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Beyond The Bottom Line

Changing HR To Change The Future Of Work



Here's the twist: when we delved into the data, we didn't really see that. Hence, we argue that in spite of its ever-growing popularity the future of work is looking increasingly bleak, because leaders – particularly those in HR – are increasingly stuck.

Of course, a call for the transformation of HR is not new. Over recent years, we have witnessed an explosion of proposals for novel roles of HR. HR is truly world-class at inventing new positions. Four out of the top five new "job roles on the rise in 2023" belong to HR! The lone outlier? A 'truck driver.' Yet, despite this feverish creativity, genuine transformation seems to be extremely rare.

Hence, our hypothesis is that all this variety masks a deep and unexamined identity crisis. If we want to make real progress, we must understand our own history and dare to explore the root causes of HR's immunity to change.

This essay first develops a short historical analysis of the evolution in HR. We will argue that throughout the last decades HR has willingly surrendered to the bottom line.

Thereafter, in the second part, we explore how HR could free itself from a deliberate stagnation and promote good work. We contend that change is possible, but there are no simple fixes. It demands substantial investment, determination and, above all, the willingness to face ourselves.

It will need courageous HR leaders to embark on a truly transformative journey together!

In a world where the average person spends over 100,000 hours working, where more than 80% of adults deeply identify with their job roles, and where employment creates significant unhappiness, the imperative is clear—we must ensure that work becomes a positive force for as many people as possible.

We firmly believe this requires leadership. In an era marked by complexity and polycrisis, leaders across the board must acknowledge their complicity in perpetuating suffering within organisations. In order to reshape the future of work, they not only need to deepen their understanding of what constitutes good work, but also dare to challenge the status quo and actively contribute to its realization. It is time to heed the call of both personal and institutional transformation.

In our short essay we turn the spotlight on a pivotal group of leaders – those in HR. Why HR? Because, more than any other leaders, we believe HR leaders should be the custodians of good work. After all, HR is all about people, isn't it?

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A Curious Beginning

Let us start with an important question: If you are an HR leader, why did you venture into HR? Thinking back to that very first day on that very first job – what attracted you to the wonderful world of “human resources”?

There are many different reasons why individuals join HR. However, three motivations consistently stand out: a passion for working with people, a commitment to defending workers' rights, and a pragmatic drive to seek viable solutions when workplace conflicts arise. Assuming these reasons resonate, at least to some extent, here comes the pivotal question: considering these goals, how successful has HR been?

The answer is of course complicated. A lot of it depends on circumstances. However, across all the surveys we have examined, three points crucially stand out:

- HR, regrettably, has often become the least trusted function in the organisation, except among executives (Edelman 2022). Yet even they are not always convinced that HR contributes significantly to the bottom line.
- In many cases, HR is perceived as ineffective in addressing organizational tensions, let alone deliver reliable services. And many employees would not even recognise HR leaders at the watercooler (Cezanne 2022).
- When it comes to employee welfare, the reality is disheartening: irrespective of the applied standards, the majority of workers have been losing out (Eurofund 2018; EPI 2022; IMF 2017).

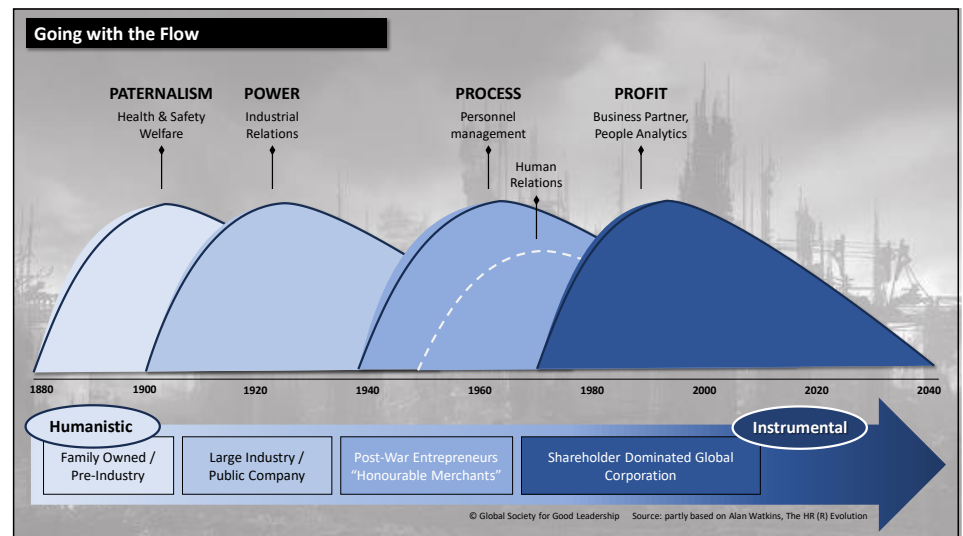
So, to put it into scientific lingo: 'on average we did not fare very well!'

That is puzzling, isn't it? HR claims to put people first, but the perception of HR is quite the opposite. What drives the disconnect?

We first analysed a lot of popular HRM literature, and there we found one resounding message: 'It wasn't us! HR is innocent, we swear! It's the line managers who give us a hard time, it's the vendors who can't run their systems, it's the workers who lack a growth mindset – and don't even get us started on those Gen Z folks who just don't want to work! Change is impossible because everybody around us is standing still!'

and management. Shortly afterwards, when social democracies demanded greater worker protection the human relations movement emerged, seeking to balance performance and well-being.

- **Profit:** Finally, when neoliberalism and global corporate expansion surged in the '80s, HR enthusiastically embraced high-performance cultures and a profit narrative.



Going With The Flow

That explanation seemed too simple, so we took out our shovels and dug a little deeper.

Without burying you with lots of data, we suggest HR has essentially navigated through four distinct phases across the last century (see also Kaufman 2014; Watkins et al. 2019):

- **Paternalism:** At the beginning of the industrial revolution, HR emerged to support early industrialists and family patriarchs striving for better health and living conditions in their factories.
- **Power:** Amid deteriorating work conditions and growing unions, HR pivoted to manage industrial power relations, ensuring orderly production.
- **Process:** Post-World War II, HR expanded rapidly to facilitate ever larger-scale of business with professional selection, training,

By and large, it seems HR has readily conformed itself with all the trends in the evolution of modern capitalism. Starting undoubtedly with a strong focus on humanistic values, it gradually drifted with the currents toward ever greater instrumentalization.

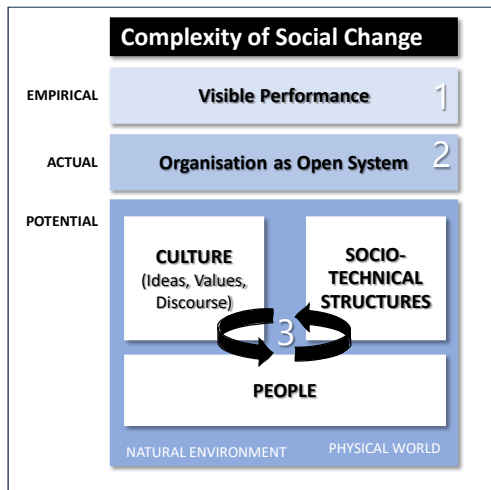
That is a paradox, is it not? We have all learned that culture change is rooted in underlying assumptions and values, below the surface. But if HR harboured strongly humanistic values, how did it drift off course?

Complexity Of Social Change

Unfortunately, it turns out the fashionable 'iceberg' model of social change is as popular as it is simplistic.

It is time to upgrade our toolkit: as it happens, in complex business environments when we dive beneath the surface, we seldom find a neatly ordered set of shared values and

assumptions that we can plug into a regression analysis or bake into some culture change programme to create the future. Conversely, the water is often dark and murky and we face dangerous sharks and treacherous currents.



In more technical speak, within complex social systems, we encounter three essential entities: people, culture, and social structures, each with its unique powers. Their combined interactions generate complex mechanisms that *might*, under certain conditions, translate into certain constellations, that we *might* detect above the water-line.

What does this mean for HR? Simply put, it means that we cannot just pick and choose our roles in complex social systems. There is no action without context. Often roles predate us and our character and identity emerge dynamically from the interplay between dominant narratives, our evolving agency, and relational dynamics. This also implies that the popular idea that we can change culture by simply changing “mindsets” is utterly simplistic. It takes evolution of all these interconnected elements in an organisational system to generate sustainable transformation.

Additionally, it sometimes needs a lot of courage to fend off the lurking 'sharks' of orthodoxy and tradition.

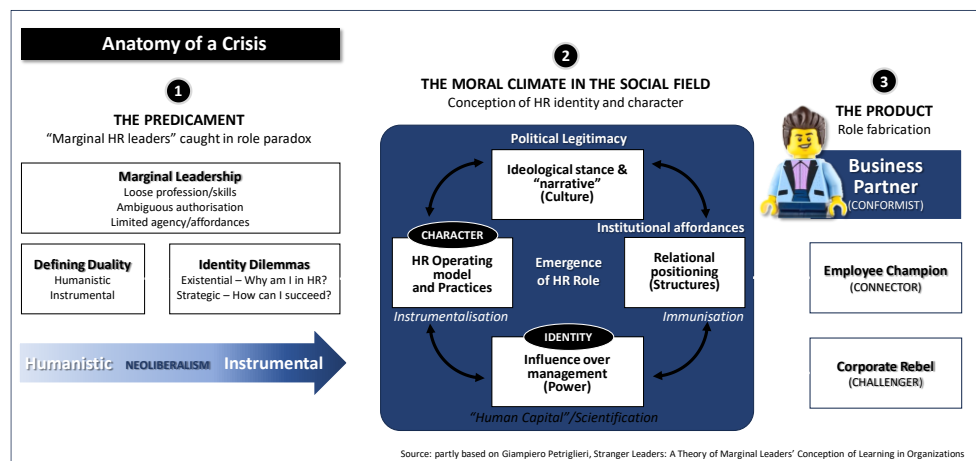
The Heroic Failure Of HR

So, perhaps we could say that HR was *indeed* a victim of circumstances...

- Right from its inception, HR occupied a *marginal leadership* position. That is a nice way for saying that despite businesses' relentless proclamations that "people are at the heart of our business" HR had very little power. Its profession was loose, its authorisation uncertain, and its influence limited, sparking existential anxiety and a deep desire to carve out a role that was both recognised and effective.
- Initially, that was not a big issue until the context shifted towards massive instrumentalization. Because then, HR got trapped by those powerful currents below the surface. In order to wield influence within the business, HR basically had to justify its existence by instrumentalising itself.
- That is exactly when the idea of the *business partner* discourse was born, which seemed truly brilliant at the time.

aimed to serve. The imprudent separation between strategic advice and day-to-day people operations led to HR management by “remote control” and algorithms, booming HR outsourcing and increasing depersonalization. This is why HR often goes unrecognized in the organisational corridors. And, of course, vendors absolutely loved it! It is no coincidence that 90% of HR “research” today is sponsored by suppliers (Capelli et al. 2024).

2. Instead of championing labour rights, HR often operated as a subsidiary of the finance department. Its original humanism faded away quickly when the emphasis shifted towards numbers, KPIs, performance-based pay, and the relentless construction of “business cases” to support Human Capital-ism.
3. Finally, HR inadvertently undermined its own capacity to tackle real-world issues, because the ‘three-tier’ model, excessive outsourcing and a single-minded



Research shows HR's extraordinary effort to ascend to strategic significance as a genuine business partner over the past three decades (for an overview see Cayrat et al 2023; Kegan 2023). Yet truth be told, it always was, in essence, a dangerous game of swimming with the sharks:

1. Instead of getting closer to the people, HR found itself disconnected from the very individuals it

focus on rolling out systems gradually chipped away at HR's core competencies and flexibility, eroding both its unique knowledge and its capacity to customize its services. And it also lost valuable allies.

Of course, you might counter, 'hold on a second! That's too pessimistic! What about COVID? Did not the whole world embrace human-centric values,

purpose-led organizations, and a global drive for planetary well-being? Well, that is true. Or better: that is truly what people claimed.

Unfortunately, it was not necessarily what they did. Sure, a few solar panels went up on head offices, Chief Purpose Officers were appointed, and CEO bonuses were tied to (rather meaningless) ESG targets. Lots of businesses became excellent in green, white or blue-washing and we created a 1.5 trillion-dollar well-being market, mostly selling quick fixes and quackery. But substantive change was stunningly absent across most boards.

As for HR, that initial revival of humanism was swiftly overshadowed by a focus on the technicalities of remote working to increase agility, and performance. Once the COVID-tech bubble subsided and vendors stopped celebrating, we saw thousands of layoffs to catapult stock markets to all-time highs. And HR continued to endorse and even accelerate a plethora of toxic practices that are neither ethically nor scientifically sound. This is exactly what Mats Alvesson calls 'functional stupidity'. Lots of highly intelligent people end up doing remarkably foolish things.

All this is really not to discount the genuine efforts of numerous organizations, particularly smaller ones, and of wonderful colleagues who every single day seek to make a positive difference. Rather, it is an urgent recognition that our businesses still too often cause human suffering and squander human potential. We believe HR has not yet faced that critical self-reflection necessary to keep those 'sharks' at bay. Let us be honest: unless we shift, the future of work will only amplify the troubles for our people, and HR might quickly become obsolete.

Reconstructing leadership

What can we do? Where do we lead from here? How can we progress towards a new "horizon" for work - to borrow the theme from the recent

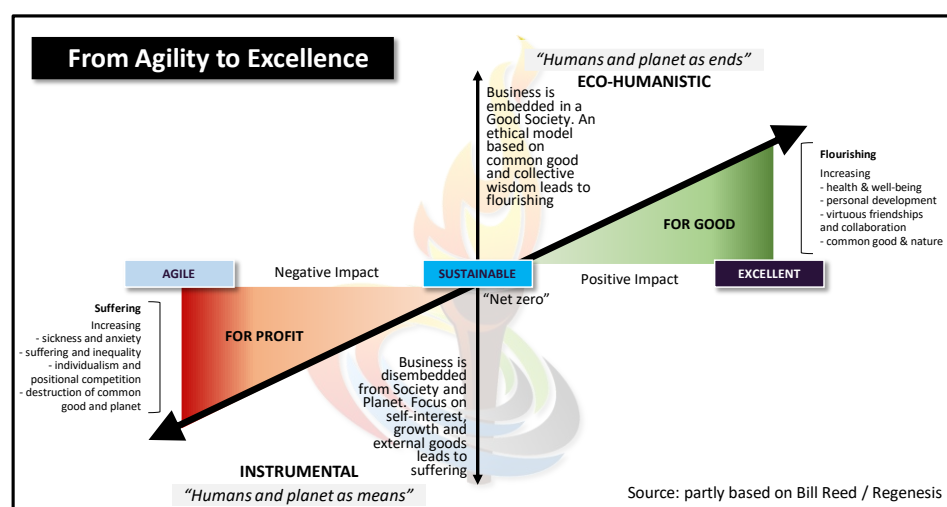
global HR Congress - where "the well-being of individuals and the nurturing of humane workplaces have taken centre stage". Is it even possible?

We believe it is, but it will not be easy. Our first step is to gain clarity on where exactly we want to lead our organizations. Not: what is the "future of work", which is *descriptive*, but what *should* the "work of the future" be? Sadly, while there are endless ideas, proposals, and leadership models scattered across social media and academic publishing, the simple questions of "what is good?" and how to operationalize "good work" are not very fashionable these days.

the best in ourselves at and through work.

Good Organisations

Our simple idea is that we need to re-embed our organisations, as the vital link between a fulfilling life and a prosperous society. Organisations attain excellence by enabling people to develop - internally - while contributing collectively to a good economy and society - externally. And let us be clear. We are not arguing against making organisations more efficient, customer-centric or adaptive, but we do suggest to do it for a different purpose. Profit is *not* an end in itself, but



This is why in 2021 we embarked on an inquiry to figure out what exactly makes organizations "good". One fact became immediately evident: most of what is being proposed as "new" and "revolutionary" today remains entrenched in an instrumentalist paradigm. Concepts like agility, net zero, net positive, sustainability, ESG, SDG, mostly centre around "doing less harm" while essentially maintaining the status quo.

If we are not careful, the "Future of Work" narrative becomes itself instrumental, by emphasising the necessity for people to submit themselves to inescapable external changes without questioning where our work is going and why. Yet, reducing bureaucracy, becoming agile or offsetting co2 emissions is not the same as good work. Genuinely good organisations centre on *who we are* and how to bring to life

must serve to enable social flourishing and justice on a larger scale.

That clearly takes more than new narratives or polished purpose statements.

Firstly, as we have seen, we must cultivate all those elements below the organisational surface, from the underlying cultural foundations—like language, symbols, metrics, and policies—to the structural frameworks, routines, and systems, and the holistic development of individuals and communities.

This calls for a new model to look at organisations. In our work, we emphasize the intentional development of virtuous social practices, which we call '*micro-organizations*,' alongside the refinement of corporate institutions and governance, which we frame as '*corporation*', and of course people.

Here our focus lies not just on competencies, but character, virtues and wisdom.

However, it is not just about each component, but also about the connection between them. Truly human-centric organizations need to nurture a moral environment that combines care, integrity and justice with a genuine commitment toward mutual elevation for the greater good. To do so, we must continue to evolve organizational design, striking a more progressive balance between local affordances within those ‘micro-organizations’, individual growth, and the need to foster shared learning and a coherent external value proposition.

That is difficult. In our research, we clearly see that with growing scale most corporations turn instrumentalist. To counter this, we believe that we must overlay the existing dominant financial governance with disciplines for collective reflection and participation, essentially creating a living organizational constitution. For instance, at ING, HR sponsored a so-called *leadership council* that collectively steered its ongoing transformation.

The ultimate goal is to first connect people, structures and culture, thus nurturing organisational wisdom, identity and character, and then to enable a reflective equilibrium that continually actualises the potential of the organisation to create social flourishing.

A Necessary (Leadership) Transformation

To put it more simply, we must learn to care and be intentional about our Organisation's *moral climate* exactly as we have learned to care for the environmental climate.

How does all of this translate into action? Firstly, we must focus *more* on our people. This involves character-based selection and promotion, personalized development plans, and

strict adherence to that famous ‘no asshole’ rule. Secondly, we need to much more deliberately evolve management structures and practices to craft a reflective *holding space* for mutual growth and creativity. Thirdly, we must revise *corporate governance structures and institutions* - like success measures, reward and recognition policies, or team affordances, to embed virtuous principles and actively develop and foster positive impact.

The key is to evolve people and organizational practices holistically and at the same time, across various levels, avoiding fragmentation between specializations or vendors.

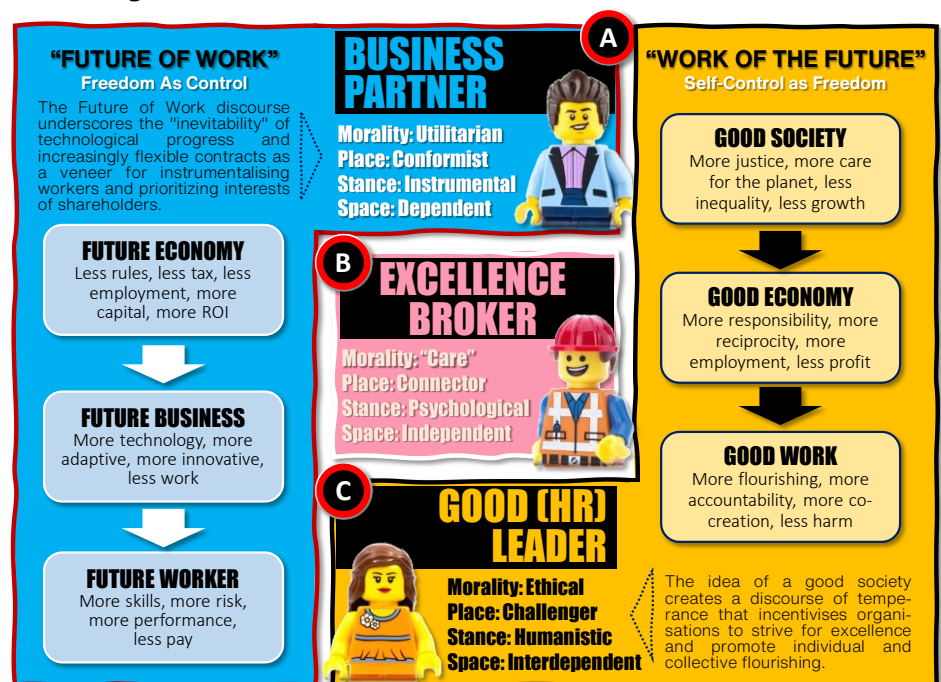
Hence, there can be no doubt that HR is in a great position to foster positive transformation. It holds many critical levers to influence the context, both within HR and across the policies, structures, and success metrics of the broader organization.

of leaders lack professional qualifications and 50% of new leaders fail within the first year.

This of course brings us back to our initial question. HR possesses some power, but it might be unwilling or unable to wield it effectively: which of the many roles that have been proposed during the last decade should and can HR assume to lead towards positive change?

In essence, we believe it boils down to only three viable options:

- **Business Partner:** Whatever the exact naming, HR in essence sticks to the conventional ‘business partner’ narrative. This, frankly, encompasses all those fashionable trends from AI to DEI.
- **Excellence Broker:** HR cultivates its capacity to empower and unite selected good leaders



In this context, however, an important qualification is due: from our experience, the maturity of an organisation can never transcend the wisdom of its leaders. Therefore, we must also deliberately develop leadership.

Undoubtedly, there is a lot to do: a recent study by the CMI (Chartered Management Institute) found that 52%

within an organization, in order to systematically create ripple effects throughout the business. This demands more focus on L&D and change management, and a radical empowerment of virtuous teams. Think of it as an undercover mission aimed at eliminating barriers to excellence, from the bottom up, one

team at a time - until the whole system shifts.

- **Good HR Leader:** Where feasible, HR could step up its position in the boardroom to actively steer the organization towards a new, more humanistic narrative for the good of all. This would require a human-centric overhaul of all HR policies and processes, the intentional development of governance and organisational design, and a meticulous vetting process for all leaders.

Here is the thing: If everybody chooses the first option, you might as well stop reading this article right now, because we'd be anchoring HR's future exactly where we stand today. We can discuss wellbeing, DEI, analytics, and talent forever, but in substance little will change!

So, it might be a good time for a little self-check. Whom do *you* aim to serve with your leadership in the coming year: employees, shareholders, the greater good, or all of them? Are you firmly committed to the business partner model and intend to remain there? Or are you willing to up your game, actively promoting the right people and structures? Or, finally, are you daring to dive straight into the boardroom to lead from the front?

It is certainly intriguing – and no doubt necessary - to take the grand challenge of a better future of work back to our own small doorstep. But perhaps, it still is not quite the right question. Even if we might personally be willing to step into a new role in our own organisation, as we have seen earlier the real challenge is how together we can create the *contextual conditions* for a systematic shift in the role of HR across as many organizations as possible. This will not be easy. Marginal leaders must always reckon with the deeply instrumental organisational immune systems everywhere.

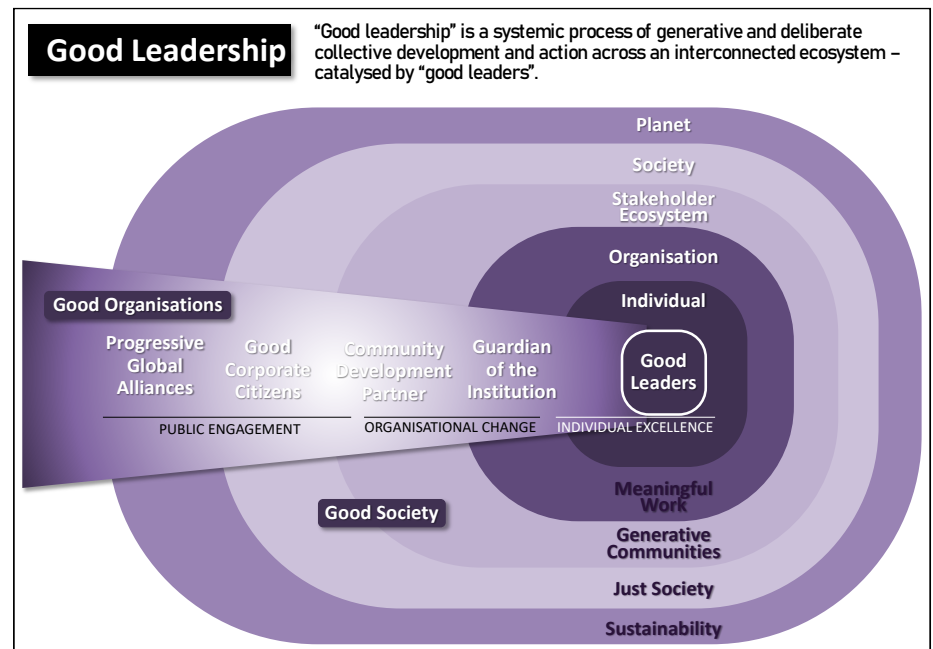
Professionalising Leadership

This leads us straight to the end of our essay and our call to action. It is our

firm belief that the time is ripe for a better future of work. The urgency of climate change has rattled our conscience. New narratives are fast emerging, challenging the status quo. And increasingly leaders are willing to step up. But in order to succeed, HR practitioners require more than just moral courage.

the Global Society for Good Leadership. Our objective is to stimulate a humanistic ethos of good leadership and to systematically support marginal leaders across all functions with continual development, a strong community and our collective best practices.

Because let's face it—the challenges



They need competence, determination and wisdom to lead against the odds. They must collaborate to develop new HR practices to cultivate such good organisations. And, above all, they must feel supported by their peers in asking the important and often inconvenient questions, proudly upholding their *dual loyalty*, as partners of the organisation and as honourable ambassadors of their profession – a profession that not only deals with the mundane intricacies of the management of "HR", but also embodies an essential spirit of humanity. That is why we believe we must invest heavily in HR as a *profession*. Every senior leader in HR should make a strong commitment to a professional mandate.

But as we said at the beginning, our contemporary leadership crisis extends far beyond HR. If we are serious about achieving good work, we need *all* senior leaders to step up.

That is why we have recently inaugurated a new initiative aimed at professionalising leadership, called

that society encounters today cannot be resolved by any single company alone. As responsible business executives, we must insist together on the advancement of better leadership within and across Organisations.

Perhaps by forging a broader coalition of leaders committed to the highest potential of both people and organizations, we stand a tiny chance to foster the necessary shift in the character of business to defy an increasingly dehumanized financial capitalism that encroaches upon our enterprises.

The Future Of Work Is Now

The simple truth is: Excellence in business is not just about what we produce, and certainly not simply about how much money we make, but ultimately, about *who* we become. Our work is always also a mirror image of who we are, capable of creating boundless joy or bottomless sorrow. The future of work? It is already here. Let's not waste it!

Further information

www.leadershipsociety.world (beta)
hr.leadershipsociety.world (video and full presentation)

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(2) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reflective-equilibrium/>

(3) <https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/an-introduction/>

(4) <https://www.boundaryless.io/3eo-framework/>

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