Research

At Human Edge, we believe leadership must be grounded in both **rigorous research** and **lived experience**. That's why this white paper is the product of a unique study that brought both data and employee voices into the spotlight.

We conducted an in-depth research project involving 25 teams and 243 individuals across industries. Each team participated in the **CORE™ Fusion assessment** and a targeted **team survey**, designed to capture insights from both **leaders and team members**. Our goal was to uncover how individual capabilities, collective dynamics, and leadership behaviors shape the climate of high-performing teams.

What made this research particularly rich was its dual lens: we didn't just collect data from leaders, nor just from team members: **we gathered perspectives from both sides**. This allowed us to identify alignment (or gaps) in perception, behavior, and experience. We also left room for something equally important: *individual voices*. Team members were encouraged to speak up and share their experiences, generating dozens of powerful stories that brought the numbers to life. These stories added warmth, contradiction, and emotional weight, the kind of nuance that data alone can't deliver.

Underpinning our research were five essential dimensions of team climate, which we call the **Five Pillars: Trust, Team Confidence, Inclusion, Innovation Climate, and Shared Leadership**.

These aren't arbitrary. Over 50 years of organizational research has consistently pointed to these five as the core drivers of team engagement, resilience, and performance. Our findings confirmed this strongly: teams described as **highly engaged**, where individuals consistently went above and beyond their roles, scored significantly higher across all five pillars.

> **This white paper examines:**
> - How can leaders create thriving environments for their team?
> - What role does the team itself play?
> - How do individual and collective characteristics interact to enable, or block, team success?

Our research, combining theory, quantitative metrics, and qualitative insights, points to a powerful conclusion: the importance of **humanistic leadership**. More importantly, it reveals how this approach can be applied in practice: intentionally, sustainably, and at both the individual and team levels.

This is not just a story of leadership evolution. It's a blueprint for enabling the full potential of people

THE POWER OF HUMANISTIC LEADERSHIP: WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Today's leaders face more pressure, more complexity, and more emotional weight than ever before. But the answer isn't more control - it's more connection.

*This section explores the challenges shaping modern leadership, from disengaged teams to the rise of AI, and offers a different path forward: **humanistic leadership**. Rooted in presence, trust, and shared power, it's a practical, evidence-based strategy for building teams that perform, collaborate, and thrive.*

Humansitic leadership is rooted in presence, trust and shared power.

The World Has Changed. Leadership Must Catch Up.

Have you noticed how there are more demands on leaders than there used to be?

There's more coming at everyone today: more decisions, more information, more expectations.

The average person now processes the equivalent of 72 gigabytes of data every single day[1]. This overwhelming figure well represents the constant noise leaders and teams are navigating.

72
gigabytes of data

Here's what your leaders might be feeling right now:

Work is more networked
Organizations are less hierarchical, more collaborative, and influence matters more than authority. Leading now means guiding without always being in control. Already in 2026, a Deloitte study found that 38 % of companies and 24 % of large organizations have shifted from traditional functional hierarchies to dynamic networks of teams[2].

The demands keep expanding
Strategic thinker. People developer. Crisis responder. Culture builder. Leaders are expected to be all of it, and fast[5].

Teams want more, too
Especially younger workers, who are looking for purpose, autonomy, fairness, and inclusion[6].

Teams are highly specialized
Leaders can't know everything their team does because expertise is spread out[3]. While this can be a strength, it also requires much more cohesive and collaborative teams to define the bigger picture[4].

Engagement is flatlining
According to Gallup, most employees and leaders are not engaged at work[7].

? So how is all this pressure showing up?

Disengagement Is Deepening

In comparison between 2023 and 2024, engagement is declining. This is a warning sign as **disengaged leaders lead disengaged teams,** since managers influence 70% of team engagement. It's costing energy, performance, and an estimated $438 billion in productivity[7].

82%
INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR DISENGAGEMENT (flat)

73%
MANAGER ENGAGEMENT (up from 70% YOY)

2

Gallup (2025), State of the Global Workplace[7]
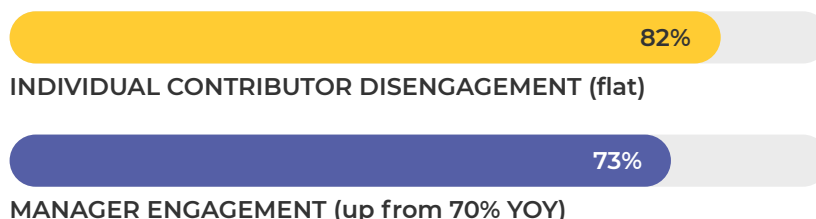
Research Highlight: The AI Paradox

AI helps individuals and teams move faster—tasks finish sooner, meetings are shorter, and decisions come more quickly. But beneath this speed lies a hidden cost: the erosion of human connection.

Research shows that heavy reliance on AI tools can lead to increased loneliness, emotional fatigue, and less real collaboration. Artificial bonds with AI agents shrink social networks and isolate people when they most need support[8,9].

> *If everybody's just interacting with AI all the time, we forget how to work with each other.*

This is the paradox: AI boosts performance, but erodes the relational glue that holds teams together.

That's where leaders come in.

Humanistic leaders are not AI skeptics. On the contrary, they offer a necessary counterbalance by protecting space for human connection. This is shown by showing up with empathy, and affirming that both people's work and wellbeing matter. Empathy enhances productivity, loyalty, and engagement[10].

<1/4 Many leaders still lack readiness for this human-centered approach; less than one in four feel equipped to lead inclusively or design truly human workplaces in today's fast-evolving world of work[11].

At the same time, younger generations are calling for meaning, growth, well-being, and empathetic leaders, especially as AI reshapes how work gets done[6].

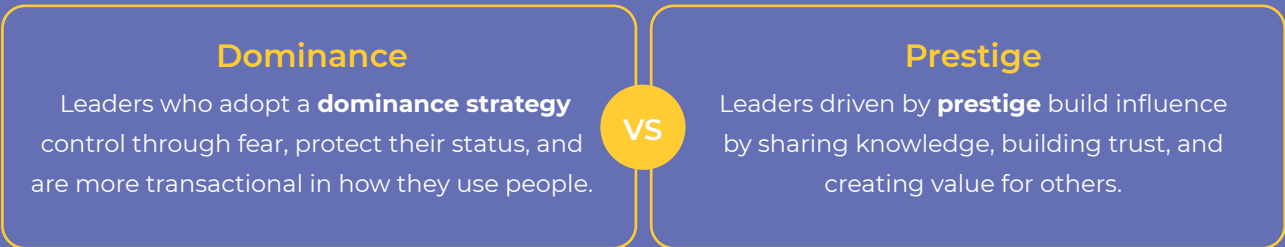# Humanistic Leadership: All In With People. All In for Results.

The old models of leadership - built on authority, control, and individual performance - no longer match the complexity of today's teams, or the expectations of the people in them.

Humanistic leadership offers a different path. It's about presence, authorship, courage, and care. It's about leading with empathy and clarity, while staying grounded in reality. Think about a form of leadership that focuses on the effect that the leader as a person has on others, because people drive everything else: innovation, inclusion, trust, and shared ownership[12].

When leaders show up competently human-first, they draw in people from different backgrounds and points of view, leading to co-creation, driving teams further than expected. Together, these diverse voices co-create, contribute, and push further than expected. The outcome isn't just good culture and engagement it's measurable performance.

What the Research Shows

Research identifies two dominant leadership strategies: **dominance** and **prestige**[13].

Dominance
Leaders who adopt a **dominance strategy** control through fear, protect their status, and are more transactional in how they use people.

VS

Prestige
Leaders driven by **prestige** build influence by sharing knowledge, building trust, and creating value for others.

What determines which path someone takes? Beliefs. When leaders believe in shared growth and mutual elevation, they lead through prestige!

What It Looks Like

Instead of...	Humanistic Leaders...
Command-and-control.	Create shared power.
Hero complex.	Build collective confidence.
Emotional restraint.	Lead with courage and empathy.
Leader having central source of expertise.	Leverage others expertise.
Giving orders.	Create the frame and they let the team fill it in.

Humanistic Leadership for Contributors, Leaders, and Human Resources

Humanistic leadership isn't just the right thing to do; it's the best thing to do. It's the smart thing to do; because when people thrive, performance follows.

When we say humanistic leadership is for everyone, we mean it.
This isn't just about how to lead, it's about creating the conditions
where everyone can thrive and contribute.

For Contributors

The Problem:

- Work feels disconnected or transactional.
- Ideas go unheard.
- People feel they are used up and they are continuously asked to do more with less.
- Burnout and workload overload.
- Lack of trust, Inclusion & communication transparency.

What Humanistic Leadership Gives Contributors:

- **A voice that matters:** They're heard and trusted, not just managed.
- **A sense of purpose:** They understand how their work contributes, and feel appreciated.
- **Real support:** Feedback, coaching, and care are part of the culture.
- **A space to grow:** Learning and autonomy are encouraged.
- **Renewal:** A shift of focus from managing time to managing energy and renewal.
- **A safe environment:** Show up as their authentic self.

For People Leaders

The Problem:

- They're pulled in every direction.
- They're expected to deliver better results with fewer resources.
- Make high-quality decisions in a fast-moving, complex world.
- They're expected to deliver results and care for people, but often with little support.
- The team's energy is dropping, and the leader is feeling it too.

What Humanistic Leadership Gives Leaders:

- **Clarity and alignment:** A framework is created for people to step in and operate with alignment and self-direction.
- **Trust-based influence:** People follow the leader because they believe in them, not fear them.
- **An empowered team who show personal agency:** The leader is not carrying the weight alone.
- **Stronger results:** Engaged teams deliver more and stay longer.
- **Authentic connections:** Real, strong bonds to enhance energy, resilience, and support.

For HR and People Teams

The Problem:

- Burnout is rising.
- Engagement strategies feel out of sync.
- People want more meaning, but systems feel impersonal.
- AI is augmenting or replacing roles.
- Lack of full and creative contribution from non-leaders.

What Humanistic Leadership Gives HR and People Teams:

- **A unifying culture framework:** Clear principles that scale across roles and teams.
- **A deeper connection** between people and purpose.
- **Leadership behaviors** that actually stick.
- **Better retention,** stronger culture, real impact.
- **Greater contribution:** employees have the space for offering their real value.

All In: When Teams Don't Just Show Up, They Step Up

Imagine a team where no one waits to be told.

Where people volunteer ideas, own their work, and help each other without being asked. Where obstacles are shared - and wins are shared too. That's an **All In** team[14].

What is All In?

"All In" goes beyond engagement as it encompasses the behavioral, measurable results, of believing that one's work matters.

Its effects are what research calls **Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB)**[14,15]: discretionary effort, collaboration, ownership, initiative, and emotional investment beyond the job description.

The challenge:

Many teams operate in a state of survival mode, working independently, maintaining distance, or operating in silos. The difference between the two isn't talent, but **climate** and leadership.

When The Leader is the Only One Pulling

*Meet **Elena**, a leader who left a dynamic private bank to join a public institution funding SMEs.*

She came in full of ideas and with a clear sense of purpose. But her new team? Cautious, passive, waiting for direction.

Instead of feeling lifted by her people, Elena felt like she was dragging them and being dragged down herself. Lonely. Fighting uphill.

Her question became: How do I bring them into the creation, without losing my own forward push?

What Drives a Team to Go All In?

58%

Our research shows:
58% of the variance in OCB is explained by just five measurable dimensions:

- Trust
- Confidence
- Inclusion
- Shared Leadership
- Innovation Climate
- ALL IN

To further explore these dimensions, visit Section 2 of this white paper: What Drives Teams to go All-In?

Navigating Humanistic Leadership with Depth and Direction

Why a model is needed

Humanistic leadership doesn't emerge from good intentions alone. It requires self-awareness, the right inner resources, relational maturity, and a co-creative mindset in both leaders and teams[16].

What the CORE™ Fusion model does

The CORE™ Fusion model helps individuals and teams understand and develop the capacities necessary to thrive in complex environments. It's a personality-based framework built not just to assess, but to **guide growth**. It focuses on the capabilities that matter most for **collaboration, adaptability, shared leadership, and innovation.**

How we used it in our research

The model also forms the backbone of our research. These variables, across individuals, teams, and leaders, served as **independent variables** in our study, helping us predict which teams go "All In."

CORE™ Fusion guides growth through:

• **Collaboration**
• **Adaptability**
• **Shared Leadership**
• **Innovation**

Capacity	What It Reflects
Inner Confidence	A stable, grounded sense of self-trust, purpose, and authorship.
Personal Agency	The belief you are able to shape your world.
Interpersonal Foundations	Empathy, compassion, intuitive listening, emotional presence.
Interpersonal Skills	Relationship-building, trust-building, clear communication.
Co-Creation	Group creation, collaboration, activating group flow and energy.
Innovative Mindset	Openness to novelty and curiosity.

We don't guess what makes teams work.
We map it, measure it, and build it.

The Power of Humanistic Leadership

Leadership Pressures Are Rising

Complexity, emotional strain, and disengagement threaten performance and cost billions.

AI Cuts Both Ways

While AI speeds up tasks and decisions, it risks eroding human connection. Leaders must protect and foster empathy, trust, and authentic connection.

Humanistic Leadership Works

Rooted in presence, trust, courage, and shared power, it shifts leadership from dominance and control to prestige and influence, so to build stronger, more engaged teams.

Benefits Extend Across All Levels

Contributors gain voice and growth; leaders gain clarity and ownership; HR gains a scalable culture that improves retention.

"All In" Teams Win

Effort, collaboration, and ownership are boosted by climate and leadership, especially through trust, confidence, inclusion, shared leadership, and innovation climate.

CORE™ Fusion Gives Structure

Humanistic leadership requires building confidence, agency, empathy, collaboration, and innovation in measurable ways.

WHAT DRIVES TEAMS TO GO ALL IN?

What do the most engaged, co-creative, high-performing teams have in common? This section explores the foundational dynamics behind "All In" performance: psychological safety, team confidence, and the often-overlooked power of shared leadership. These are not soft skills, they're the structural enablers of innovation, initiative, and real, lasting engagement.

Trust Is the Glue: Without It, Teams Don't Move

Before teams can innovate or lead together, they must trust each other and their leader.

Trust is the willingness to be vulnerable to others' decisions and intentions. In teams, that means knowing your colleagues are capable and caring and believing your leader has your back[18,19]. Research shows that this trust fuels everything from collaboration to resilience, engagement, and retention[20]

Trust is directly related to performance. Team performance is correlated to trust in team members at 30%, and trust in team leader at 41%[49].

Two Kinds of Trust:

Cognitive Trust built on competence: Can I rely on you to do your part, do it well, and meet expectations?
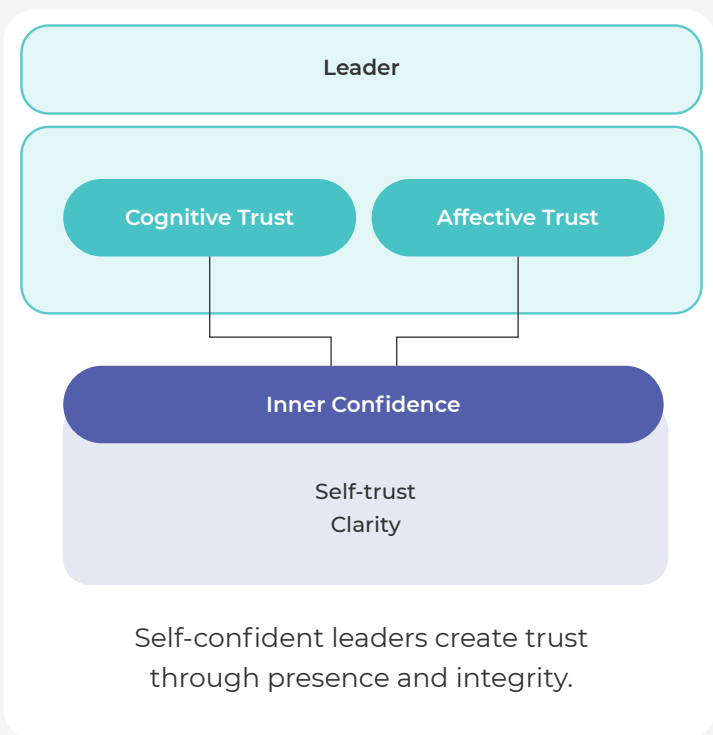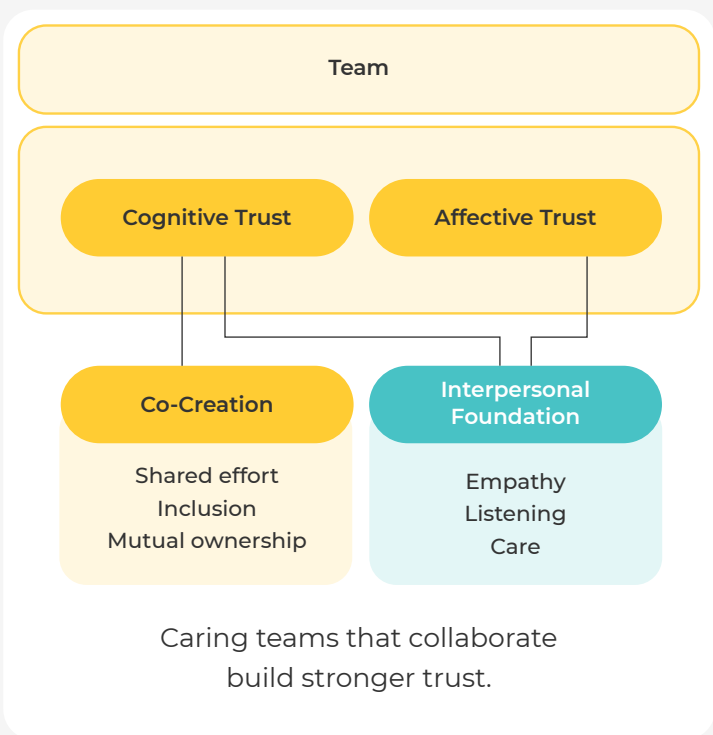
VS

Affective Trust built on care and character: Do I feel safe with you? Do you have good intentions? Do you have my back?

Trust comes in stages: Cognitive trust tends to form first. Affective trust grows over time, through empathy, care, and shared experience.

WHAT BUILDS TRUST IN TEAMS AND LEADERS: INSIGHTS FROM OUR RESEARCH

Team

Cognitive Trust | Affective Trust

Co-Creation
Shared effort
Inclusion
Mutual ownership

Interpersonal Foundation
Empathy
Listening
Care

Caring teams that collaborate build stronger trust.

Leader

Cognitive Trust | Affective Trust

Inner Confidence
Self-trust
Clarity

Self-confident leaders create trust through presence and integrity.

Trust That Delivers

High-trust environments consistently outperform low-trust ones in innovation, retention, collaboration, and team resilience[21].

When **cognitive** and **affective** trust align, teams operate with clarity *and* care. That balance fuels inclusion, confidence, and psychological safety.

What Leaders Can Do

Focus Area	What to Do
Cognitive Trust	Show consistency. Deliver results. Set clear expectations. Recognize competence in others.
Affective Trust	Lead with empathy. Be present. Model vulnerability and care.
Peer-to-Peer Trust	Encourage open feedback. Celebrate team contributions. Build rituals for sharing + bonding.
Trust Workshops	Intentional trust building sessions for creating deeper connections amongst teams. Team building tools like Human Edge CORE™ Connect Cards.
Ongoing Practice	Understand that trust evolves. High-performing teams, continue to invest in deepening and widening trust through a team's journey.

The Confident Team: Belief That We Can Win Together

A team's success doesn't come from skills alone, but it comes from belief. **Team confidence** is the shared sense that *"we have what it takes to succeed together"*. It's collective psychological capital: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism[22,23,24].

When High Performers Start to Doubt

Meet **Marco**, a creative engineering team lead. His team was known for breakthrough ideas and self-managed innovation. Then came the merger.

The new executive team had different priorities, but never made them clear. Approvals slowed, new ideas were shelved, and direction vanished.

At first, Marco's team tried to adapt. But when their best efforts were ignored, something shifted. They stopped offering ideas. They waited to be told. They quietly detached.

The team hadn't lost their skills: They'd lost belief in their ability to shape the world around them.

This is **learned helplessness** and it's one of the surest signs a team's confidence is eroding.

Confidence is built (or broken) in small moments. Are leaders noticing them?

Think About It:

Does the team believe they can succeed together? What's the evidence?
When was the last time your team, or teams in the business, took a bold step without being asked?

Are people energized by challenges, or cautious and withdrawn?

What's one recent moment that lifted a team's confidence? What's one that quietly chipped away at it?

What Drives Team Confidence?

Our research clearly signals which characteristics of teams and leaders foster team confidence.

Factor	How It Helps
Self-authored leadership	Leaders who show clarity, purpose, and self-trust help teams believe they're being led somewhere solid.
Receptivity in the team	A culture of openness and adaptability encourages experimentation, learning, and contribution.
Strong team relationships	Trust, empathy, and support allow teams to stay grounded in one another—even when the path forward is uncertain.

You can be H.E.R.Oes with

A Self-Authoring Leader
A Receptive Team
And Strong Team Relationships

Receptivity (T)

+

Relationships Building (T)

+

Authorship (L)

=

Hope
Efficacy
Resilience
Optimism
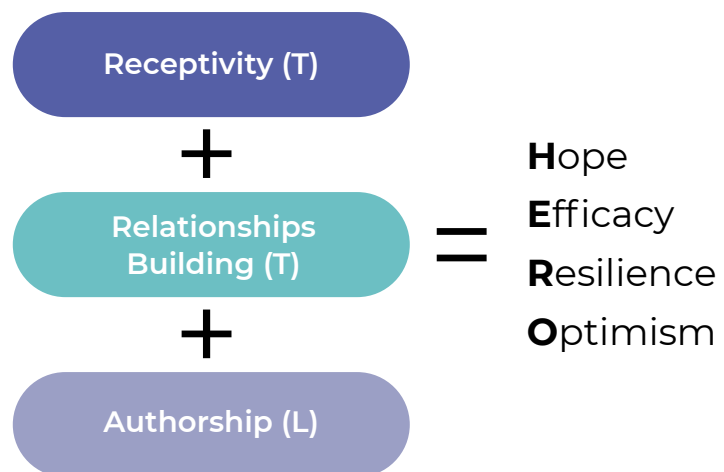
What Leaders Can Do:

Celebrate progress, not perfection.
Recognize learning moments, not just wins. Confidence builds when people feel safe to grow.

Build rituals that strengthen connection.
Regular check-ins, appreciation circles, and shared reflection time reinforce emotional bonds.

Name the confidence gaps.
If the team is hesitating, talk about it. Confidence isn't restored by silence, but it's rebuilt through shared awareness and small, steady wins.

Innovation thrives where it's safe to speak up, try, and fail.

Safe to Stretch: The Climate That Enables Innovation

Innovation doesn't come from pressure. It comes from possibility. It thrives in climates where people feel safe enough to speak up, explore, and even fail[25].

When that kind of safety is missing, so is the innovation. The best ideas stay hidden. People play it safe. Energy goes into self-protection, not problem-solving.

More Than Ideas: Innovation Needs Psychological Safety

Team level Innovation can lag without **psychological safety**, the belief that it's okay to take interpersonal risks. This includes challenging assumptions, pitching raw ideas, or saying "I don't know" without fear of judgment.

Team climate plays a crucial role. It's the **invisible culture** that tells people what's okay and what's not. A positive innovation climate builds energy, trust, and collective creativity[26].

The Role of Inclusion

Innovation isn't just about loud ideas from the few. It's about creating space for **all voices** and building on each other's ideas. Inclusion fuels innovation by tapping into diverse perspectives, lived experiences, and thinking styles[27].

# All In teams don't just execute. They explore.

They take ownership not only of their tasks, but of their creative process. A strong innovation climate signals that contributions are valued, even when messy, unfinished, or unconventional. This drives higher engagement, deeper trust, and the kind of initiative that fuels **Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB)**.

Without psychological safety, teams may comply, but they won't commit. With it, they stretch, grow, and go all in.

According to our research, team members feel safe to participate when:

- They believe they can shape the world around them (High Personal Agency).
- Their team is competent in interpersonal skills and promote a collaborative creation process (Interpersonal Foundations + Co-Creation).
- Their leader is curious about everyone's ideas and does not feel threatened by other people's suggestions and success (Curiosity + Inner Confidence).

PARTICIPATORY SAFETY: WHEN DO PEOPLE FEEL FREE TO SPEAK?

Personal Agency	+	Interpersonal Foundations / Co-Creation	+	Inner Confidence / Curiosity
Individualds		Teams		Leaders
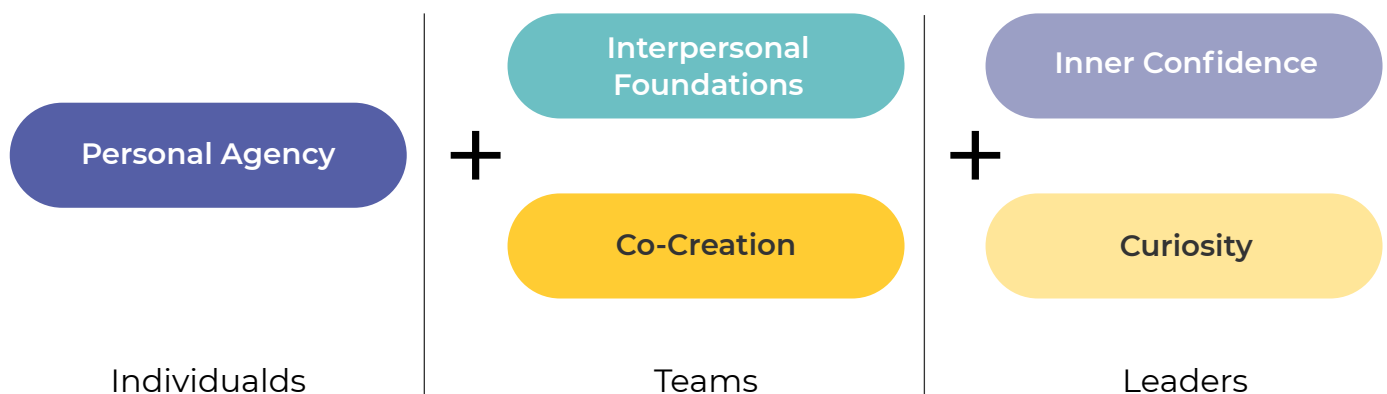
Innovation Killers to Watch For:

Judgment: Early criticism shuts down risk-taking.

Rigidity: "We've always done it this way" thinking.

Perfectionism: Focus on flawless execution over experimentation.

**Ambiguity in direction:** No clear "why" behind the innovation.

Shared Leadership: The Hardest Skill to Build — and the Most Powerful

In our research, we asked participants to answer questions about the climate of their team. Most people reported a high level of trust in their team members, but other drivers were harder to achieve.

THE MOST OVERLOOKED DRIVER OF HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

Despite its proven impact, shared leadership ranks last, revealing a missed opportunity hiding in plain sight.

6.1
TRUST

5.8
INCLUSIVITY

5.6
TEAM CONFIDENCE

5.3
INNOVATION

4.7
SHARED LEADERSHIP
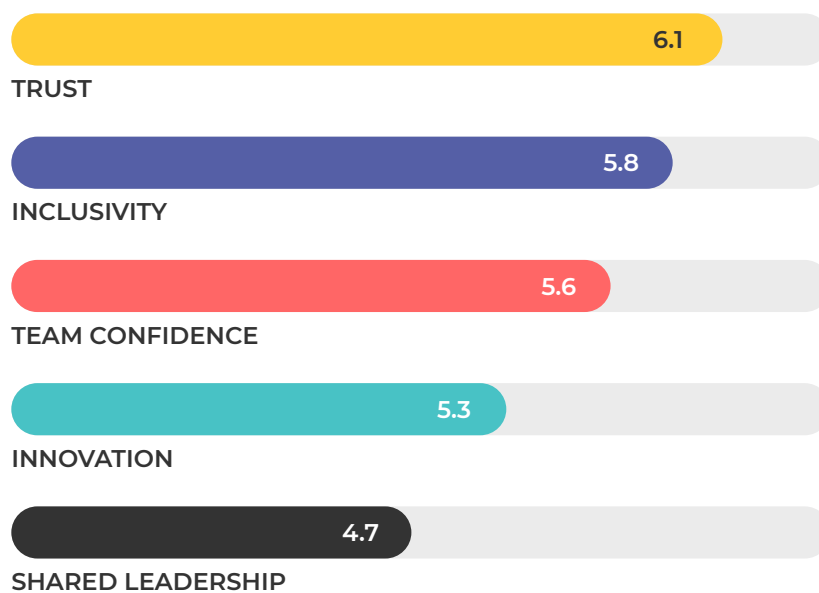
Teams Struggle with Shared Leadership

On a scale from 1-7, it was the only outcome whose mean was below five.

What Is Shared Leadership?

Shared leadership means leadership isn't confined to titles. It's the practice of **distributing key leadership functions** - like setting direction, offering inspiration, and monitoring progress - across the team[28].

In a shared leadership culture, team members step up when the situation calls for it. They lead initiatives, offer clarity, support each other, and take accountability because they own the mission and they have the credibility and capability.

Why It's Rare

Shared leadership is rare because most organizations and cultures still equate leadership with a single figure at the top, creating clear lines of authority and accountability. Traditional hierarchies, performance systems, and cultural expectations reinforce this model, making it challenging to distribute power and decision-making authority. Leaders themselves may also resist sharing authority, fearing a loss of control, status, or recognition.

Even when organizations value collaboration, sustaining shared leadership can be challenging. It demands high levels of trust, communication, and conflict management, which many teams struggle to maintain under time pressure or in high-stakes **environments. As a result, while** research shows that shared leadership can drive innovation and engagement, the familiarity and perceived efficiency of centralized leadership often win out.

It's often blocked by:

The Team Who Might Avoid Responsibility

It's not my role

Leader's Ego And Control

What if they do it wrong?

Uncertainty In The Chain Of Command

Who decides, then?

Accountability

Who is responsible if things fail or go wrong?

The Balancing Act: All In for Shared Leadership

Formal leaders must provide clarity and vision. But teams must feel safe and empowered to step into leadership roles themselves.

Our research shows that this balance only works when:

- Leaders have inner confidence and feel secure enough to share power without feeling they are losing control.
- Team members are capable and encouraged to take ownership and initiative.
- The group is able to co-create, including everyone in the definition of their work practices.

How To Get There:

- ✓ Leaders create space by showing humility, inviting input, distributing responsibility and providing clarity on decision-making.
- ✓ Team members step in with initiative, self-trust, and proactive contribution.
- ✓ Trust and quality relationships serve as the bridge between formal and informal leadership.
- ✓ Transparency, extra contributions, and collective results are celebrated, rather than hierarchy and discipline.

When Shared Leadership Does Not Work

A global company, **Nexora**, launched a bold initiative to promote "unbossing" and shared leadership.

Managers embarked on what was framed as a **leadership quest**—an intensive training that asked them to look inward. On this journey, they examined their leadership styles, questioned their authenticity, and grew their self-awareness. For many, it was a deeply personal experience.

But while the leaders went deep, the teams were left out. There was no common language, no collective process, and no clear invitation for employees to step into

agency. Leaders had grown personally, but they had not learned how to enable that same growth in their people.

Without a cultural shift to support shared responsibility, hesitation took the place of empowerment. Team members waited, momentum faded, and the promise of unbossing never materialized.

In the end, Nexora's HR realized that shared leadership cannot be won through leaders' quests alone—it must be a **collective journey**, one that actively involves teams in shaping the practice, language, and culture of agency together.

What Drives Teams to Go All-in

Trust is Key

Teams need both trust in skills (cognitive) and trust in care (affective). High trust drives innovation, collaboration, and resilience.

Confidence Drives Results

Teams perform when they believe in winning together. Confidence grows from clarity, adaptability, relationships, and celebrating progress.

Safety Sparks Innovation

People take risks and speak up when it feels safe. Inclusion brings diverse voices that fuel creativity.

Avoid Innovation Killers

Judgment, rigidity, perfectionism, and unclear goals block safety and reduce commitment.

Shared Leadership Matters

Spreading leadership fosters ownership and initiative when leaders share power and teams take the lead.

Human Leadership Makes it Real

Trust, confidence, safety, and shared leadership thrive when leaders show presence, empathy, courage, and care.

THE POWER OF CONNECTING

Leadership that drives trust, ownership, and innovation starts from within. This section explores the foundational connections that enable Humanistic Leadership: first to self, then to others, and finally to the group.

Effective leaders move beyond external approval to a self-authored mindset, grounded in authenticity and guided by internal values. They lead with heart, not just intellect, drawing on empathy, emotional agility, and instinct to make courageous, human-centered choices. But the connection can be blocked. Our data shows that certain behavioral "masks", overused strengths like perfectionism, harmony, or skepticism, can quietly erode inclusion, trust, and shared leadership.

CONNECT TO SELF

Explore and integrate every aspect of oneself to achieve self-mastery, drive personal agency, and unlock potential.

+

CONNECT TO OTHERS

Establish meaningful connections with others and engage them to create a sense of belonging.

+

CO-CREATE POSSIBILITIES

Hold space for others to contribute, generate and capture insight, and activate everyone's genius.

=

ALL IN

Leadership Starts with Connections

Teams that go *All In* don't thrive by accident. They thrive when the leader creates the conditions for trust, ownership, and shared purpose. That begins with connection: to self, to others, and to the group[13].

Connection to Self

Have you ever led a project you don't believe in? Was it hard? Strong leadership begins with **authenticity**, grounded in self-awareness and self-authorship.

Most adults operate from a **socialized mindset** - shaped by others' expectations. However, effective leaders move toward the **self-authoring mind**, where values are internal, and decisions reflect personal agency[29,30]

> *Self-authoring leaders lead with clarity. They take responsibility, stay grounded, and act with intention even under pressure.*

What is Authenticity

Authentic leaders don't need to "bring their whole selves" to work (unmanaged, unfiltered, driven by instincts). They consistently bring their **best-aligned selves**, grounded in what matters most to them[31,32].

Connection to Others

Leadership is relational. It grows through empathy, compassion, and presence[33]. Leaders who see their people at a deep level create emotional safety[34]. This fuels trust, inclusion, and engagement at every level of the team. This creates space for unspoken fears to surface, be addressed through coaching, and ultimately transformed into growth.

Connection to the Group

Beyond one-on-one relationships, great leaders sense and influence the collective. They hold the emotional temperature of the team, help shape shared meaning, and co-create progress – this is where personal connections expand into cultural impact.

Opening the Channels: Head, Heart, and Gut

The most impactful leaders don't just analyze. They sense.
They lead with their **head, heart,** and **gut**, and they know when to integrate them[35].

What the Data Shows

In our research, the most effective leaders scored consistently higher in:

- **Emotional insight** (Heart).
- **Instinctive clarity and bold decision-making** (Gut).

These leaders were more likely to:

- *Connect deeply with people*
- *Read situations accurately*
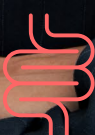- *Make courageous, values-aligned choices—even under pressure*

Head
Structure. Logic. Execution.

Heart
Empathy. Emotion. Care.

Gut
Intuition. Courage.
Fast truth-sensing.

The Channels: Head, Heart, and Gut

Channel	Definition	What Qualities it Provides
	The head is our reality builder, using thought to shape our experiences, sift data, solve problems, and give structure to our dreams.	• Operationalizing ideas • Evaluating options • Problem-solving • Analytical reasoning • Planning and prioritization • Decision-making based on evidence
	The heart is the entryway into our being, connecting us to our emotions, values, and humanity, and allowing us to fully experience life.	• Empathy • Compassion and care • Building trust • Emotional intelligence • Inspiring and motivating others
	The gut is our highest form of intelligence—our intuition—that serves as a guidance system for the soul, offering deep insight and helping us navigate uncertainty.	• Manage ambiguity • Systems thinking • Strategic thinking • Connect the dots • Risk awareness and courage • Sensing patterns and opportunities • Acting decisively under uncertainty

The best decisions aren't just smart.
They're felt, sensed, and aligned.

A Guide to Lead with Heart

Research shows that having a good understanding of one's own and other's emotions helps leaders in two ways: firstly, emotions help effective decision making. Research shows that when leaders understand their own emotions, and those of others—they make better decisions and lead more effectively. People who are disconnected from their own feelings make poorer decisions[36]. Secondly, this helps to create strong connections with other people, to deescalate conflict, and help boosting morale[37].

Leading with Heart Means:

Empathy	**Emotional Agility**	**Authenticity**
Understanding and feeling with others. Seeing their world and responding with care.	Navigating emotions with clarity. Staying grounded and adaptive through challenge and change[38].	Showing up as one's best-aligned self. Being clear on what matters and leading from that place[14].

Leaders Can Try This:

- **Practice active listening:** listen to understand, not just to respond.
- **Validate experiences and emotions:** acknowledge experiences and feelings without judgment.
- **Lead with vulnerability:** share purpose, not perfection.
- **Be responsive:** use emotional insight to guide action.

Leading with heart means being human, honest, and deeply committed to the people you serve.

The Masks that Block Connections

Masks serve as a form of protection, shielding us from vulnerability and the discomfort of exposing our true selves. While they may help us feel safe in the moment, they also create barriers that disconnect us from our authentic essence and from others[8,39]. By hiding behind these facades, whether it's the mask of perfection, pride, or indifference, we limit our ability to build genuine relationships, tap into our full capabilities, and achieve our greatest potential for success.

Our data shows that the most problematic behaviors in teams and leaders aren't obvious weaknesses. They're often overused strengths that become masks.

These masks block the connections that power trust, inclusion, innovation, and shared leadership.

They're self-protective habits, such as control, harmony, or perfection, that helped people succeed in the past, but now get in the way of open, adaptive, and emotionally honest leadership.

The Most Problematic Masks

According to our data, these masks most often block team and leader effectiveness:

	Leaders Mask	Why It Blocks Connection
	Skepticism (Suspicious)	Lowers trust and psychological safety — makes it harder for others to step in or speak up.
	Harmony (Agreeable)	Avoids tension, limiting honesty and participatory safety.
	Unease (Excitable)	Makes teams more cautious — undermines team confidence.
	Stability (Cautious)	Reduces flexibility and blocks shared leadership.
	Perfectionism (Meticulous)	Suppresses inclusion, reduces room for others' ideas.

The Most Problematic Masks (continued)

Teams Mask	Why It Blocks Connection
Skepticism (Suspicious)	Undermines team trust and inclusion — damages team dynamics.
Harmony (Agreeable)	Reduces participatory safety and open conflict.
Pride (Arrogance)	Directly reduces all-in behaviors and shared ownership.
Originality (Gutsy)	Undermines cohesion and breaks trust as people are unpredictable or domineering.

Why It Matters

Strong leadership requires openness, not armor. When teams or leaders rely too heavily on these masks, they block the emotional flow that powers engagement, inclusion, and innovation[40]. Masks may feel protective, but when fear meets fear, connection breaks down, constant misunderstandings arise, and progress and performance are impeded.

The Power of Connections

Connection is Key

Connection to self (authenticity and values), to others (empathy and presence), and to the group (shared meaning and cultural impact).

Self-Authorship Matters

Strong leaders move beyond external approval toward an internally guided, self-authored mindset.

Head, Heart, and Gut Integration

The most impactful leaders integrate analysis (head), empathy (heart), and intuition (gut), in order to read situations accurately, connect deeply, and make courageous choices.

Leading With Heart

Emotional awareness enhances decision-making and builds stronger relationships.

Masks Block Connection

Overused strengths (such as perfectionism, harmony, and skepticism) act as protective "masks" that erode authentic connections.

Openness Drives Performance

Letting go of masks and integrating head–heart–gut expands leaders' and teams' capacity to co-create, handle complexity, and ultimately achieve higher levels of performance.
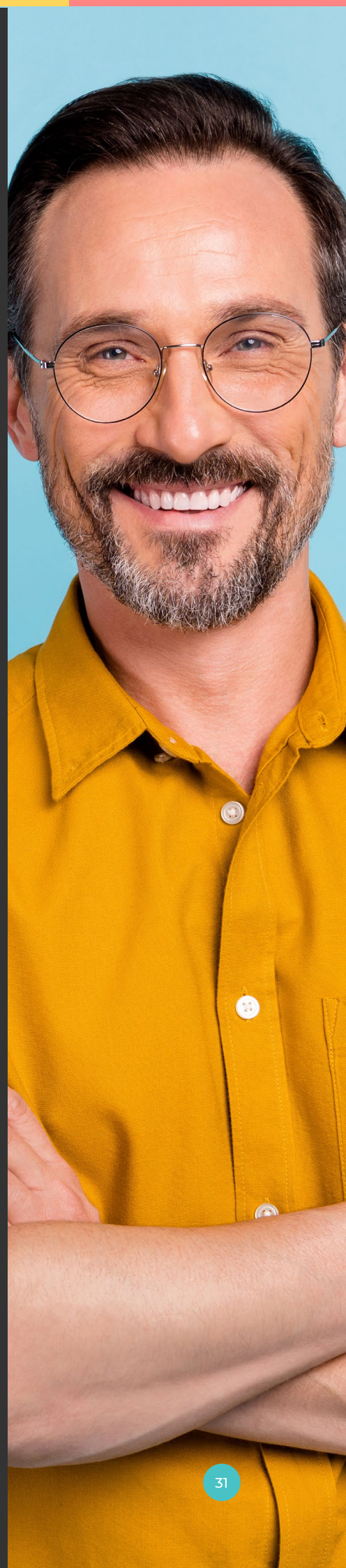
THE HUMAN EDGE OF LEADERSHIP

*How do leaders and teams evolve together to meet the complex demands of today's world? Drawing on our research, we highlight three critical traits in leaders: **Heart, Self-Awareness, and Authorship.***

*High-performing teams must also be supported as full systems, not passive followers. Team dynamics like **Relationship Building** and **Receptivity** are key drivers of success, and share practical insights on aligning leader and team development. With **CORE™ Fusion**, our integrated assessment, we help organizations build a future grounded in **clarity, courage, and human connection.***

The Connection of Humanistic Leadership

High-performing teams must also be supported as full systems, not passive followers. Team dynamics like **Relationship Building** and **Receptivity** are key drivers of success, and share practical insights on aligning leader and team development. With **CORE™ Fusion**, our integrated assessment, we help organizations build a future grounded in **clarity, courage, and human connection.**

Connection to Self
The tendencies and behaviors needed for individuals to fully embody their potential.

Connection to Others
An individual's ability to estblish meaningful connections with those they work with.

Co-Creating Possibilities
The tendencies and behaviors necessary for inspiring new possibilities at a group level, going beyond what is possible at an individual level.

Leadership Begins with Authentic Connections

The process of becoming a leader is, at its core, a journey of emotional growth. It's not just about acquiring skill, but happens by maturing into deeper self-understanding, integrity, and connection.

At the heart of effective leadership lies **alignment**: between values and actions, intentions and impact, self and system. This inner clarity is what allows leaders to show up consistently, respond wisely, and lead with presence.

In our data, the three leader personality traits most strongly linked to team success are:

Heart
The capacity to include others' perspectives and feelings in decisions.

Self-Awareness
Honest self-perception, and reflection on one's own actions.

Authorship
The sense of having an impact on the world, and writing one's own story.

These traits don't develop by chance. They grow through intentional reflection, understanding their own patterns, and learning how to connect meaningfully with others. For many, this growth is supported through **coaching, feedback, and deep developmental work**[41].

Teams Are More Than Just Followers: They Are The System.

Leadership doesn't happen in isolation or as consequences of their leader. Today, research increasingly understands teams as dynamic systems where the leader is just one of many interconnected parts[42,43].

That shift matters. In our own research, **team personality composition**[44] predicted more variance in team behavior than leader traits alone. In fact, when analyzed together, **leader and team scores explained up to 40% of overall variance** in key team outcomes.

That's a powerful reminder: to change performance, we must work with both sides of the system: leaders and teams.

Teams are not passive recipients of leadership; they shape culture, engagement, and innovation from the inside out. That's why humanistic leadership calls for a more active, reciprocal approach, where leaders **guide teams toward forward-thinking behaviors and proactivity, grounded in interpersonal connection**.

Two team traits stand out as most predictive of performance:

Relationship Building

The capacity for trust, collaboration, and emotional connection across members.

Receptivity

The team's openness to new ideas, feedback, and experimentation.

When these traits are strong, teams don't just execute but evolve.

Synchronizing and Integrating Leaders and Teams

When Eliza, the owner and leader of her own successful consultancy, started her coaching journey with Human Edge, she was known for her sharp intellect and constant drive for innovation. Always scanning the horizon, she was quick to adopt new strategies and push bold initiatives forward.

But something wasn't landing and the CORE™ Fusion insights helped her to understand the missing piece of the puzzle.

Her team, composed of highly skilled professionals, wasn't resisting her vision, but they weren't moving with her either. Energy felt scattered. Feedback loops were slow. Momentum lagged.

That insight changed everything. She began to shift from solo acceleration to team synchronization, slowing her pace just enough to bring others with her, listening more, and aligning direction before charging ahead.

Within months, the dynamic shifted. The team began showing more initiative, co-owning goals, and gaining traction faster *together*.

In one pivotal coaching session, Eliza said:

"I just realized they're not trying to slow me down. They're trying to stay with me."

36

Co-creating with Teams:
Tips for Framing a Problem

Successful teams need structure to succeed together with everyone involved. One of the simplest yet most powerful practices is how leaders frame problems[20]. The way a challenge is defined can either limit thinking or unlock creativity and ownership. Leaders can use the following steps to co-create the frame with their team, so that everyone can contribute with clarity, confidence, and purpose.

Identify a Business Problem: Establish the business opportunity or the problem that needs to be solved. Be sure to identify the benefits of success in either circumstance.

Alignment with Purpose: Determine how the opportunity aligns with the company's purpose. It may sometimes cause things to shift or even lead to a major disruption.

Establish Boundaries: Establish boundaries to determine what should be included or excluded from the context and answer the question: "What should we explore and what should be left alone?" A few examples to consider: product portfolio, geography, technology enablement, customer group, and merging sectors.

Identify Capabilities: Identify the organizational and team capabilities. This instills all members a sense of what they can build on or what needs to be augmented, depending upon the level of disruption involved in the change.

Empower the Team: Allow the team to get to work by granting them enough freedom and safety to fill in the frame. To give everyone an opportunity to contribute, empower team members to tap into their knowledge, experiences, curiosity, and networking contacts to bring forth new kernels of ideas.

Bring the Brick: Share with the team members that they need to "bring a brick, not a cathedral." This is a lesson gleaned from the art of improvisational comedy. The concept is that each troupe member contributes a piece of the sketch (the brick) and not the entirety of the scene (the cathedral).

The Teams and Leaders of Tomorrow

The future needs humans, not heroes.

We live in a world that moves fast, demands more, and is increasingly complex. Technology accelerates everything while it pulls people apart. Teams are scattered across time zones, overwhelmed by change, and navigating a rising tide of pressure and noise.

To navigate the perilous waters of the contemporary workplace, the teams need connected and brave human beings.

The Leader and Team of the Future

The leaders of tomorrow won't lead from control or charisma. For the employees, the humanistic leader has two major functions:

Community Builder: The organization, indeed, is a community of people who share goals and missions. The leader needs to build the space where people can channel their energies to contribute to the community.

Champion of Purpose and Principles: The leader helps individuals feel they are part of a group, sharing common values, and modelling the way people are expected to behave.

They will fulfill this function by continuously improving as a human being. Learning to recognise and project their own feelings and sense of purpose, and deeply caring about the people in their community, helping employees and individuals grow.

The teams of the future will be **confident, creative, and responsible** because their teammates and leaders created the conditions for them to thrive.

They'll build adult-to-adult relationships based on transparency, empathy, and trust. They'll stretch together, solve problems together, co-create and celebrate what they've built.

We don't just imagine this future.
We build it.

How to Use CORE™ Fusion to Build the Future

Human Edge is on a mission to help leaders to unlock their capabilities and create authentic connections with their team. To guide the journey, we have created **CORE™ Fusion**, an integrated development framework. This framework empowers both leaders and teams to evolve across three transformational dimensions:

Dimension	What It Unlocks
Connecting to Self	Inner clarity, purpose, authorship.
Connecting to Others	Trust, empathy, emotional insight.
Co-creating Possibilities	Shared direction, co-creation, cultural impact.

By developing self-aware leaders and co-creative teams in parallel, CORE™ Fusion strengthens the **humanistic leadership** – clarity, courage, and connectedness in action.

The Recipe for Humanistic Leaders

How To Create Connection to Self

Self-Reflection: Understand one's own emotions, limitations, and reactions.

Purpose & Values: Have a clear understanding of own mission and ethical values.

Role Modelling: Be consistent and live up to own values to provide genuine inspiration.

Interpersonal Perspectives: Understand other points of views and care about their own team and colleagues.

Individualized Support: Continuously helping others to learn, grow, and outperform.

Enable Self-Leadership: Empower team members to become leaders of themselves – providing enough freedom for self-management and enough protection for failing safe.

Offer a Safe Environment: Where trust, psychological safety, and inclusion are a priority.

Foster human growth and development. People feel more engaged and are more motivated when they feel they can learn and grow.

Build a Community of People: Based on common values and shared identity.

Adapted from Fritz and Sorgel (2017)[45]

The Human Edge Advantage: Embedding Humanistic Leadership

Humanistic leadership cannot remain an abstract aspiration. It needs practice — moments where leaders and teams experiment with new behaviors, reflect on their patterns, and build the courage to connect more deeply. At Human Edge, this is the work we do through the **Human Edge Advantage** - a development journey that follows CORE™ Fusion assessment and helps teams turn insight into lived capability.

The approach is grounded in four principles:

Courage to be Oneself:
Leaders and teams explore how they step into (or out of) their personal power, becoming more aware of when they act with confidence and clarity, and when they let that slip away.

Authentic Connections:
Teams practice respect, integrity, vulnerability, and empathy and confront how masks such as perfectionism or skepticism block trust and inclusion.

Co-creation in Complexity:
Participants learn facilitation tools to navigate conflict, integrate diverse viewpoints, and unlock creativity when problems have no simple answers.

Team Involvement:
The learning journey involves both the leader and the team, as they negotiate together their way forward.

These principles should be considered as a north star for a journey that can include **coaching, workshops, team building sessions, and culture change**. What matters is the repeated practice: moving beyond intellectual understanding into habits that sustain trust, ownership, and innovation.

The Human Edge Advantage approach represents our way of helping leaders and teams bring humanistic leadership to life. But, its principles are universal. Any organization can benefit from creating deliberate opportunities where leaders and teams slow down, face the masks that limit them, and practice authentic connection.

This is how humanistic leadership becomes real, not as a program, but as a lived experience of how people choose to work together.

The Human Edge of Leadership

Core Leader Traits

Heart (empathy, inclusion), Self-awareness (honest reflection), and Authorship (agency, ownership) lead to team success. Built through growth, reflection, and feedback.

Teams as Systems

Team dynamics often matter more than leader traits. Relationship building and receptivity predict success.

Leader–Team Rhythm

Leaders boost performance by synchronizing with teams, listening attentively, adjusting their pace, and aligning their direction.

Future Leadership

Not heroes, but community builders who foster trust, transparency, and adult-to-adult relationships.

CORE™ Fusion

Assess Growth across three dimensions: Self (clarity, authorship), Others (trust, empathy), and Co-creation (shared direction, culture).

Human Edge Advantage

A practice-based approach with four principles: courage, authentic connection, co-creation, and shared involvement—building lasting trust, inclusion, and innovation.

Cultivate Humanistic Leadership for a Future-Proof Organization

Organizations today face a paradox. Technology accelerates progress, yet it fragments connections. Markets demand agility, yet people feel overwhelmed and disengaged. Many leaders respond with more control, speed, or process, but these strategies often exacerbate the very disconnection they seek to resolve. The cost is visible: eroded trust, lower ownership, and untapped potential.

This white paper has argued that the answer is not more heroic leadership, but more humanistic leadership. Leaders and teams thrive when they root performance in connection to self, to others, and to the group. Connection expands courage, builds trust, and creates the conditions for people to go *all in*.

Our research indicates that successful leaders are those who cultivate **Heart, Self-Awareness, and Authorship**. They bring empathy into decisions, reflect honestly on their impact, and step into authorship of their story. But leadership does not happen in isolation. Teams, too, are active systems. High-performing teams share two defining strengths: **Relationship Building** and **Receptivity**. Together, leader and team form a living system where trust, collaboration, and openness drive results.

The conclusion is clear: the future does not need superhuman heroes. It needs connected, courageous human beings who can create communities of trust and purpose. Humanistic leadership is a measurable, practical path to stronger performance, healthier organizations, and a more sustainable way of working together.

APPENDIX: RESEARCH DEMOGRAPHICS

Our research brought together 20 companies across 8 industries, engaging 25 teams of varying sizes and perspectives. In total, 243 individuals contributed—spanning organizations from fewer than 50 employees, to over 150,000. Representing professionals from career starters to seasoned leaders with more than 30 years' experience, the research included a mix of ages and backgrounds, offering a multidimensional view of how leaders and teams operate in today's complex environments.

Total Number (N) = 243
Total Number of Teams (k) = 25
(min 5, max 13 people per team)
Total Number of Companies = 20

Industry:

Medical/pharma	6
Professional Services	6
Engineering	3
Tech	1
Education	1
Travel	1
Finance	1
Consumer Goods	1

Size:

Very large (5000+)	6
Large (250-5000)	6
Medium(50-250)	4
Small (<50)	4

Sample demographics:
M = 45%, F = 54%
Age: mean = 41 (sd = 8.4),
range: 20-66

Work experience:
4% less than 1 year
12% 1-5 years
24% 5-10 years
33% 11-20 years
21% 21-30 years
6% > 30 years

Team country:

Germany	6
UAE	4
France	3
Norway	3
Singapore	3
Switzerland	3
Ireland	1
Lithuania	1
Sweden	1
UK	1
USA	1

APPENDIX: RESEARCH DEMOGRAPHICS

The questionnaire included 30 items. Participants were asked to indicate with a score from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much), the extent to which the statements described their teams.

The questionnaire included the following sections:

Section	Example
Trust (6 items)	I believe my team members are sincere and keep their word.
Inclusion climate[46] (3 items)	People's differences are respected within the team
Innovation Climate	Team members are comfortable in sharing their thoughts, as know they won't be judged.
Team Confidence[47]	Even after serious difficulties at work, we tend to quickly bounce back.
Shared Leadership[48] (3 items)	All team members initiate actions to make the team more effective.
Team Mindfulness (2 items)	The team does things without paying attention (reverse scoring).
Organizational Citizenship Behaviours (2 items)	My team colleagues are available to take on extra workload if that helps the team to reach our goals.

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For further information please contact:

Lisa Danels
+41 61 229 38 34
info@human-edge.com

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