

The Human Touch: Why Leadership Still Matters Most

Tom Kelley

Growing up near Akron, Ohio, one of my summer jobs was working the night shift at Oak Rubber, a factory boldly claiming to be “the world’s largest manufacturer of toy balloons.”¹ My boss there was never mean to me, but he was also never motivational. At the start of my first midnight shift, he explained that I must make no less than my quota of 1,800 toy footballs each night; my coworkers urged me not to make *more* than 1,800. My foreman was perfectly adequate for the job of supervising me, and I made my quota every day by 8 am.

If “adequate” is good enough, and your work never changes, maybe you don’t need human-centered leadership. But if your company aims higher, the right kind of leadership makes all the difference. After seeing a wide range of leadership styles across more than a thousand client organizations during my career at IDEO, I found that human-centered leaders are the ones best equipped to help organizations learn and innovate at the pace of change.

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What makes a human-centered leader? The question is best answered by example and by contrasting such leaders with other, very different management styles. I sincerely hope you have had firsthand experience with human-centered leaders who are distinguished by the cultures they create around them. They lead with empathy in a way that enhances employee engagement and loyalty. They enable team members to speak up without fear of punishment or repercussion. They listen with care and then lead with confidence. They inspire others to do their best, most creative work. They model integrity and purpose. Even at moments when you disagree, they still convey a sense of being on your side.

Those characteristics may seem universally desirable, and yet most of us have also dealt with managers or coaches with polar opposite leadership styles: tyrants, taskmasters, narcissists, or weak managers who are just muddling through.

That old balloon factory faded away, and tasks like the ones at Oak Rubber have been offshored or outsourced to robots and algorithms. Now, decades later, artificial intelligence promises to be even more disruptive than offshoring and automation, opening the door to both threats and opportunities.

A couple of years ago, *Wired* produced a thought-provoking video titled “A.I. Tries 20 Jobs,” featuring people from 20 different careers as they each did a self-assessment of how vulnerable their jobs were to encroachment from AI.² One by one, they looked into the camera and explained why they thought their job would be safe for the moment. An advertising copywriter showed how a ChatGPT response couldn’t quite match her at writing the tagline for a new product. A graphic designer compared her own logo design favorably to AI-generated versions. A translator pointed to subtle flaws in the current AI translations. Even at the time, however, their jobs seemed more vulnerable than they realized. Only the firefighter and

the circus performer seemed truly safe from AI, and even the firefighter should already be looking over his shoulder at the firefighting robots and drones racing to encroach on his job.

Leadership as a Future-Proof Skill

In the short time since that video was made, I have experienced dozens of worried conversations in which people are wondering: “Will my job survive?” A better question might be: “Which human qualities can’t easily be replaced by AI?” There’s a lot of speculation on this topic, and of course, no one—including me—can claim to have the definitive answers. My current take, however, is that there are a handful of human-centered leadership skills that can improve your chances of surviving and succeeding in the age of AI.

- ***Inspiring a shared vision.*** AI can’t instill passion, create purpose, or cultivate a company culture where people genuinely care about their work. Nor can it make people feel connected to a company’s mission. As a human-centered leader, you can paint a positive picture of the future with your ideas in it.
- ***Building trust.*** Trust is an essential element of thriving organizations. AI can provide unbiased analysis, but it cannot build relationships, mend conflicts, or create a culture of psychological safety.
- ***Making tough decisions.*** AI is a powerful tool for synthesizing mountains of data and generating recommendations. But good leaders also understand the human emotions, diplomacy, and moral dilemmas that play a role in making the final call.
- ***Managing through a crisis.*** When crises hit, employees don’t look to AI for guidance; they look to their leaders.

- ***Developing people.*** AI will inevitably automate many tasks, but it cannot develop the leaders of tomorrow. And when AI does encroach on many jobs, leaders can create pathways for reskilling the people affected.
- ***Making employees feel valued, trusted, and motivated.*** A human-centered leader can look someone in the eye at the end of a tough project and say, “I believe in you.” Such leaders can also be present at times of need and roll up their sleeves to help at critical moments.

So, what does this future-proof human-centered leadership look like in practice? I found answers in one-on-one interviews with remarkably human-centered leaders, including a Fortune 50 CEO, an expert in professional development, and the inspirational founder of a life-changing nonprofit.

First, however, here’s a story closer to home:

Straight out of college, my son Sean began his career as a mechanical engineer at Varian Medical Systems in Palo Alto, working on advanced technologies for cancer care. His job there had special meaning for our family because Varian’s radiation oncology machines had helped save my brother’s life during a long and scary cancer journey. One day, his boss unexpectedly called Sean into his office for a conversation. Although Sean liked his boss, the sudden meeting made him wonder if he was in trouble. He wasn’t. His manager said something like this:

Sean, this may sound funny to you, but your happiness is important to me. You represent the next generation of leaders here, and I want to help you on that path. So, let’s make a social contract between the two of us that you won’t come into my office a few years from now and say you’re leaving because one thing is annoying you or

another thing is frustrating you. If things start to annoy or frustrate you, let's agree that you'll come to me *first*, before it gets to be too much, and we can fix it together, so that you can continue to be happy and energized here.

That one-on-one conversation with a promising young employee exemplified the best of human-centered leadership. The older man didn't speak about the company's metrics or even his own expectations, though both the senior leader and the young engineer knew that those were essential. Sean's boss centered the whole proposal on Sean, and the two of them exchanged promises. Although I never met that leader, I greatly admired him, and almost a decade later, I borrowed his idea to make a similar social contract with a young, wise-beyond-his-years venture capitalist at D4V, our Tokyo-based VC firm.

Lessons from Remarkable Leaders

As I set out to write a chapter about human-centered leadership, the first senior leader who came to mind was Jim Hackett, former CEO of Ford Motor Company. As much as any CEO I have ever met, Hackett both appreciated the value of human-centered design and practiced the art of human-centered leadership. In his previous role as CEO of Steelcase, Hackett had an open-door policy that allowed anyone in the company the possibility of bringing an issue to his attention. Looking at each individual topic of those meetings, some might have seemed trivial, but at a macro level, the open door signaled that Hackett was approachable and willing to listen. Throughout Steelcase's history prior to Jim becoming CEO, the company had been family-owned and operated, so Hackett's approachability preserved that same spirit, even inside a publicly traded company.

Hackett always emphasized that integrity was an essential element of human-centered leadership. Shortly after meeting him decades ago,

he handed me a book on ethical management and emphasized the importance of doing the right thing. “People don’t have to agree with you,” Hackett explained, “They don’t even have to like you. But if you have deep integrity, they will still follow your lead.” He mentioned the name of a prominent Fortune 500 CEO who blamed employees whenever the business results were bad. By contrast, Hackett felt his role was not to put people in their place but to help them thrive.

Having been a strong advocate for human-centered design both at Steelcase and Ford, Hackett has immersed himself in the world of AI, even advising executives on the topic, in working sessions he calls “CEO Labs.” Drawing a connection between human-centered design and AI, Jim says that it used to be enough to design products or experiences with a human-centered perspective, but with the growing influence of

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AI, we should be designing systems for human agency. In other words, he believes leaders should design the organization to engage the capabilities of AI while still having humans at the center, like conductors of a complex symphony that includes both human and AI resources.

When asked about success stories from his own CEO leadership roles, Hackett modestly shifted the focus to other human-centered leaders. Hackett, a former college athlete and athletic director of the University of Michigan,³ immediately thought of fellow athlete Junior Bridgeman, an NBA player who went on to even greater success in food and beverage businesses. After retiring from the NBA, Bridgeman started buying Wendy’s restaurant franchises, growing his business year by year until he amassed more than 400 fast food outlets.⁴ By then, he was a wealthy entrepreneur, but as Hackett

reports, you could still drop into a Wendy's and find Bridgeman flipping burgers.

If the owner of hundreds of restaurants shows up to work the grill, what signal does that send to the team? It says he still understands the business, all the way down to the grassroots level. In the process, he becomes more familiar to the employees, not just some faceless boss whom they have never met. It also lets people know that he remembers what it's like to be a regular guy, born the son of a steelworker in the Midwest.

On the basketball court, Bridgeman had been a solid player, more often serving as the sixth man coming off the bench than as a starter for the team. In his role as a leader and entrepreneur, however, he was a superstar. In the long history of the NBA, only four players have ever become billionaires. Three of them are household names: Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and LeBron James. The fourth was Junior Bridgeman.⁵

Cultivating Human Potential

The late Sir Ken Robinson never ran a Fortune 500 company, yet his ideas about learning and development have influenced leaders and educators around the world. Among his many accomplishments, Robinson is best known for his iconic 2006 TED Talk, "Do Schools Kill Creativity?"⁶ Watched more than 100 million times, it is the most-viewed talk in TED's history.⁷ Two decades later, the talk still holds up remarkably well, losing none of its original impact.

Watch even the first 60 seconds of Robinson's presentation, and you encounter a human-centered thought leader with an extraordinary ability to build rapport and trust. He takes the stage as a stranger to most people in the room, yet within his opening moments he has the audience firmly on his side. His warmth, humor, and humility are

not performance tricks. They are expressions of how he understands people. In that talk and throughout his later career, Robinson focused primarily on K–12 education. Yet his message for the business world is both relevant and unmistakable: Leaders create living ecosystems in which people either flourish or quietly shut down.

“There are lots of different styles of leadership,” Robinson once observed. “If you were just after efficiency, then you may need to go into command-and-control mode.”⁸ But he was adamant that this logic breaks down when the goal shifts to innovation or cultural transformation. In those moments, he argued, the leader’s job is not simply to tell people what to do. Leadership may include direction, but great leaders also create what he called a climate of possibility, an environment where people feel safe to experiment, challenge assumptions, and discover capabilities they didn’t know they possessed. Creating a climate of possibility may be Robinson’s most concise articulation of human-centered leadership.

When I interviewed Robinson years ago near his home in Los Angeles, he displayed the same warmth and authenticity millions have witnessed in his talks. I never had the opportunity to ask him about the leaders who shaped his early life, but in later public interviews he shared a telling example. As a teenager in the United Kingdom, Robinson was unexpectedly asked to direct a school play. “It had never crossed my mind that I could direct a play,” he recalled. But a high school teacher saw latent potential and nudged him toward the role. “Sometimes other people see in you things you don’t recognize in yourself,” Robinson reflected. “They can see a strength or ability that you didn’t know you had.”⁹

The play was a success, and decades later Robinson still spoke of the experience with gratitude.¹⁰ That long-ago teacher was demonstrating human-centered leadership in microcosm: taking a risk on another person, expanding what was possible, and quietly changing the trajectory of a career and a life.

Leading with Empathy

Interviewing executives for this chapter, I often asked them who comes to mind when they think of human-centered leaders. Over lunch at Café Borrone in the heart of Silicon Valley, I asked that question of Greg Warman, cofounder at Toronto-based ExperiencePoint, one of the world's leading experiential training companies.¹¹ I was pleasantly surprised when the first person he mentioned was a senior leader at my firm, IDEO.

Warman is very skilled at leading lively, interactive workshops, and one day several years ago, he was hosting an all-day event at IDEO's San Francisco office. There was just one problem. The printed handout materials for his workshop were nowhere to be found, and his clients would be showing up at any minute. Just then, an IDEO partner was passing by and noticed that something was up. "Are you OK, Greg?" the partner asked. "Not really," replied Warman, and explained his predicament.

With time running short, the IDEO partner urged Warman to get started while he searched for the missing materials. Warman took a leap of faith, starting a high-stakes workshop while still unsure how he would finish it. Luckily for all parties, the IDEO leader showed up in time, carrying the boxes of handouts. Warman said that, for him, that whole sequence of events epitomized human-centered leadership. "It wasn't only that he delivered the crucial materials just in time," Warman explained. "It was that he noticed my problem in the first place. He had enough empathy to sense that I needed help, and he cared enough to ask 'Are you OK?' He took time on a busy day to make my problem his own. The world needs more leaders like that."

Empowering Future Leaders

My last interview was with Emily Pilloton-Lam, an architectural designer, author, TED speaker, educator, and nonprofit founder. Pilloton-Lam gained a surge of public attention when she was the

focus of the documentary film *If You Build It*, about an innovative design program she created for high school students in rural North Carolina.¹² By then, however, she had already started a design firm, written her first book,¹³ appeared on late-night TV, and traveled 6,000 miles in her Airstream trailer to share her unique design exhibit with schools across America—all before she turned 30.¹⁴ Pilloton-Lam is now the founder and executive director at Girls Garage, a nonprofit design and construction program that helps students aged 9 to 18 build not only their skills but also their confidence.¹⁵

Pilloton-Lam emphasized the idea that leaders can be found everywhere, regardless of the organizational structure or the power dynamics. As she put it in a June 19, 2025, interview with me, “The people that I think of as leaders in my own life are pretty quiet about it. I don’t even know whether they self-identify as leaders.” If a leader is simply someone who helps make others successful, then there’s room for all of us to be leaders in our own way. At Girls Garage, Pilloton-Lam feels the

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need to pay attention to the tiny details of every individual while simultaneously crafting her vision for the whole organization. She values both granular and global views, knowing that the small details shape the big picture.

I’ve had the honor of working with many human-centered leaders in my life, but Pilloton-Lam takes her leadership one step further than any I have ever met. More than 1,000 students have gone through the Girls Garage program so far, and Pilloton-Lam feels connected to all of them. In her farewell address to graduating seniors, Pilloton-Lam tells students to “open your phone and make sure you have my number. If you need me, even at 2 am, *you call me*. No judgment.”

And they do call, on an incredible range of topics, including “Can I use you as a reference for my first apartment?” Sometimes her

alumni have big questions, like “Should I stick with my first job, even if my boss is a little toxic?” And sometimes the questions are much narrower, like “I’m at Home Depot. Can you remind me of the name of the screws we use?” Emily Pilloton-Lam patiently answers them all, taking human-centered leadership to a whole new level.

An Early Role Model for Business and Life

Like many kids in my generation, I looked up to my father as a primary role model for business leadership. My siblings and I got to witness his work ethic at home and to sense the importance he placed on doing a good job, but we never actually got to see him in action at Goodyear Aerospace because of security restrictions at his plant. Halfway through his career, however, the company magazine featured him in a profile that gave me the first glimpse of what he was like at work:

Getting James Bernard Kelley to talk about himself is not easy. One way or the other, Jim keeps shifting the talk toward the nearly 400 engineers, scientists, technicians, and administrators who make up his division. Ask him what he’s doing, and he tells you what they’ve done.¹⁶

The profile clearly suggested that he was a human-centered leader, and more confirmation followed decades later, at the end of his career. When Dad retired after 38 years with the company, Goodyear celebrated his achievements with a 20-page booklet titled “A Gifted Leader with the Human Touch.” The long tribute wrapped up with a description of his management style:

Jim also played another equally memorable leadership role during his years at Goodyear. Throughout it all, he maintained a remarkable human touch and was richly endowed

*with a concern, compassion, and caring for people. This role endeared him in the hearts of all his associates, and for this, he will always be treasured.*¹⁷

As my father's career ended and the heart of my own began, Goodyear's profile of him inspired me to seek my own path to human-centered leadership.

Leaders Who Matter

With every leap forward in AI, new possibilities emerge, sparking predictions of the future that range from utopian to apocalyptic. Talking with human-centered leaders has given me cause for optimism, pointing toward the possibility that we can use artificial intelligence to amplify the best of human capabilities. The leaders who will matter most tomorrow may be the ones who care most today: the ones who know how to read the room, who show up with empathy, who act with integrity, who unlock hidden talents in their people. If you can be an effective human-centered leader, you can thrive in the age of AI and help shape a brighter future.

Notes

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