



# The Human Touch Advantage: Strong Leadership Embodies HR Mindset

By **Amelia Chan**, CPHR

**P**EOPLE DEFINE THE CORE OF ANY ORGANIZATION OR BUSINESS: from its mission to its motivation to the prevailing culture. As each of us is unique, so too is the collective DNA which develops, defines and delivers any organization's product or service.

However, in a world of widgets, what sets those leading organizations apart, time after time, regardless of size or industry? In a word—mindset. More accurately, the HR mindset with its prevailing ethos of keeping people first in the minds of decision-makers.

### People First in HR Mindset

As HR continues to ascend in strategic thinking, so too does the thinking of HR continue to impact organizational success stories. Case in point, without a true understanding of this HR mindset—rooted in the people and how they operate—leadership is missing the opportunity to excel from all points.

In terms of sustainable futures, leadership and a “people-first” mindset go hand-in-hand. Impactful leadership cannot be at arms-length or activated in isolation of the very human “resources” they affect.

As evidenced by my own HR practice and pursuits, including sitting as a judge for the Small Business BC ‘Best Workplace’ Awards, a true leader thrives by inspiring and mobilizing others

as their actions influence thinking and behaviours in the business. That this holds true for the Fortune 500s as well as for those employing under 50 people is revealing.

### Small Business Reflects Big Picture

Corporate decisions involve people at all levels and at every stage—from planning to process to execution to outcome. It is the employees who will help solve the problems, carry out the initiatives and reap/reject the resulting decisions made by leadership. With the HR mindset guiding their actions, strong leaders gain the keys to the proverbial kingdom of productivity, as it is by tapping into what motivates and engages others that they are able to accomplish their goals.

### Mindset Revealed in Everyday Interplay

According to Dacher Keltner<sup>1</sup>, author of *The Power Paradox*, there are multiple power principles at play in effective organizational use of human resources, anchored in everyday actions, relationships and interactions, and altering the mind states of others. Such power through people taps into the innate tendency of humans to seek connection.

Leaders who listen to staff feedback and seek to understand their challenges for resolution are able to build rapport—as

these efforts create a bond and a sense of community which demonstrates, “We are in this together.” This provides leadership enormous opportunity to fill the engagement and productivity gap in the organizational context.

### Relentless Employee Focus Unites Top CEOs

For many, this marks a change in mindset. Where past organizational principles have been based on industrial age concepts, the information age has a different set of needs and motivations. Workers are no longer commodities to be used up, but talents to be sustainably grown. As a result, the criteria for strong leadership requires adjustment to the times, which has been established with a renewed focus on people.

True leaders go beyond just the daily grind of operations because they function at a different level. They do more than manage the work or the workers. These individuals must already possess a certain level of technical mastery, core supervisory skills and/or management depth. However, the focus of strong leaders goes beyond their own domain; these individuals’ actions have a macro-perspective and influence the greater good.

As a fundament of modern success, the HR mindset has become essential to maintaining focus and relations in a world that moves at such a speed than many default to more reactive mindsets with limited thought to the future. Just how essential that mindset is to success was recently revealed by an article in *Harvard Business Review* on what the world’s best CEOs have in common<sup>2</sup>; perhaps unsurprisingly for those in HR, “long-term thinking, short-term savvy, and relentless focus on employees” were at the top. In keeping with the notion of the HR mindset, within this group of globally-recognized business executives, one of the biggest focuses was how to keep employees motivated.

### Look to Tomorrow, Live for Today

One true mark of effective leadership is long-term thinking and sustainability, with the majority of the top CEOs on *HBR*’s list having an average of 15 years in their position. This is very compelling evidence that high-performing leaders place a lot of importance on the future.

Case in point, the top CEO of 2016, as well as several years preceding, Lars Sorenson<sup>3</sup> of Novo Nordisk, shared that his success/failure should be measured 15-20 years after the decisions were implemented to see the full impact. The multi-year winner explains how he must run today’s business while planning for tomorrow’s business, putting any assessment of success into the long-term. In the short-term, his focus remains on his people and product as always.

This foresight and steady stewardship echoes the analysis methods of investment guru Warren Buffet. Instead of the quick profitability ratios that change with the volatile financial markets, truly successful business must be able to endure the passage and challenges of time. This type of leadership success is based on true value and longevity.

### Four Fundamental HR Principles

An HR mindset is the “it” factor that separates great leaders from the rest. In a sense, all leaders know it, but great leaders show it; they know how to apply this mindset as an HR tool while embodying the following traits:

**Empathy:** Strong leaders practice empathy and lead with genuine concern for others, and a focus on solutions which foster shared growth for the individuals and their organization; their people-first instincts encourages loyalty, while enabling and empowering others.


**Integrity:** Top leaders lead with respect for others, a trait anchored by a consistent ethos of honesty as a personal and professional hallmark; they embody and bring these principles into action by sharing information and remaining open to input.

**Motivation:** Inspiring leaders provide a model, and motivate by means of communication that is clear and concise, as well as by sharing and embodying their vision through their actions. They encourage and challenge others, motivating their best efforts, while modelling the same high standards daily.

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**Communication:** The ability to get people to “want to” do their best for you is a talent in itself, and one which great leaders hone daily. Knowing how to build rapport and create teams that work are the bones, but they realize that the best ideas, opportunities and results come from the amount of heart they bring to the table, and receive in kind.

From a purely practical perspective, the four fundamentals above speak to an even more simple truth— having people’s hearts and minds focused on the right goals allows business large and small a speed of responsiveness that supports the growth of their employees, as well as their organizational futures.

That so much of this speaks directly to the experience of HR professionals, speaks volumes of the strategic value of the HR mindset as a mainstay of all future leaders. 

Amelia Chan, CPHR, RCIC is founder and principal consultant of Higher Options Consulting Services (HR-options.com), providing a wide range of HR and immigration services for small to mid-sized businesses.

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1. *The Power Paradox – How we gain and lose influence* (New York, 2016 Penguin Press)
  2. *Harvard Business Review* (online article) October 20, 2016 “What the World’s Best (Performing) CEOs Have in Common”. Interestingly, the list has a large concentration of European companies who have more holistic approaches to business (i.e. success is measured beyond financial results and must also include social and environmental responsibilities)
  3. Lars Sorenson has won this distinction for three consecutive years.