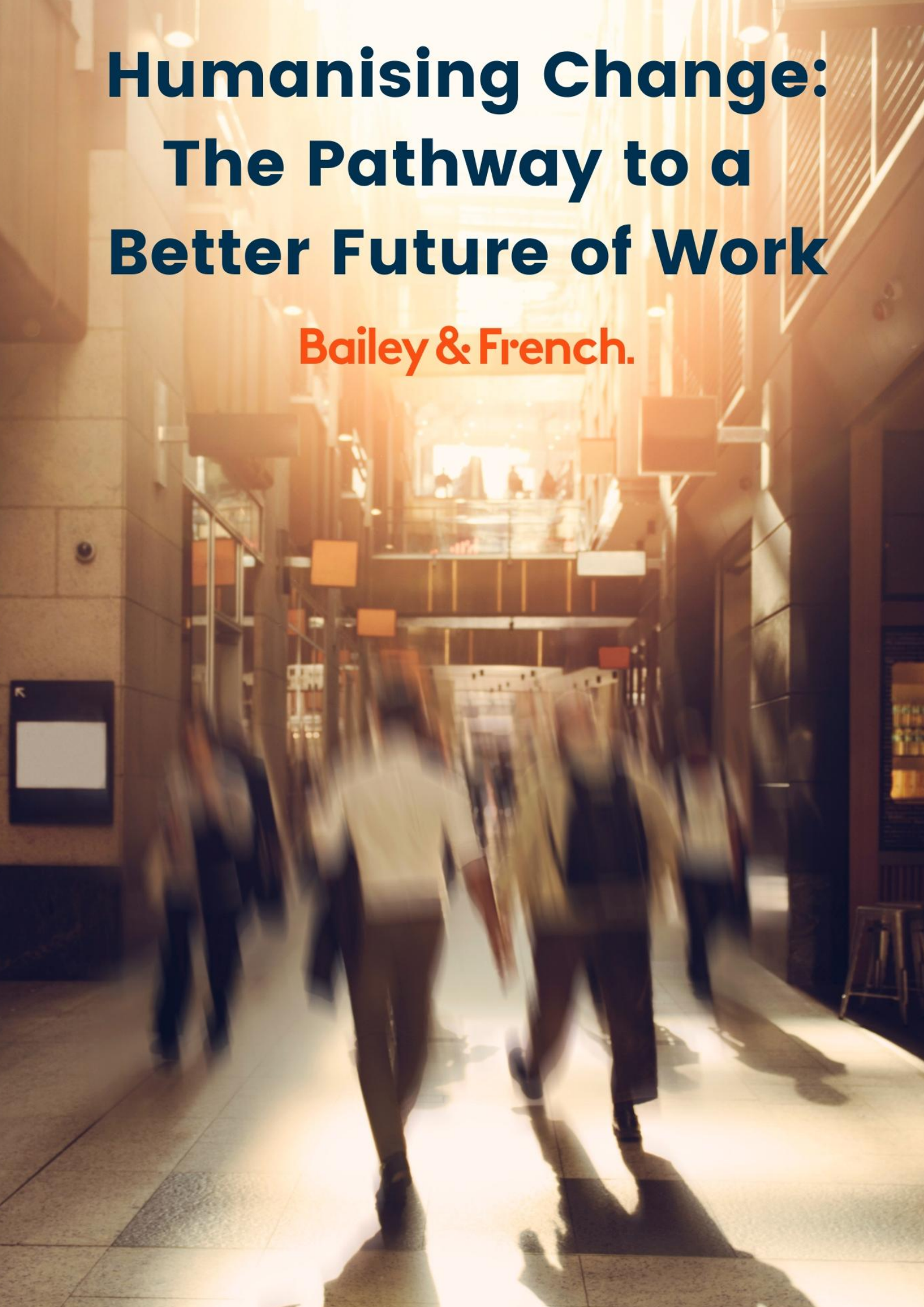# Humanising Change: The Pathway to a Better Future of Work

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Humanising Change: The pathway to a better future of work

By Alex Bailey

Introduction

Change is an inevitable aspect of modern life and work, impacting us in a multitude of ways both professionally and personally. As organisations face geopolitical tensions, advancing technology, and vast generational differences, we must adapt to remain flexible and relevant. In a world of complex change and global crises, leaders must navigate not only the operational and transactional impact change brings but also the profound effect on individuals emotionally.

Humanising change – placing people at the heart of transitions - offers a pathway to not only navigate uncertainties but also create workplaces that allow for true innovation, collaboration, connection and trust through complex times. A human-centred approach calls for leveraging our unique human strengths and understanding the resources we have at our disposal, such as collective imagination, psychological flexibility, and a growth mindset - to reframe change as an opportunity for development. Leaders must listen actively, involve employees early in the decision making, and connect meaningfully with teams. Keeping our 'human' switched on is vital and allows us to support our teams, colleagues and co-workers to not just survive but to truly thrive during times of change.

Drawing on market intelligence from recent roundtables and global events we've hosted across the year as part of our 2024 Human Series, and speaking with leaders in organisations across all industries, this paper collates our insights into what we mean by humanising change, why we are talking about it today and how organisations can lead evolution in a way that prioritises the human experience.

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What do we mean by Humanising Change?

In the aftermath of COVID-19, businesses face an unprecedented opportunity to rethink their fundamental approaches to work. HR leaders are now tasked with addressing what it truly means to be human in the workplace, and how to unlock the unique human strengths that will drive meaningful change.

Humanising change is about recognising and addressing the human elements of change and growth. It goes beyond operational processes and focuses on the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of change. This approach empowers organisations to prioritise trust, inclusivity, safety and shared ownership during times of uncertainty.

It is crucial to acknowledge the human impact of change in order to transition more successfully and sustainably. Without this understanding, organisations risk overlooking critical factors that can undermine the success of change efforts.

- Employees who feel **supported** during change are **3.5 times more likely to remain engaged and productive** (Gallup, 2021).

- **Successful change is 6 times more likely** when leaders create a **vision**, communicate it clearly, and involve employees in the process (Kotter, J. P., 1996).

- 65% of people report that **strong social support helps them cope with the stress** of change more effectively (Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S., 1984).

- Research from McKinsey (2021) shows that **70% of change programmes fail**, often **due to neglecting the human element.** Anxiety, resistance, and burnout are common, yet preventable, outcomes of poorly managed transitions.

- 54% of Americans report that **change at work causes significant stress**, leading to burnout and disengagement (American Psychological Association, 2015).

- Simon Sinek is a visionary in the world of culture change and explores the **fear response to uncertainty**, and how we must make use of our people to find the pockets of '**early adopters**' in individuals and teams, to build demand and create the tipping point for change.

- Change can trigger a **threat response in the brain**, making it harder for people to think clearly and collaborate effectively (David Rock, SCARF, 2008).

We recognise that frameworks and processes can help to guide us through change, but by **keeping our human switched on** during times of change we are able to go above and beyond traditional methods to truly understand where individuals are emotionally, and how as leaders of organisations, we can be more human to support people through these challenging times.

Why is Humanising Change so important now?

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Why is Humanising Change so important now?

The need to humanise change is now more urgent than ever. Within the post-pandemic digital age, we are facing change constantly in our organisations:

- **Geopolitical turbulence**: Events like the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and geopolitical conflicts have heightened uncertainty in our organisations and the way we live and work. The impact that global conflicts have had on our energy markets has led to us feeling the consequence of change not only transactionally and operationally, but emotionally.

- **Post-Brexit and Economic Uncertainty**: For organisations operating across the UK and Europe, navigating the ripple effects of Brexit around talent shortages, shifting trade relationships and the cost-of-living crisis requires resilience and continuous agility.

- **Generational Demands**: Millennials and Gen Z entering the workplace need to operate in a way that reflects their values and purpose, prioritising inclusive, emotional connection. A Deloitte study (2023) found that 60% of these employees are more likely to stay with employers who bring well-being and inclusivity to the forefront.

- **Climate change and sustainability**: As organisations streamline towards sustainable practices, people and their social skills are key drivers of this shift. During our recent roundtable 'Creating a Future-Ready Workplace' as part of the Human Series, we recognised how sustainability is no longer just an environmental goal, it's an approach we must take to achieve prolonged performance for humans too. We must focus on human sustainability as much as environmental sustainability as they are intertwined.

In addition to navigating these big changes that exist as a result of external factors in the world around us, there is a complex distinction between continuous and big change here. Change emerges in different degrees of visibility and whilst we often focus on 'the' change or larger changes, we also must recognise that the smaller, continuous changes that people face individually alters their ability to cope in the moment. It is essential that we are remaining not only human, but also nimble and fluid to pre-empt, accept and embody change in all its' forms.

"In unstoppable and unsolvable global dynamics we are the good that can happen – stop looking for it elsewhere"
(Dr Margaret Wheatley)

How do we Humanise Change for
a better future world of work?

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How do we Humanise Change for a better future world of work?

1. We must be human beings, being fully human

In the fast-paced, complex world of change management, we can often get caught up in the framework and structure of process, and dismiss the raw impact change has on our people. We must dial up the human side to leadership in order to support ourselves and our teams to navigate change and crises positively.

- The need to create space for reflection and connection has emerged as a crucial theme. Insights from our "Rediscovering Organisational Humanity" roundtable as part of the Human Series highlighted that the frenetic pace of business often stifles human strengths such as empathy, creativity, and problem-solving. This underlines the importance of intentionally creating environments where human potential can thrive.

- Sarah McClellan argues in her book '*Making the Workplace Human*', empathy and compassion must become central leadership qualities because these attributes help leaders build trust and connection, which are critical in uncertain times.

- In a world where we are competing with computers and AI, the power of being human and leveraging our unique human strengths is more important than ever and can act as a catalyst for dealing with change positively.

- People tend to look for authenticity, vulnerability and human connection in times of quick change. Organisations may fall into the trap of thinking that the message is understood from the get-go, but it is during this time of urgency and pace of when the change is announced, that we must foster trust and 'humanness'. The repetition of the message is critical for people to digest the depth of any change as often only part is heard before the brain reacts and the rest is missed.

Seligman and his collaborators in "Homo Prospectus" 2016 identified that humans look ahead to anticipate future scenarios more than behind. Humans explore future possibilities and scenarios to adjust their behaviour more so than based on past experiences. This is what we mean by prospection, and is a fundamental point for us to consider when working on change.

Leaders often want to sort it all out, to have complete action plans to placate people when communicating change and not empowering them to find their own route through. This overparenting comes from an empathetic place of care and wanting to problem solve for others, yet can diminish the individual's power to feel part of the change at all and resulting in feeling the change is simply being done to them.

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Vitally, in the book the authors propose four modes in which prospection operates:
- The implicit mind,
- deliberate thought,
- mind-wandering,
- and collective (social) imagination.

This last one is poignant for the future of work and innovation: collective/social imagination. This is what separates us as humans from computers and technology. AI does not have the capability here; it cannot make intuitive leaps or think about the unique intricacies of human life experience when innovating. If we are asking people to be more fully human at work and particularly through and leading change, what do we need people to focus on that is truly different to what is available via AI and technology? We believe looking ahead and using collective imagination (based on unique individual wisdom of experience) are key to what differentiates us as humans. This means making time and space for rich discussions and imagining new opportunities. **We must be unapologetically more human in our need for this to be seen as profitable way to spend time without structure and restrictions or scripts. The organisational need for every second spent by people at work to be profitable diminishes our space to be human even when this is at the heart of profitable innovation.**

2. Build psychological flexibility and safety

Interlinked with the call for adopting a human-centred leadership approach during times of change, we also must consider the conditions we create for support. To truly understand how to help people through challenge or crises, we need honest and open conversation rooted in trusting relationships, where people feel they can bring their true selves to work without fear of judgement or consequence. This feeds into creating an environment of psychological safety, which is key to ensuring a positive response to change.

- As humans, we come from positive case and intent. Our courage and bravery to take risk, and fail, should be kept to the forefront and we can remain open which may be vulnerable.

- We must build higher levels of trust leading to simpler transition through change; this trust comes from doing exactly what you've said you would do and role modelling integrity. It is vital to reflect on how organisations can build trust as a deliberate activity, and not as an accidental consequence of good leadership.

- Above and beyond focus groups, engagement surveys and other HR-focused data collection tools, we need to become listening mechanisms ourselves to understand the impact of change through the voice of the employee. Psychological safety is a key driver for this.

- Amy Edmondson's work emphasises that teams with high psychological safety are better equipped to innovate and adapt during change. Employees who feel safe to speak up and share ideas are critical to building resilient organisations.

An extension to this is psychological flexibility and focuses on how we can go beyond resilience of coping, dealing with and recovering from change impact to anticipating it, balancing demands, staying true to our values and continuing to focus, act and function with positive forward momentum.

This notion of **psychological flexibility** includes:

- Remaining open and curious through challenge with platforms for open dialogue and observing what is happening without judgement, which are extensions to work on inclusion practice that many organisations have been incorporating.

- Practicing and testing our value anchors in different scenarios is an extension of self-awareness development that is core to many L&D offerings available, particularly those with a foundation of Emotional Intelligence. Whilst this is a base for many leadership programmes, the events of the past five years press us to re-know ourselves and remember it is a lifelong journey of discovery that we need to revisit throughout our careers.

- Learning to use observation to balance demands and reprioritise, realigning to the mission and regularly asking what is happening, what is needed now, am I the right person for this?

As people leaders we need to create the conditions for people to apply these new skills into daily ways of working. These conditions include:

- Safe routes back so exploring and experimenting is encouraged and learning from failure is celebrated
- Not feeling alone and trying new responses to change with others and peers
- Feeling strong in who we are – knowing what we do well and where we feel brave
- Emphasis on learning from reflection and planning recovery time when things don't turn out how we anticipated.

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3. Supporting people through change with learning, skills and inclusive intervention

If organisations are upskilling through change, it enables individuals to embrace change more easily and feeds our natural human tendency to grow and learn. As leaders we must aim to support people through times of difficulty, change and challenge by moving towards skill acquisition for positive acceptance and opportunity.

- We can navigate change by reframing it as an exciting opportunity to grow and dial up its beneficial role in supporting new career experiences/steps.

- A shift in mindset to one of growth, curiosity and openness is especially needed for those who feel trapped in change or stuck in their 'homes'

- As humans, we have a natural tendency to want to learn and grow both personally and professionally, and we must tap into this human tendency as leverage for navigating continuous change.

- In order to grow through change, we may utilise continual reflection, and celebration/acknowledgment of what we are doing and where we are going. This could show up as ceremonies to close off a chapter, and to help create a new one; rituals can help to reboot our energy into recognising opportunity within change.

- Chris Yates and Linda Jingfang Cai, in their book '*Share*', emphasise the importance of harnessing networked knowledge and involving diverse perspectives. They propose moving beyond hierarchical models to "galaxy" systems, where each person is empowered to contribute.

Due to the complex nature of change, its' impact on people is not linear. The role of personal and team resilience has been an effective approach to support people through the various waves of continuous change, but within this, leaders must be aware of the spectrum in which people fall on at varying degrees in their openness to change, and therefore capacity to foster resilience.

In many organisations there tend to be traditionalists, pragmatists, and change makers. Regardless of what the change is, people will view change through different lenses and as leaders we must account for this. When we look to humanise change, we account for these differences, which enables our change initiative to be even more sustainable and of high impact.

"Do what you can, where you are with what you have" (Roosevelt)

Conclusion

Conclusion

Through conversations with leaders across various industries and our work on the Human Series over the past six months in 2024, we've seen that embracing our humanity during times of change is not just important - it's essential.

The insights from our recent roundtables reinforce this message: leaders who prioritise building trust and belonging to encourage innovation through co-creation are better equipped to navigate the complexities of today's workplace. By leveraging our social imagination and engaging in open dialogue ensuring everyone has a voice, organisations and their leaders can unlock sustainable creativity, innovation, and resilience, even in the face of change and challenge.

As we look to 2025 and beyond, grounding people strategies in human connection, psychological flexibility, meaning, and purpose will be vital for shaping a thriving and adaptable future on a global scale. When we prioritise the human experience, we can ensure that change is not only managed but also accepted and embraced for growth and opportunity.