Creating a Human-centred Workplace

A magic three-step formula? I think not.

Implement a, b, and c and you'll be there. No. Our world is **VUCA** (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) and **TUNA** (turbulent, uncertain, novel and ambiguous).

So why would one size fit all and one formula work to create a human workplace? It wouldn't, and it doesn't. Another issue is a lot of research is from the US, based on huge organisations that don't translate well to Aotearoa and to the public sector.

So should we give up and muddle through? Of course not. Reflect on, experiment with, and adapt some key ideas to your context? Sounds good to me.

So we're drawing ideas from all over. Some new, some not so new.

The L word

I first came across this when Gary Hamel raised it in *What Matters Now,* 2012.

> "Why are words like love, devotion and honor so seldom heard within the halls of corporate-dom. Why are the ideals that matter most to human beings the ones most notably absent in managerial discourse?"

He makes a great point. But does everyone's workplace create love? Are organisations devoted to a great cause? And do people experience honour in action in their daily lives at work or otherwise? Maybe not, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't aim for all three, with love as number one.

Certainly, I remember a lovely phase from the US military when talking about what their role and comradeship meant to them: *What is it about Band of Brothers you don't understand?*

The noble quest

Hamel and Zanini*, Humanocracy,* 2020:

> "At some deep level, we know that life is too short to work on inconsequential problems...Solving new problems and forging new paths—that is what we were born to do. "

And if people can do this, they'll be inspired and that's a key element of a human-centred organisation.

Certainly my experience is that most people want to do a useful job. When I talk to public servants about what a spirit of service means to them, I get some inspiring responses. Anecdotally, during 2020 I worked with teams of people paid low wages doing hard work outdoors in sometimes difficult conditions. They were the most dedicated teams I met last year and were proud of the work they did in their communities.

Aspirations versus reality

In Aotearoa the top 10 jobs searched for on the careers.govt.nz site in 2018 were:

1. Police Officer
2. Registered Nurse
3. Psychologist
4. Secondary School Teacher
5. Accountant
6. Pilot
7. Primary School Teacher
8. Surgeon
9. General Practitioner
10. Veterinarian

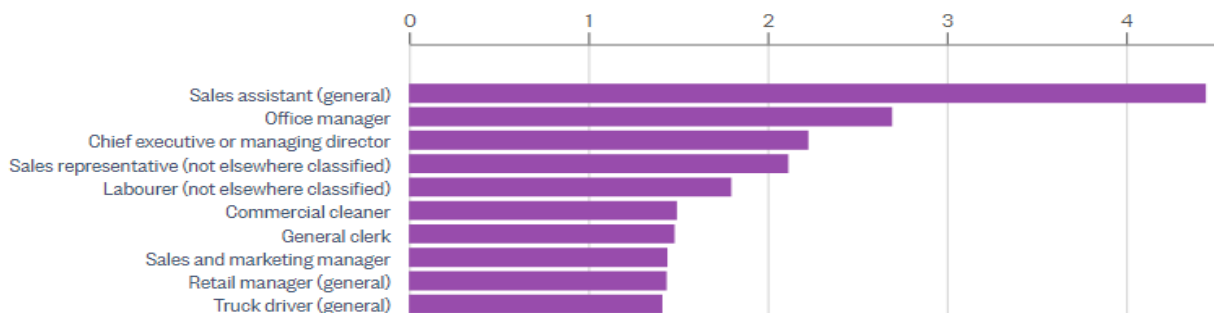I think we can see the search for a noble quest is alive and well here.

But the 2018 census tells us that the most common top 10 jobs are:

Most common occupations of people living in New Zealand

2018 Census, % of employed people aged 15+

Provider: Stats NZ

figure.nz

We expect leaders to draw a line of sight to what people are doing day to day and the noble quest of their organisation. But how easy is that when you're a shop assistant with few promotion prospects and the stuff you're selling is harming the planet? Think fast fashion.

Autonomy, freedom and empowerment

Autonomy is one of Dan Pink's key motivators. The neuroscientists tell us autonomy is one of the things we crave as humans. And the psychologists argue that being empowered and having self-determination leads to us being intrinsically motivated. I'm sold.

So what does autonomy, freedom and empowerment look like?

Allowing creativity and innovation

We know this story. Agile has given us self-managing teams and iteration. Lean Startup has given us MVPs and fast failure. And classic innovation practices are well-established:

- Allow ideas and people to collide and combine
- Learn from the fringe.
- Plan using scenarios.

By the way, some of the most simple, relevant and on-the-button innovation principles were articulated by Waka Kotahi a few years ago:

- Give it a go
- Copy shamelessly
- Talk to strangers
- Be the why guy and gal
- Tell stories.

The Training Practice

Controls: the bureaucratic versus the innovative mindset

So why aren't teams given autonomy to be creative and innovate?

> "It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them."

Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince

He's right. The opposite of autonomy is control. And a lot of organisations favour control. It's part of the bureaucratic paradigm that includes rigour, alignment, consistency, discipline and predictability.

Bureaucratic mindset	Innovative mindset
People will slack off and abuse their freedom	People doubt and question continually
People will go off at a tangent	People and teams adapt quickly to changing circumstances
The organisation will lose focus	People respond quickly to changing societal and customer needs
Risks will multiply	Initiative is encouraged and measured risks are taken. Teams experiment and share their learnings. Failure is accepted
It'll be chaos	People working on the frontline have significant input
We won't reach our KPIs	The focus is on outcomes
We need systems and processes	Organisations adopt basic principles and values and ways of working adapt quickly
We need a hierarchical structure and supervision	Structures are flat. Initiative is encouraged and measured risks are taken. People and teams are accountable Teams collaborate and efforts are co-ordinated

Lessons from Christchurch

This is one of my favourite quotes about innovation.

> "Canterbury, after the earthquakes showed what is possible. The earthquakes, provided a 'perfect storm' for innovation. The status quo was not an option and public servants were given permission from Wellington to 'do whatever it takes'. They responded to the challenge with new and different approaches to service delivery and design which provide live demonstrations of better public services."

Washington and Groves, *Seismic Shifts: designing and growing innovation capability*, Policy Quarterly, Feb 2013

The interesting thing for most people at work is that the status quo is the obvious option. Yes, we adapted quickly last year to COVID. MSD paid wage subsidies super quickly; its systems and processes were easy to follow. Staff were empowered to take decisions and pay the subsidy. A bureaucratic mindset and practices just wouldn't have worked.

So, how do we create a situation where the status quo isn't the option?

Two completely opposing ideas?

Is there a middle ground between the bureaucracy and innovation? Surely yes. The why and outcome needs to be clear; values and principles matter. Greater autonomy and innovation go hand in hand with accountability. Teams can decide, and act, on the what and how.

Is it messy? Potentially.

But how every organisation does it is up to them. Allowing one or two teams significant autonomy in an organisation is problematic. Check out the story of the former Connected Journey Solutions Group, Waka Kotahi.

This ring-fenced innovation hub idea clearly didn't work.

A community, rather than a sterile workplace

Community is one of those concepts we refer to outside of work. But a human-centred workplace is far more community and less sterile workplace.

In a community, members share something in common. More than that, they care about what they have in common and care about each other. And they interact regularly to reinforce these three things. A community is passionate about its common purpose and has shared core values.

Community members care about the community as a whole and play an active role in building and sustaining it.

> "Community is much more than belonging to something. It's about doing something together that makes belonging matter. "

Brian Solis

Henry Mintzberg Rebuilding Companies as Communities, Harvard Business Review (July/August 2009):

> "We are social animals who cannot function effectively without a social system that is larger than ourselves. That is what is meant by community, the social glue that binds us together for the greater good. "

But how do we create community?

Start with transparency, openness and collaboration

All three build trust, that all important social glue. Here's one way to think about trust:

The trust equation

$$\text{Trustworthiness} = \frac{\text{Credibility} + \text{Reliability} + \text{Intimacy}}{\text{Self Orientation}}$$

Then add psychological safety and belonging

This diagram is from the Google's Aristotle Project 2018. Here are the project's conclusions about what makes a successful team.

1 Psychological Safety
Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.

2 Dependability
Team members get things done on time and meet Google's high bar for excellence.

3 Structure & Clarity
Team members have clear roles, plans, and goals.

4 Meaning
Work is personally important to team members.

5 Impact
Team members think their work matters and creates change.

re:Work

It's all valuable, but psychological safety is the absolute must to create a human-centred workplace. If it's present, people feel they:

• won't be punished for making mistakes
• can speak their mind
• be creative
• stick their neck out without fear of having it cut off.

These statements are from Goffee and Jones, (Creating the Best Workplace on Earth, Harvard Business Review, May 2013) and refer to belonging.

- I'm the same person at home as I am at work. (There are some cultural issues with this question.)
- I feel comfortable being myself.
- We're all encouraged to express our differences.
- People who think differently from most do well here.
- Passion is encouraged even when it leads to conflict.
- More than one type of person fits in here.

How many can you answer positively? Try using these on your team along with ratings of how they feel using the 1 – 5 Aristotle project scale.

A shout out for DIB (Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging)

DIB is crucial to belonging and a human-centred workplace. How many people 'cover' at work? That means they don't talk about their home, cultural or religious practices because they're in a minority. They change their name to make it easier for the majority culture to pronounce it.

The quest is to affirm people's true identities at work. DIB is an area we're deeply involved in and can be confronting as well as hugely rewarding.

Fear: the enemy of the human-centred workplace

Here are seven signs of fear in workplaces:

- The focus is on short-term goals – that's what people are measured on.
- Results are measured, wrongdoing is punished and order is maintained.
- People don't tell the truth; they know no-one wants to hear it.
- The rumour mill is alive and well, noting people's ups and downs.
- People second guess what good performance looks like and the implications of any sort of performance review.
- People follow rules and avoid taking blame. They blame others to deflect blame sticking to them.
- People hide their humanity, warmth and empathy.

How does your workplace stack up?

11 Humanocracy statements

Let's finish with Hamel and Zanini's humanocracy assertions. Feel free to use or adapt these as tests of how human-centred your workplace is. You don't have to agree to everything they're saying 100%, but they're clues to guide your thinking and actions:

1. You had the right to design your own job.
2. Your team was free to set its own goals and define its own methods.
3. You are encouraged to grow your skills and take on new challenges.
4. Your workmates felt more like family than colleagues.
5. You never felt encumbered by pointless rules and red tape.
6. You felt trusted in every situation to use your best judgment.
7. You were accountable to your colleagues rather than a boss.
8. You didn't have to waste time sucking up or playing political games.
9. You had the chance to help shape strategy and direction of your organisation.
10. Your influence and compensation depended on your abilities and not your rank.
11. 11. You were never given reason to feel inferior to the higher-ups.

So love, a noble quest, empowerment, community, transparency, trust, and psychological safety are the mainstays of our thinking at the moment. Implementing these ideas is far from straightforward and that tension between freedom and control is real.

VUCA and TUNA are snapping at our heels as we move – sometimes in millimetres and sometimes in marathons towards creating more human workplaces.

Thanks for coming!

From The Training Practice team - *Hilary, Dinah, Kristen and James*

Check out our refreshed website, with all of our thinking and upcoming events:

trainingpractice.co.nz
hilary@trainingpractice.co.nz
027 222 1498

Follow us on Facebook and LinkedIn