



# Humanity

Reinforcing its role  
and meaning in business



# What we heard

People are thinking more critically about power and systems that serve the few over the many. Racial and gender bias, perceptions that companies value profit over people and slow response to environmental issues are all seen as structural problems, baked into the way we do business and run our companies today.

What stood out was how strongly workers have become less tolerant of cosmetic approaches to these challenges in the organizations they work with and for.

We observed people thinking quite deeply about the cultural and economic biases upon which our current organizational systems have been built.

## At the heart of this are three ideas:



Improving equity, access and opportunity and how far we have to go



Increasing transparency and ethical conduct (not just the “ethical practices” described on companies’ websites)



Organizing and being selective about where and under what conditions people are willing to work



# Systems awareness

People are seeing organizations as a system, not just a set of arbitrary rules — and that is both interesting and remarkable. Employees are recognizing their place within the system and often don't like it. Whether it's because they're stuck in a career cul de sac or being asked to perpetuate unethical practices or inequity, employees are reevaluating the role of work in their lives and whether their employer operates with the same values they do.

As people are becoming increasingly aware of the deeper structures in society that produce economic inequities, racial injustice, environmental degradation, technological bias, educational, and health-related segregations, they are deeply questioning their individual place within these established systems.



# Ana

We are seeing beyond our personal experiences as workers. And we've set our sights on the societal structures that intentionally limit the well-being of individuals — specifically groups of people — and the planet. What used to be the province of activism is now just a regular day on the job.

Ana is a practicing artist who has experienced the art world's system and corrosive structures that include well-funded artists who "pay to play," while others are excluded by fees. For some, art is a long-term investment vehicle, making it a commodity instead of art. The "who's who" lists and the politics of patronage and galleries are more about ego than art.

As a young child, Ana always knew, "**I am an artist.**" Art as a business is a different system.

Today, she experiments with new ways of "being an artist" that enable her to be less tethered to the traditional art market. Whether as a dance instructor, a curator, an art therapist or an artists' retreat host, Ana keeps her work personally rewarding, human-centered and, most importantly, in line with her sense of community and personal ethics. Her moral compass shows her where and how she will show up as an artist. She doesn't see this changing. If anything, Ana believes her ethical commitments will deepen.

" The systems are working how they're supposed to. It's just not in your benefit but in the benefit of the person who created it. And they're functioning right on track ... I accept it as a reality of a system that I'm a part of in different ways. And it's also why I invest my time and energy in efforts in the arts outside of it."

# Sharon

Sharon feels the sting of being a person with no assets and of trying to move from worker to business owner.

Sharon and her husband have built careers in fine dining. Both are well recognized in their areas of expertise. Now in their mid-30s, they are ready to run their own small business. Instead of focusing on fine dining, they intend to create a café where local people and especially fellow restaurant workers can gather to enjoy conversation and community over exceptional “down-to-earth” food. Their vision is a place where those who serve can relax and be served.

Raising the funds to start the business hasn't been easy. Both have taken multiple jobs to save the money required. They each grew up in households where money was scarce, and there is no safety net. Instead, they are relying on their own ingenuity, talent and luck.

Sharon described her experience of applying for a small-business loan. When asked about the value of her home, she said she was a renter. The bank replied somewhat condescendingly, “You don't own your own home?” They were denied despite having excellent credit.

It was a humiliating experience that served to underscore the anger that Sharon already felt about feeling excluded from opportunities because “we were born poor, so we are going to be poor.” She and her husband eventually did get funding from an outside investor to open their business.

**“People that work jobs like my husband and I work and like my parents worked, this life kind of isn't for us. We've struggled really, really, really hard to get this restaurant open. We are barely making it by the skin of our teeth. It's really sad that it's about how much money you have. And it's not about how much skill you have.”**

As a Michelin-rated pastry chef whose parents didn't have wealth to “hand down,” Sharon's lived experiences call into question the “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” origin story of the American Dream. As an individual, Sharon has pulled herself up as a chef. But she told us it takes far more than personal fortitude and grit to get ahead.

Nonetheless, people are actively trying to create opportunities for themselves on their own terms and tied to their personal systems of values.

# Marnie

Marnie occupies an unusual position within her organization. She's considered a "master of her craft" and oversees a large global business unit. Despite her leadership and value to the organization, she still does not have a recognized or "official" place at the table. This is not what she thought her experience of climbing the ladder would look or feel like.

Marnie is stuck, but not because she hasn't progressed in her career. She has. She's "stuck" because, as a woman, she feels her voice is less valued.

She's dumbfounded that, although she has done everything right and worked extremely hard to get to where she is, it will never be enough. Marnie wonders how it is that she can be so valued, "so amazing" and celebrated and still not be "in the room where it happens." That room continues to be filled with men.

Marnie is disillusioned by the illusory promise that hard work, skills and talent are what matter. Instead, it's a Y chromosome.

Marnie has turned her focus toward imagining a work future where she is able to build her own table.

“ Even though I feel like I'm getting powerful or important, a bunch of men are still making all the decisions. It's been sort of an exercise in resentment [and] anger.”



# Lara

Many workers, especially marginalized groups, have always had an increased awareness of the social dynamics behind lack of access. Now, they are also thinking more carefully about the moral and ethical consequences of economic systems they participate in.

There are inequities that people can't tolerate, either because it's happening to them or because the disparities seem to be so embedded and pervasive.

Lara and people like her understand they are part of much larger social and economic systems that perpetuate practices that run counter to their personal morals. This realization can be overwhelming.

One way that people are counteracting this "crisis of conscience" is by speaking up more frequently and with a louder voice.

Lara does this by carefully choosing the clients she works with. She won't work with companies or leaders if she feels they demonstrate disregard for people's welfare and the environment. Lara seeks companies that are trying to do better and have visible track records supporting these efforts with real action.

She also takes it as a personal responsibility to speak up when she feels something isn't right. In this way, her "words and deeds" become her ongoing contribution to enacting better systems with more humane outcomes.

"I get assigned something seemingly mild. But if you peel back layers of enough companies, you know, everybody's supply chain and every business is exploitative of some kind of labor and, you know, it's all rough.

And so, the lesser of two evils, I guess, is where I end up landing. But from an ethics standpoint, I'm very clear on how I will treat people. And I'm very clear that, if people are not treating people well, I will call them out one-on-one. I won't do it in public, but I will go to them, and I will feel comfortable with that."

“ And there are folks who strongly believe the American Dream and say they have the same opportunity as Elon Musk has. They say, if they both started at the same time, they could have been where Elon is now. Elon just worked harder or got lucky. But it's not true. If you look at Elon's background, he comes from generational wealth. He had a lot of money, [while] immigrants come here with nothing.

[This is] a comparison I turn to when talking about the American Dream and why it bothers me. [But] as a very real comparison and a very real example, I see massive holes.”

**Lian, 22**





# Moral burnout

As a term, moral injury has historically been applied to medical clinicians and military personnel. But it describes what many are feeling about work.

Unlike burnout, where the “problem” is thought to reside within the individual, moral injury results from structural pressures that force people to do things contrary to their value system and moral code of conduct. For health care workers, environmental pressures may run contrary to the Hippocratic Oath to, “First, do no harm.”

In high-stakes work situations where people are expected to “toe the line,” even if this means doing something against their moral grain, putting profit, policy or process over people can be morally injurious.

## Doctor J.

Dr. J treated patients throughout the height of the pandemic. As an OBGYN, he confronted a great deal of vaccination pushback. It was difficult for him to come to terms with the fact that, while he believes people have the right to make their own choices, he saw these very same people back in the hospital struggling with critical illness.

Although Dr. J has learned to compartmentalize, he says the practice of medicine is starting to change. New physicians are working to process and address the ethical dilemmas they face.

“You’re always gonna run into unpredictable, emotionally stricken, emotionally disturbing [situations]. It’s always been stressed to the trainees or new doctors to make sure you remember the compartment. You have a job to do. Stay objective. Stay focused. Keep carrying on.

I think, especially in the recent past five years or so, things are changing. I think the newer generation of upcoming doctors and trainees are realizing things are gonna be different and we demand things to be different, and changed.”

For Dr. J, a greater emphasis on ethics, support from colleagues and his own mindfulness practice have helped him find ways to better align his ethics to the field of medicine.

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**Doctor J.**



# Asa

Asa is a real estate investor who is leveraging his expertise to help others. He is also rewriting the script about work, himself and how he wants to show up in the world.

Asa has always been interested in finding solutions to thorny challenges. He used to do this through his work in industrial design. He became concerned about how the things he was designing were affecting the environment and decided he could not continue in good conscience.

Today, he uses his problem-solving skills and collaborative energy to design ways to help historically marginalized communities find paths to home ownership and neighborhood renaissance.

**"Gentrification is really about making a community wealthier ... but because of the barriers that have existed ... that population moved out. The only model of gentrification that we've seen in a lot of cities is displacement."**

By turning his energy to helping effect positive change in his community and applying what he has learned to challenges that he finds professionally gratifying and morally compelling, Asa feels a greater sense of attunement between his identity and his work. While his work remains design-oriented, it's now about designing approaches that do more good than harm.

**"** People who are marginalized are at the receiving end of a lot of [unfairness]. You just can't ignore that.

People who are marginalized and at the receiving end of all of that can now be louder."

# Lara

Lara is also focused on recalibrating her own moral compass. She does this, in part, by working with clients who operate with a system of values she can get behind.

Caught up in the frenetic energy of the media industry, Lara had lost touch with parts of herself she holds dear. Too busy to even “know what she was missing,” she eventually hit a wall and was forced to step back and rethink.

It was difficult. Lara loved being a company co-founder. She loved the energy, the creativity, the creating a path and being recognized in her industry. Even with all that love, she realized she was overworked, undervalued and shut off from other aspects of her life. This self-knowledge led her to chart a different course.

Long-term exposure to a toxic co-founder, pandemic pause, life stage and a renewed commitment to broader cultural concerns were all a part of Lara’s shift to working for herself.

Today, she works with people who can benefit from what she has learned and who are in positions to effect the positive changes that are more aligned with the world they wish to live in. She now coaches leaders on how to rethink policies to address inequities in pay and organizational culture. Respectfully acknowledging the diverse circumstances of people’s lives is an area of practice she continues to deepen.

In the past, certain types of behaviors, expectations and demands would go unchecked. Today, Laura has no qualms about calling out unethical practices and encourages those she coaches to do the same.

“ I have much tighter filters now about the kind of people I will put up with or allow to be a part of my life or network. And similarly, when I look for a job, I’m very deliberate.”

# Disillusionment

Just because you do excellent work, go above and beyond and are willing to take on new challenges doesn't mean you will be recognized or rewarded for it.

For those of us who were taught "hard work pays off," it's deeply disillusioning to discover that this may not always be true.



# Athena

Athena was excited for her new job with the janitorial team at a hip technology start-up focused on providing a “third space” for the growing remote workforce.

The company got great press when it opened its first New York City co-working locations. When she arrived for her first day of work, the building was still under construction.

From the start, Athena found ways to improve processes. She worked hard, took initiative, wanted to grow. As she applied for roles with increasing responsibility and higher pay, her manager supported her efforts and said he was planning to promote her. But one day, she arrived for work, and he was gone. No promotion.

Her next manager was new to the company and did not know how valuable Athena was, so they did not champion her development and progress. The manager after that realized Athena was a great worker and didn't want to lose her. Still, no promotion. Finally, after more managers and many applications, Athena was promoted to the mailroom. Soon, she was the building receptionist and “daily community activities” organizer.

Then came the pandemic. The co-working spaces were empty. While most of the administrative staff shifted to remote work, Athena was an “essential worker” and had to work onsite. Meanwhile, her five kids were home doing remote learning. Her husband worked nights and could help with the kids on most days, especially if Athena was able to work remotely part of the time. Athena's co-workers said they could cover for her. So, Athena asked to either work a four-day week or work remotely the fifth day. The company denied her request.

Athena was there from day one. She started as a custodian and later took a desk job. Athena believed in hard work and had worked hard. She was always there for the company but felt that management wasn't there for her when she needed them most. The fact that her managers did not care enough to give her one day off was deeply disillusioning.

# Hierarchy flattening

People are feeling more empowered to assert their value as individuals outside of traditional hierarchy. We heard that some hierarchies have come to feel increasingly arbitrary.

Increasingly, people are questioning the importance of hierarchies as we move toward organizations where equality, fairness and belonging are valued. People are looking for meaning and to be rewarded based on their contributions rather than their titles.

# Asa


Asa continues to learn more about blockchain-enabled platforms called distributed autonomous organizations (DAOs). He is contributing his design skills to build out parts of his chosen collective.

One of the aspects of blockchain-enabled organizations that Asa appreciates is transparency in governance. Some blockchain groups operate under a one-token, one-vote policy, while others have “weighting algorithms” that allocate each person’s share of say. Regardless, all decisions made are transparent to all members of the organization.

People like Asa want to devote their energy to more egalitarian endeavors. They are looking for transparency, direct community involvement and more balanced sharing of power and profits. Asa is hopeful that more equitable distribution mechanisms will address the inequities often found in traditional hierarchical organizations.

The very existence of these emergent, currently niche forms of organizing based on blockchain suggests an appetite for leaderless collectives where the decentralization of power is written into the code.


“ I think that what’s different is that there’s a lot more transparency. When you vote on something, you can see all the different wallet addresses that voted either for or against, and you could click on the wallet address, and you can see all the transactions that person has ever made. Everything happens on the blockchain.”



Several executives we spoke with voiced a common question about whether hierarchies are still useful, given the changes in how and where many of us work. Hierarchies are often justified with the “organizing principles” of efficiency, distribution of resources and chain of command. Leaders make decisions, while everyone else makes what’s needed for the product or service. Often, leaders could not do the actual work of their organizations — even if they know what the work is and how it’s done.

Leaders who are unwilling to “get their hands dirty” risk losing the trust and respect of those who do. Worse are the leaders who pass work along to others, only to take credit for the effort later. Company leaders who allow this type of behavior to go unchecked are perpetuating a workplace culture where people learn to “hoard” their ideas, “sell out to move up” and covet their work product for fear of these being “reappropriated” by what Adam Grant describes as “takers.”

This approach ignores both the complexity and collaborative nature of most work and the care, labor and creativity of the people who give.



“ We needed to prepare something for a meeting that was coming up the next day. I’m like, ‘Okay, I’ll do it.’ And I got a note from one of the strategists saying, ‘Wow, I’ve never worked with a managing director who makes slides.’ It never occurred to me to delegate that to someone for me. If I’m not in the work, I don’t even know how to function.”

**Marnie**

# Structuring empathy

Workplaces that are going to be most successful are those that design with people, not just for people. They demonstrate empathy and awareness of what it's like to do the work and show concern for the people doing it. What does it take to affirm the role of empathy in business and in the workplace?

In some cases, it means building in empathy from the ground up, not as a plug-in or an overlay. It means meeting individuals where they are and acknowledging them as multidimensional. It means building freshly minted structures that account for the daily realities of workers, the planet and the diversity of experiences that comprise our shared humanity.

It calls for a new form of leadership seeking to humanize business and push past conventional lip service. But many organizations don't really know how to metabolize this "elusive human stuff." And it's difficult to measure.






**“Empathy absolutely belongs in business. And when you see that business is stressful or terrible, or it goes real sour or is doing unethical things, it’s because that empathy’s lost.”**

**—Ally**





Empathy is a “hot topic.” It shows up in corporate communications and marketing materials. It’s the focus of trainings and company mission statements. But what does it mean? Or, to be more precise, what does it do?

As we explored this topic, people described what empathy wasn’t as much as what it was. Like so many “loose” concepts, our understanding comes from the contrast between the two.

We heard about attempts to measure and quantify empathy. We learned about empathy training sessions. And we heard how these initiatives can register as another example of leaders’ “tone deafness.”

One example was a “collective wellness” exercise for physicians, who were required to go to an orchard and harvest apples.

The physicians, like many of the others we spoke to, were already feeling overworked, sleep-deprived and hard-pressed to find any space for self care.

The larger question for our resident physician in his last year of training became: How do you define what wellness looks like for others when wellness is likely to be quite personal and self-defined? The hospital never considered the true needs of its residents and physicians. Instead, they made people pick apples. They never considered that the time might be better spent sleeping or with family. One of the doctors expressed that it felt not only tone-deaf but also mean. It was certainly not empathetic.

**“We’ll have Friday lectures where we’ll have required attendance to listen to a one-hour lecture about how to feel well and about what stress is, after a whole week of working a hundred hours, on a Friday afternoon at 4 p.m. Can you believe that? At that time, my ‘wellness’ is turning off everything, maybe taking a nap. I will feel so, so much better after an hour of that, than me listening to a lecture about feeling stressed.”**

Dr. J said that the days when training to be a doctor meant subjecting yourself to the unreasonable demands and sometimes abusive treatment of your attending physician instructor are waning. He attributes this change to the current generation of resident trainees, who are more willing to speak out against top-down abuses of power. He believes the opportunity to be able to share stories and vent frustrations on social media has accelerated the slow dismantling of this long-standing, top-down power dynamic.

Inherited practices along with the rituals and symbols that reinforce them are so taken for granted that they are unremarkable. They seem normal, even when they are harmful to everyone involved. Yet hierarchy and power structures also often require people not to speak out because of fear of retaliation or public ridicule.

Yet as we heard from Dr. J, once people start talking and begin to share their common experiences, it emboldens others to contribute their voice. In this way, people are coming together to call attention to their shared experiences and what needs to change.

“ Medicine is a very toxic internal society. So, most of the public do not know this. But in the hospital, clinics, and in general, medicine has been very toxic, especially from the apprenticeship side. So, the teacher-to-the-learner relationship is oftentimes very toxic.

It's kinda like, 'This is how I learned it. This is how I was treated' ... I think, when we hit this generation, at one point, we said that enough is enough.”

**Dr. J, OBGYN**

# Ellis

Ellis, who identifies as gender nonconforming, shared how they felt bound to a “cookie-cutter” identity that left no allowance for a more authentic expression of self. It was disillusioning and deeply corrosive to the trust in their workplace’s stated values of inclusion.

They described editing a lengthy monograph and being asked to write a biography to include in a publication. When they used “they” as a pronoun to describe themselves, the employer insisted they pick an identity — male or female — to make it easier. Easier for whom? Not Ellis. Imagine being male and your employer asking you to use “she” pronouns in a biography for a professional publication.

This incident stuck with Ellis, who is now more committed than ever to work in gender-affirming environments where empathy is an unwavering core principle. They just want to work in an environment where they feel they belong and can be themselves. Ellis is currently pursuing a master’s degree in disability studies, in part, to help rewrite inaccurate and incomplete paradigms of normal.

# Ally

During our conversation, Ally described her approach to creating an “empathy-first” culture in the company she co-founded. Her approach is based on building in the structures of empathy right from the start. It begins with all the choices she makes about how the company is managed day-to-day.

For example, if an employee experiences a personal tragedy or illness and needs to take time off to heal, they are encouraged to take as much time as they need. For Ally, it all comes down to building teams that operate out of trust and care before all else.

**“A company’s leadership, its true mettle, shows at times of challenge where every single decision is an opportunity to show your values.”**

For Ally, it’s about establishing policies premised on mutual trust and empathy. She operates from a place of knowing she has hired the right people and that, when things happen — as they do — they will make the right decisions for themselves and for the team.

Ally also provides a generous wellness stipend that people can use as they see fit. What wellness “feels” like is different for different people. Ally knows forced wellness doesn’t help. So, she let’s each person figure out how best to use the stipend.

“ We take an individualistic approach to all our benefits. We want to support people for whatever they need in that moment. We don’t have policies; we have hearts.”



# Insights to consider

People are trying to make sense of their place within larger social structures and are examining the structures themselves. This, in turn, invites new interpretations of our existing models of work, jobs, companies, power and leadership.

Those we spoke with are taking a deeper look at the systems that are the foundations of the work they do. They are seeking to understand what does harm and what has the capacity to lift people up. It's a renewed effort to reimagine the American Dream with a broader view of how our economic systems affect our days, lives, relationships, organizations and planet.

Listening deeply and reflecting on our own thoughts and feelings about work and identity and how the circumstances of our lives have shaped our understanding is a great starting point. Conversations with people different from ourselves open new ways of thinking and offer new perspectives. People want to feel truly heard.

Systems do exactly what they are designed to do. Most businesses are systems designed to make money, preferably profits.

Computers are great at many things. But they don't have the capacity to consider the broader picture, understand emotions or care about others.

# Conversation starters



## Systems

- What systems do we have, and what are they designed to do?
- Are our systems delivering the outcomes we want?
- Are there outcomes we want that have no systems or incentives to do them?
- What do we measure to determine progress or success? Are our measurements based on what we want or what is easy to measure?
- Do our KPIs reflect what matters to the work, the business and the humans performing the work?

## Ethics

- Do we evaluate whether we are doing the right thing as a required part of our decision making? Do we understand what could possibly go wrong and how that would affect people?
- Have we asked for diverse perspectives to see beyond our own world view and identify issues and questions we might not have considered?

## Disillusionment

- Do our words and our actions match?
- Are we more concerned about compliance and checking boxes than a culture where people are seen, heard and valued?
- What risks are we managing for, and are these concerns more important than helping our people thrive?

## Hierarchy

- Why are we organized the way we are?
- Is it working for our purpose? Is that still the purpose we want?
- How does power work in our organization? Is it protected or used to benefit others and the work?
- Do our leaders understand the work, and do they ask people to do things they are not willing to do themselves?

## Empathy

- What roles do compassion, care and empathy play in our decisions?
- Do we consider the interests of the people affected and whether the decisions will cause harm?