

THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE

Aligning Talent, Culture, and Leadership to Accelerate Business Performance in a World of Disruption and AI

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Executive Summary

Organizations are navigating a period of extraordinary transformation. Artificial intelligence is reshaping how work gets done, roles are evolving, skill requirements are changing, and expectations for speed and productivity continue to rise. At the same time, leaders are navigating economic uncertainty, multigenerational workforces, shifting employee expectations, new operating models, and near-constant change.

Yet at precisely the moment organizations need people to adapt, innovate, collaborate, and perform differently, many are confronting a growing human challenge.

Global employee engagement remains low. Gallup reports that only 21% of employees worldwide were engaged in 2024, with declining engagement costing the global economy an estimated \$438 billion in lost productivity. Trust presents another challenge. PwC found that while 86% of executives believe employees highly trust their companies, only 67% of employees report that level of trust themselves. And according to Deloitte, approximately seven in ten workers say a stronger organizational commitment to human sustainability would improve their engagement, productivity, desire to stay, and trust in leadership.

Meanwhile, the capabilities organizations need are changing rapidly. The World Economic Forum estimates that nearly 40% of skills required on the job will change by 2030, with 63% of employers already identifying skills gaps as a primary barrier to business transformation. While AI and technology skills are growing in importance, so are distinctly human capabilities including creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, agility, and leadership.

These are more than workforce statistics. They represent business risk.

A strategy cannot execute itself. Technology cannot create adoption on its own. Transformation cannot succeed without people changing how they think, work, collaborate, decide, and lead.

This creates what I refer to as the **Human Readiness Gap**: the distance between the speed at which an organization is transforming and the readiness of its talent, culture, and leadership to successfully execute within that transformation.

Closing this gap does not require organizations to choose people over performance. It requires something much more practical: identifying the human capabilities most critical to the business strategy and strengthening them in parallel with the transformation itself.

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That is where the Human Advantage begins.

Talent development, employee engagement, leadership capability, trust, inclusion, and culture cannot remain initiatives pursued only when budgets, resources, and time allow. They are part of the organizational infrastructure through which strategy becomes execution and execution becomes results.

The opportunity ahead is to align them.

The Human Readiness Gap

Business transformation rarely succeeds through strategy or technology alone. Its success depends on how effectively people understand the change, adapt their behaviors, develop new capabilities, and translate what is changing into how work gets done.

When those elements are aligned, organizations can create meaningful shifts in a relatively short period of time. The key is not trying to change everything at once. It is identifying the **specific human capabilities and organizational conditions that have the greatest influence on the desired business outcome** and intervening with intention.

The challenge emerges when those conditions are overlooked or addressed separately from the transformation itself.

This creates what I refer to as the **Human Readiness Gap**: the distance between what the business needs to accomplish and the readiness of its talent, culture, and leadership to deliver it.

The gap can show up in different ways:

- A company introduces AI and new technology, yet employees lack the skills, confidence, or clarity to integrate it effectively into their work.
- A high performer is promoted into management but has not yet developed the capabilities to achieve results through others.
- A new strategy requires greater collaboration, while organizational silos continue to influence decisions and execution.
- Leaders communicate change, yet employees lack clarity about what it means for them or how their work contributes to the direction ahead.
- An organization needs greater innovation, while employees hesitate to question established thinking, experiment, or challenge assumptions.
- Business priorities evolve, while the leadership pipeline continues developing capabilities based primarily on what has driven success in the past.
- Expectations for productivity increase while engagement, trust, or employee capacity is declining.
- Organizations invest in new systems, processes, or structures without addressing the behaviors and cultural conditions needed to make them effective.

These are not reasons to slow transformation. They are signals that help leaders determine **where targeted human intervention can accelerate it**.

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Closing the Human Readiness Gap does not require another broad initiative or years of culture transformation. Depending on the business challenge, the greatest leverage may come from strengthening a specific leadership capability, developing a critical talent segment, improving how teams collaborate, addressing a barrier to trust, creating greater clarity around change, or shifting a few behaviors that are limiting execution.

The starting point is always the business.

What are we trying to accomplish? What must people be able and willing to do differently for us to achieve it? And what is currently enabling or preventing that from happening?

Those questions turn human readiness from a broad people agenda into a focused business strategy.

And they create the foundation for what I call **the Human Advantage**.

The Human Advantage

Throughout more than two decades leading commercial strategy, innovation, organizational transformation, and people across global Fortune 500 organizations—and subsequently advising executives and leadership teams—I have learned that business strategy and human strategy are most powerful when they move together.

Three dimensions consistently shape that alignment:

Talent. Culture. Leadership.

They are interconnected, but they answer three different business questions:

TALENT

Do we have the capabilities we need to execute where the business is going?

CULTURE

Are we creating the conditions for people to contribute, collaborate, adapt, and perform?

LEADERSHIP

Do our leaders have the capability to translate strategy into action through others?

Together, they influence how effectively an organization executes its strategy and sustains performance through change.

TALENT

Develop for where the business is going—not only where it is today.

Talent strategy often begins with current needs: What roles are open? Where are the skills gaps? Who needs training?

A future-focused talent strategy starts one step earlier:

What will the business require from its people next?

That question is becoming increasingly consequential as AI reshapes roles and redistributes work between people and technology.

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Organizations certainly need greater AI fluency and technical capability. But the World Economic Forum's research also points to growing demand for creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, agility, curiosity, leadership, and social influence.

The future workforce therefore needs both **technical capability and human capability**.

This changes how organizations should think about development.

Talent development cannot be limited to transferring knowledge. It must strengthen people's ability to learn, adapt, think critically, collaborate across differences, exercise judgment, solve unfamiliar problems, and continue developing as the work evolves.

It also requires understanding what activates performance at the individual level.

People can possess similar skills yet be motivated by very different things—learning, impact, autonomy, stability, collaboration, recognition, challenge, or purpose. Tools such as Driving Forces and other talent diagnostics can help leaders better understand those differences and create environments where people are more effectively positioned to contribute.

The same forward-looking approach must extend to the leadership pipeline.

Organizations frequently identify their strongest individual performers and promote them into management. Yet the capabilities that make someone exceptional at delivering results individually are not necessarily the capabilities required to achieve results through other people.

That transition requires intentional development.

DDI's 2025 Global Leadership Forecast found that high-potential employees were 3.7 times more likely to leave within a year when their managers did not regularly provide growth and development opportunities. The same research identified areas including strategy and change management among significant leadership capability gaps.

The business cannot wait until a capability becomes urgent to begin developing it.

Talent readiness has to anticipate strategy, not chase it.

CULTURE

Create the conditions the strategy requires.

Culture is sometimes treated as an aspirational statement about who an organization wants to be. However, its real impact becomes much clearer under pressure. When organizations are growing, restructuring, adopting AI, changing strategy, or asking people to work differently, culture influences what people actually do.

- Do they speak up when they see a problem?
- Do they challenge an assumption?
- Do they share an idea before it is fully formed?
- Do they ask for help?
- Do they collaborate across functions?
- Do they experiment with unfamiliar technology?
- Do they acknowledge when something isn't working?

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- Do different perspectives genuinely influence decisions?

Those behaviors matter because transformation requires people to move beyond what is familiar.

Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety has demonstrated the importance of creating environments where people feel able to speak up, ask questions, acknowledge mistakes, and contribute ideas without fear of interpersonal consequences. In an era of constant experimentation and learning, that capability becomes increasingly relevant to business performance.

Inclusion matters for the same reason.

An inclusive culture does more than ensure different people are represented. It creates the conditions for different experiences, perspectives, and ways of thinking to actually influence the work.

That can strengthen decision-making, challenge groupthink, surface risks earlier, and expand the possibilities teams are willing to consider.

This is also where **productive discomfort** becomes valuable.

Organizations cannot continuously adapt while protecting everyone from challenge. Strong cultures create enough trust for people to question established thinking, have courageous conversations, invite perspectives that challenge their own, and remain curious when they do not have the answer.

The goal is not comfort. Nor is it disruption for disruption's sake. It is a culture capable of **learning and adapting without losing trust, connection, or accountability**.

That becomes a competitive capability when change is constant.

LEADERSHIP

Strengthen the ability to achieve results through people.

Leadership is where strategy, talent, and culture become visible in everyday work.

Employees rarely experience "the organization" as an abstract concept. They experience priorities, change, accountability, trust, development, and culture largely through the leaders around them.

And the expectations placed on those leaders have expanded.

Today's leaders must deliver results while navigating ambiguity. Move quickly while exercising judgment. Introduce new technologies while managing uncertainty about what those technologies mean for people. Create accountability while maintaining trust. Lead teams with different personalities, cultures, generations, motivations, and working styles.

That requires more than technical expertise.

It begins with **self-awareness**.

Leaders need to understand how they naturally communicate, make decisions, respond under pressure, approach conflict, and affect others. Behavioral tools such as DISC can make those patterns visible and help leaders learn to flex their approach to what different situations and people require.

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Emotional intelligence adds another dimension. Leaders who can recognize their own emotional responses, regulate them under pressure, read the environment around them, and respond intentionally are better equipped to lead through uncertainty.

But self-awareness alone is insufficient. Leaders must also become better listeners.

Some of the most valuable information inside an organization is found in what is **not** being said: the concern no one raises in the meeting, the perspective absent from the decision, the employee who has stopped contributing, or the assumption everyone has quietly accepted.

Strong leaders intentionally create space for those signals. They also develop the capacity to operate without certainty.

AI and disruption will continue presenting leaders with situations for which there is no established playbook. The ability to engage in possibility thinking—to challenge assumptions, remain curious, seek different perspectives, and experiment without needing to know the final answer—becomes increasingly valuable.

And through all of this, leaders must maintain the capacity to lead well.

Constant urgency can easily become a leadership habit. Yet when every issue is treated as immediate, leaders lose space for reflection, creativity, judgment, and strategic thinking. Intentional pauses and protecting capacity are not about lowering expectations. They allow leaders to bring greater intention to the decisions and interactions that matter most.

The future will continue requiring leaders to accomplish difficult things.

The difference will increasingly be **how effectively they can accomplish those things through other people.**

Turning The Human Advantage Into Action

The Human Advantage begins with the business challenge.

A company preparing for rapid growth may need to strengthen its leadership pipeline. An organization implementing AI may need new workforce capabilities and greater cultural readiness for experimentation. A restructuring may expose trust and communication gaps. A new executive team may need stronger alignment. Declining engagement may reveal issues with leadership, motivation, culture, or organizational design.

The intervention should follow the diagnosis—not the other way around.

A practical approach begins with four questions:

1. What business outcome are we trying to achieve?

Growth, transformation, productivity, innovation, integration, market expansion, stronger execution, or something else?

Clarity here prevents human-capital work from becoming disconnected from business priorities.

2. What must people do differently for that outcome to become possible?

What new skills, behaviors, decisions, relationships, or ways of working will the strategy require?

This translates business strategy into human requirements.

3. What is helping or preventing that from happening today?

This is where organizational diagnostics become valuable.

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Executive and employee interviews, engagement data, talent reviews, DISC, Emotional Intelligence, Driving Forces, 360-degree feedback, team assessments, and culture diagnostics can reveal patterns that are difficult to see from performance data alone.

The assessment itself is never the solution. It provides information that allows the right solution to be designed.

4. Where will intervention create the greatest leverage?

Organizations rarely need another list of twenty initiatives. They need to identify the few changes most likely to improve execution.

That could mean strengthening a leadership team, preparing high-potential talent, redesigning leadership development, addressing a cultural barrier, coaching key executives, improving cross-functional collaboration, strengthening succession, or helping leaders navigate a significant transformation.

The objective is targeted organizational capability—not activity.

Measuring What Matters

Human-capability investments should ultimately connect to the outcomes they were intended to influence.

That requires moving beyond traditional measures such as participation rates, training hours, or satisfaction scores.

Depending on the business challenge, organizations might examine:

- Employee engagement and trust
- Voluntary turnover and retention of critical talent
- Internal mobility and promotion readiness
- Succession strength
- Leadership effectiveness
- Team performance and collaboration
- Adoption of new technology or ways of working
- Speed of change implementation
- Productivity and execution
- Innovation
- Customer experience
- Business performance

Not every intervention will have an immediate line to revenue, nor should every human outcome be reduced to a financial calculation.

But leaders should be able to answer a more important question:

What became possible for the business because organizational capability became stronger?

When a Fractional Executive Can Create Value

The Human Readiness Gap often becomes most visible during pivotal moments.

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Organizations may benefit from fractional executive support when they are:

- Scaling rapidly and recognizing that leadership capability has not kept pace
- Implementing AI or significant digital transformation
- Restructuring or redesigning the organization
- Integrating teams following a merger or acquisition
- Experiencing declining engagement, trust, performance, or retention
- Promoting technical experts or high performers into people leadership
- Strengthening succession and leadership pipelines
- Developing a newly formed or evolving executive team
- Navigating significant leadership transitions
- Shifting strategy in ways that require new workforce capabilities
- Working to strengthen culture, inclusion, or cross-functional collaboration
- Experiencing a persistent gap between strategy and execution

These challenges rarely fit neatly inside one organizational function.

They intersect with strategy, operations, talent, culture, leadership, and performance.

A fractional executive brings an enterprise perspective to that intersection—working alongside the CEO and leadership team to diagnose the challenge, determine where intervention can create the greatest leverage, and strengthen the organizational capabilities required to move the business forward.

The Human Advantage In A World of Disruption

AI will continue changing what organizations can accomplish.

It will automate work, increase speed, expand access to information, improve analysis, and create possibilities we are only beginning to understand. The opportunity for organizations is extraordinary.

Realizing that opportunity will require more than adopting the right technology. It will require people capable of learning and adapting as their work evolves. Cultures where curiosity, trust, inclusion, challenge, and experimentation can coexist. Leaders capable of exercising judgment, creating clarity, developing others, and bringing people with them through change.

This is why human-centered and results-driven should never be positioned as opposing philosophies.

The strongest organizations will continue investing in strategy, technology, operations, customers, and growth while simultaneously strengthening the human capabilities required to deliver against those investments.

Business transformation and human readiness must move together.

Because ultimately, the competitive advantage will not come from technology alone. It will come from what an organization enables its people to accomplish with it.

That is the Human Advantage.

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About Ilhiana Rojas Saldana

Ilhiana Rojas Saldana is a global business executive and organizational transformation leader with more than 20 years of Fortune 500 experience spanning commercial strategy, marketing, sales, product innovation, organizational effectiveness, and leadership development across North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia.

Throughout her career at Procter & Gamble, HanesBrands, and Hasbro, Ilhiana led and partnered with cross-functional teams to drive business growth, bring products and commercial strategies to market, navigate organizational transformation, and strengthen the talent, culture, and leadership capabilities required to deliver results.

Today, Ilhiana serves as a Fractional Executive, strategic advisor, executive coach, keynote speaker, and human-potential and culture consultant, partnering with CEOs and leadership teams to align business strategy with organizational capability. Her distinctive combination of commercial leadership experience and human-centered expertise enables her to connect strategy with execution and people with performance.

As Founder and CEO of BeLIVE Coaching & Consulting, a bestselling author, and an internationally recognized leadership expert, Ilhiana has coached hundreds of executives and trained thousands of professionals across industries. Her work is grounded in the belief that sustainable transformation occurs when organizations intentionally create the conditions for people to grow, contribute, adapt, and perform at their best.