



The Conundrum of Humanity

The word humanity is from the Latin “humanitas” - human nature. Our natural human tendencies, emotions, and social behaviours, even our kindness. However, the human instinct to compete for status, promotion and favour quietly shapes our behaviours towards others.

What do we mean by this title?

In hierarchical workplaces, "humanity" becomes an almost unseen toxin of organisational culture and relationships. When rigid, top-down structures prioritise command- and-control over human connection, this leads to fear-based cultures in which psychological safety is largely absent.

Stifled communication becomes a source of internal stress, job dissatisfaction, and inherent insecurity, in which employees become "their own worst enemy" by focusing on pleasing authority and even peers rather than performing to deliver the best possible outcomes for the business and their clients/customers. This is just one of the drivers that cause the best people to leave and find the same job in an organisation with a better work culture.



Why "Humanity" Becomes the Enemy:

These hierarchical structures often ignore the human need for autonomy, respect, and open communication, replacing them with a strict, often irrational, adherence to seniority that hampers innovation and well-being.

- **Insecurity and Power Plays:** Leaders often struggle with insecurity, resort to intimidation, and treat employees as pawns to protect their own standing rather than empowering, listening and trusting people.
- **Fear of Speaking Out:** Hierarchies create a culture of silence, where employees fear being penalised for honesty, leading to poor communication and a lack of transparency.
- **The "Command-and-Control" Trap:** Old-fashioned, "Public School" traditions still present in some UK firms can lead to a culture of disrespected, overworked staff, treating employees like teenagers rather than responsible adults.
- **Over-Reliance on Policies:** Instead of nurturing autonomy, rigid policies and micromanagement create a culture that suppresses the human need to be valued and trusted.
- **The Psychological Toll:** People often feel powerless and afraid within traditional hierarchies, which stifles productivity and engagement, turning employees into passive participants and possibly even conscious saboteurs!
- **Lack of psychological safety:** Due to the strict hierarchical structure of most organisations and the political shenanigans that play out in them, psychological safety is rare, even though many senior leaders and managers may say it is present.



The working culture:

Mac believes that there are three types of working cultures in all organisations, which are:

- a. **The presented culture:** where the organisation proudly describes the culture everyone exhibits. This is almost the marketing advert of the organisation's culture.
- b. **Experienced culture:** the actual lived experience people feel from working there (please note that this can differ significantly between and even within teams).
- c. **Localised culture:** this can be completely different between two teams situated right beside one another.



Why these matters

Culture is not what we put in the staff handbook, on the walls or on the company website. It is the sum of the small, daily decisions people make about what is rewarded, what is punished, and what is quietly tolerated. In great organisations with great cultures, where everyone is bought into the mission, people are the architects of that culture. A healthy culture is not a “nice-to-have”; it is the operating system on which everything else runs. It is supported and defended by the organisational values and their underpinning behaviours, which should be in every job description. We don't just pay people to do a great job, we pay them to adhere to, follow and demonstrate our values.

And yet, with the best intentions in the world, we can end up undermining all of the above. Not because anyone is acting with bad intent (although some sometimes are), but because hierarchy, status and the scramble for promotion or favour activate something very old and very human in us. Left unmanaged, our humanity becomes the accidental erosion of the culture we say we all want.



The accidental enemy: hierarchy, status and favour

Human beings are wired to read hierarchy. We notice who is in, who is out, who is rising, who is to be feared, trusted or not trusted. We discover who is being listened to and who is being overlooked. In moderation, this awareness is useful; in excess, it distorts behaviour in predictable ways:

- People begin to manage upwards rather than outwards, polishing and promoting what their boss wants to see while hiding what they know will upset or anger them.
- Information becomes currency. It is hoarded, leaked or spun rather than shared, because sharing it reduces personal advantage and may leave them open to disapproval or worse yet, reprisal for saying what needed to be said; their honesty. (Go figure)!
- Disagreement gets framed as disloyalty. Psychological safety slowly and quietly evaporates, and people stop saying the difficult, useful things that could help us, our team, colleagues, organisation, customers and clients.
- Credit is claimed; blame is allocated. Successes acquire many parents, while problems become orphaned or passed to those who feel unable to speak out.



None of this requires bad people. It requires only people who have learned not to speak out, to hide bad news, and at all costs, protect themselves. This is why managers and leaders carry a disproportionate share of responsibility for culture: small signals from us are amplified into big patterns in the team. Train your managers and your leaders well, as people and their behaviours make or break cultures.

Why “Belief creates reality” is more than a saying

Mac argues in his handout “Belief Creates Reality” that our beliefs are not just private opinions sitting harmlessly in our heads. They shape what we notice, how we behave, the outcomes we experience, and how we interpret the communications we work with every day. In their words, belief is “that powerful” that it can become a person’s self-fulfilling prophecy.



"If someone believes they are being treated unfairly, even when they are not, or that everyone is ganging up against them when they are not, they are far more likely to exhibit the malicious behaviours of a workplace saboteur. Whereas if someone strongly believes they can achieve a particular goal, they are trusted, empowered and listened to, they are far more likely to take actions that align with that belief and, in turn, increase the likelihood of success."

Plug this thinking into the hierarchy problem, and the picture sharpens. A team member who believes promotion is allocated by favouritism will start collecting evidence to support that belief, withdraw discretionary effort, and may slip into the behaviours of a workplace saboteur.

A colleague carrying imposter syndrome will underbid for stretch work and confirm to themselves that they were never really up to it. A manager who quietly believes a particular team member “isn’t leadership material” will set a higher bar, give less airtime, and produce exactly the underperformance from them that they expected. The belief becomes the reality.

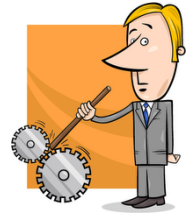
Pygmalion and Galatea: Mac’s writing names the mechanism that turns this around. Managers and leaders, he argues, must understand and deliberately employ the Pygmalion effect; the way our expectations of others raise or lower their performance and, in doing so, produce the Galatea effect, where colleagues come to believe in their own ability and act accordingly.

In practical terms, for a team lead, this looks like:

- Audit your private commentary with yourself. The story you tell yourself about each direct report. Is this thinking leaking into your behaviour? Intended or not?
- Give opportunities, stretch tasks, and visibility at meetings; give the vote of your confidence to people you may have underrated, not only to those you usually delegate.
- Praise the behaviour you want to see repeated, in public; give corrective feedback in private and quickly. Both are acts of culture-setting.
- Make the criteria for promotion, pay and progression explicit and boring. Mystery is the soil in which beliefs about favouritism grow.
- Name the dynamic out loud. Saying “I want to make sure we’re not just hearing the loudest voice” gives the team permission to do the same.

Key things to watch for in your team

1. **Imposter syndrome:** Where capable people convince themselves they are frauds, then behave like frauds-in-waiting: avoiding visibility, over-preparing, declining opportunities. Counter it by naming strengths specifically, normalising not-knowing, and separating the person from the performance.
2. **Workplace saboteurs:** Where someone has come to believe the system is rigged against them, behaviour can curdle into gossip, withdrawal, or quiet obstruction. Mac's writing makes it clear that this needs to be managed quickly and correctly, and not ignored, not over-punished, but addressed directly and supportively, with curiosity about the belief underlying the behaviour.
3. **Favour economies:** Watch for the early signs: the same names in the same rooms, decisions made in corridors, humour that excludes. These are not personality issues; they are structural signals that the hierarchy is being read as a market for favour rather than a structure for service.
4. **Conscious & unconscious saboteurs:** A workplace saboteur is an individual who intentionally, and often maliciously, disrupts or undermines operations, productivity, or morale in the workplace. They engage in harmful activities to cause damage, chaos, or personal gain at the expense of the organisation or their colleagues. This is often done because they believe they have been treated badly.



The unconscious saboteur is often a person who, through how they interact with others, work, communicate, and behave, causes disruptions, delays, or even breakdowns in trust and relationships. This is often caused by a lack of training in effectively and thoughtfully managing and leading others. They are ignorant of the thinking behind the Moccasin Approach. Their intent is often good, but their skills, knowledge and understanding are lacking.

The Moccasin Approach/EI as the antidote

Mac underpins all of his thinking with emotional intelligence, and so should we. EI is what allows a manager to notice their own irritation before it becomes a cold email, to hear a difficult piece of feedback as data rather than an attack, and to choose the behaviour that builds psychological safety rather than the one that protects ego.



In a working world where people are often given more than the job description asks, EI from leadership is not so much a soft skill as what keeps the mission funded by the goodwill of staff and volunteers. The term "people power" has never been truer.

