

NG&A White Paper Series

Purpose in practice: Shaping the future of business

Humanising Business: Why Trust, Relationships and Purpose Are the Next Strategic Advantage

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Executive summary

The role of business in society is undergoing a profound shift. For decades, strategy has been framed around efficiency, scale, and financial return. But in today's volatile world, where geopolitics, polarisation and artificial intelligence are reshaping the landscape, leaders are rediscovering an old truth: Business is human.

This paper argues that humanising business is not a wellness perk or HR tactic. It is a strategic and governance upgrade. Drawing on global trends and lived experience, this paper explains how organisations that embrace human connections as a source of value are better equipped to navigate disruption, attract talent, and build resilience. It also demonstrates how NG&A's Single Organizing Idea (SOI®) framework provides leaders with the tools to embed human-centred purpose across strategy, governance and culture.

The most effective leaders of the next decade will not be those with the biggest balance sheets, but those who can unlock trust, empathy and long-term value in an era of uncertainty.

The case for humanising business

For much of the industrial era, business treated people as inputs — labour to be controlled, creativity to be commoditised, suppliers to be managed, and consumers to be persuaded. The world of work was organised as a process for converting human intelligence and effort into products and services to be sold. The rise of scientific management in the 20th century prioritised efficiency over empathy. Even as attention turned to the 'human' in the value chain, the lens remained extractive. Terms like 'discretionary effort' and 'human capital' framed people as a cost to be optimised and a return to be chased. Work itself was seen as a means to extract value rather than a medium for people to thrive, create, and connect. Extraction can scale; it rarely endures. Enduring value arises when work has meaning and purpose, that enables people to contribute, grow, and connect. History has shown time and again, that when work is stripped of meaning and human dignity, organisations and societies falter.

Today, the costs of dehumanised business models are stark. Burnout has become endemic, with the World Health Organization classifying it as an occupational phenomenon. In New Zealand, recent surveys show that nearly half of employees report high stress levels at work, with downstream impacts on productivity, health and retention.

The context is shifting. Political fragmentation, climate risk and AI-driven disruption mean the "business as usual" model is increasingly brittle. What endures are trust, relationships and a clear sense of shared purpose.

Humanising business is the practice of building organisations where value creation and human flourishing move together. It means shaping the context of work and honouring the context of humanness, so people can contribute, grow, and connect. It treats value as inseparable from how work is experienced, paying equal attention to the systems, incentives, and rhythms of work and to what makes us human. Enduring performance follows from that alignment.

The goal isn't to blunt capitalism but to make it work better. It is about strengthening performance by designing for connection, trust and meaning. Humanising business creates capacity for rapid flow of knowledge and innovation that will drive productivity today and resilience when conditions change. The result: organisation executes faster in steady state and bends without breaking in a crisis.

From wellness perks to strategic imperative

Too often, organisations respond to employee pressure with surface-level solutions: A mindfulness app, a yoga class, or a fruit basket in the break room. While these can have symbolic value, they rarely address systemic issues of trust, inclusion and governance.

Humanising business requires more. It is not about adding wellness programmes onto a toxic system; it is about rethinking the system itself. Governance, leadership and strategy must reflect the reality that organisations are communities of people bound by shared goals and values.

This shift is already underway. A Deloitte global survey found that 79% of executives see fostering a sense of belonging as critical to organisational success. Companies that invest in meaningful engagement — through fair treatment, transparent communication and authentic leadership — outperform peers on retention, innovation and financial return.

The message is clear: Wellbeing is not an HR issue. It is a boardroom issue. Humanising business is a governance upgrade.

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Trust as the currency of the future

Trust is now the defining metric of organisational success. Edelman's Trust Barometer shows that business is more trusted than government or media in most countries, but also more vulnerable to reputational shocks. In a hyper-connected world, where a

single breach of trust can erase years of goodwill, leaders cannot afford to treat relationships as secondary.

Humanising business elevates trust to its rightful place as a strategic asset. Trust cannot be mandated; it is earned through consistency, fairness and care. This means listening to employees, customers and communities — and responding with transparency and accountability.

Trust is the invisible contract that underpins every organisation. When people feel trusted, they give more. When trust is broken, no amount of financial incentive can repair the damage.

Embedding trust in governance structures—through clearer accountability, stakeholder engagement, and transparent reporting—is essential to sustaining value.

Leadership for a polarised world

The geopolitical landscape is increasingly fractured. Rising nationalism, misinformation, and cultural polarisation are testing leaders in unprecedented ways. At the same time, AI and automation are reshaping jobs, amplifying fears of obsolescence.

In this context, the leaders who succeed will be those who can unite rather than divide. They will prioritise empathy alongside performance and build cultures that value inclusion and diversity of thought.

Introverts and extroverts alike must be able to thrive. Too many organisations still reward the loudest voices, sidelining quieter contributors whose perspectives may be critical. Humanising business means redesigning leadership systems to accommodate different styles, ensuring that decision-making reflects the full spectrum of talent.

This is not about lowering standards, it is about raising them. In a polarised world, leaders need the courage to model vulnerability, admit what they do not know and stand firm on values that transcend short-term pressures.

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The AI era: Why human matters more

Artificial intelligence promises efficiency gains, but it also raises profound questions about identity, fairness and human agency. As algorithms take on more decision-

making, the uniquely human capacities — judgment, empathy, creativity — become even more valuable.

Humanising business in the AI era means resisting the temptation to reduce people to data points. Instead, leaders must design systems where technology amplifies human strengths rather than replacing them.

This requires governance frameworks that ensure AI is used ethically and transparently. Boards need to ask: Does this technology enhance human wellbeing and organisational purpose, or does it erode trust and dignity? The SOI® framework provides a lens for answering these questions by aligning technology choices with long-term values.

The irony of AI is that it makes human qualities more, not less, important.

Purpose as the organising principle

Purpose is the bridge between human-centred leadership and long-term value. When organisations clearly articulate why they exist, they provide a foundation for trust, belonging, and resilience.

The Single Organizing Idea (SOI®) framework offers leaders a practical way to embed this purpose. Developed by NG&A over two decades, SOI aligns leadership intent with day-to-day behaviour across governance, operations, culture and brand. It turns purpose from aspiration into system.

Organisations that adopt SOI move beyond superficial statements. They build cultures where employees understand how their work contributes to something bigger; where boards evaluate performance not just on profit, but on alignment with values; and where customers see evidence of purpose in consistent action.

Humanising business requires this kind of discipline. Purpose is not a slogan. It is the organising principle for resilience.

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From human-centred to human-impact

The true test of humanising business is impact. Do employees feel valued? Do customers trust the brand? Do communities see the organisation as a partner in progress?

Humanising business is not about sentiment. It is about performance. When trust and purpose are embedded, organisations see measurable gains in innovation, loyalty, and resilience.

Examples abound:

- Global companies like Unilever, which has made sustainability and social impact central to its strategy, consistently outperform peers in brand trust.
- Closer to home, Fisher & Paykel Healthcare's purpose — improving care and outcomes — guides its innovation and global partnerships, reinforcing its long-term success.

These examples show that human impact translates into strategic advantage.

Practical takeaways

- Humanising business is not optional — it is the next frontier of strategy and governance.
- Trust is the most valuable currency leaders can build.
- Leaders must embrace vulnerability, empathy, and inclusion in a polarised world.
- In the AI era, human qualities are a competitive advantage.
- Purpose, operationalised through SOI®, is the system that embeds human impact into performance.
- Boards and leaders who fail to humanise risk irrelevance in a world demanding authenticity and care.

Applied SOI® insight

The SOI® framework helps leaders:

- Clarify the organisation's human-centred purpose beyond profit.
- Align governance structures with trust, wellbeing and long-term value.
- Embed empathy and inclusion into culture and leadership development.
- Ensure technology decisions (like AI) serve people and purpose.
- Measure performance in terms of human impact as well as financial return.

About the authors

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Neil Gaught & Associates (NG&A) is a strategic consultancy that helps organisations align purpose with performance. Our proprietary SOI® framework enables leaders to embed purpose at the heart of strategy, governance and operations.

NG&A { *Empowering Purpose Driven Progress* }
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