DES DEARLOVE

Co-founder, Thinkers50

LISA HUMPHRIES

connectedness

HOW THE **BEST LEADERS** CREATE **AUTHENTIC HUMAN CONNECTION** IN A **DISCONNECTED WORLD**

THINKERS 50

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Thinkers50 is the world's most reliable resource for identifying, ranking, and sharing the leading management and business ideas of our age.

Founded in 2001, the Thinkers50 definitive ranking of management thinkers is published every two years. The Thinkers50 Distinguished Achievement Awards, which recognize the very best in management thinking and practice, have been described by the *Financial Times* as the "Oscars of management thinking."

Since 2016, the Thinkers50 Radar has been identifying emerging thinkers with the potential to make a significant contribution to management theory and practice. The Thinkers50 Booklists of Management Classics and Best New Management Books, introduced in 2022, highlight the most influential management books past and present, as selected by the Thinkers50 Community.

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Foreword

Learning from one another sets human beings apart from every other species on the planet. It isn't our big brains (though that doesn't hurt). It isn't that we have both spoken and written language (though that doesn't hurt either). And it certainly isn't because we are the largest, fastest, or most threatening of creatures. No, what makes humans unique is our unparalleled ability to learn from each other, both at once and across time.

It is learning that has given us the ability to reach a total population size that is vastly larger than would be the case for animals of an equivalent size. It is learning that has allowed us to survive, even thrive, in astonishingly diverse environments. Indeed, humans can be found in virtually all habitats on Earth, a quality unique to our species. And it isn't that humans simply adapt to the environments they find themselves in—they actively alter the environment through their command of energy and matter. Humans can innovate and build upon insights and discoveries made far from where they happen to be, in both space and time. With the press of a button, humans can access and build upon centuries of accumulated knowledge, generate more of it, and in turn share it with other humans who can do the same.

In this timely book, authors explore the implications of human connection and communication in an age of exponentially developing technologies. Both are essential to the extraordinary accomplishments of our species.

Let's explore three situations in which acknowledging participants' humanity has fundamentally shifted business outcomes.

Human Unpredictability and the Challenge of Scaled Systems

The very concept of scaled systems—systems that are designed to create outputs in a systematic and predictable way—is unique to humanity. Wonders such as the assembly line, globally precise supply chains, and the entire worldwide shipping industry are marvels of productivity. And yet, the very precision and repeatability that makes scaled systems so powerful is also often an enemy to the human beings enmeshed in them. As Paul LeBlanc, former president of Southern New Hampshire University, observes, scaled systems are built to ensure predictability and reliability (McGrath, 2024). Humans are capable of designing such systems, but when it comes to those that are intended to deliver care, they often fall short. Providing education, health care, recovery from the criminal justice system, and addiction treatment are all situations in which scaling struggles.

Humans are unpredictable. Their very ability to learn means they can do things like game the system, avoid sanctions, do things in ways that are more convenient for themselves, or learn bad habits that they in turn can pass along to others (Bloom, 2024). Similarly, rigidly built scaled systems with a one-size-fits-all approach often leave out solutions for those who do not fit their prescribed patterns. Evidence suggests that the more complex a scaled system becomes, the more resources need to be dedicated just to maintaining it (Ehrenreich, 2020). That said, we may well be on the brink of discovering a new solution to the perennial dilemma of the fragility of scaled systems.

With the advent of artificial intelligence and machine learning, historical processes of human learning can accelerate. This in

turn means that people with less expensive expert training can take actions and make decisions that previously required highly skilled experts. Further, instead of having systems that rely on predesigned solutions to succeed, humans can be at the touch-points in which variability arises in the system. A fascinating example of a system that has achieved this is Nashville's CareBridge Health, which uses technology to surround its Medicare and Medicaid patients with the equivalent of 24/7 care and monitor-ing, bringing in expensive experts only when warranted. The rest of the time, the healthcare teams of physicians, pharmacists, nurses, social workers, and others providing care address issues such as preventing falls and limiting the appearance of wounds. The result is a system that profitably serves its patients at scale.

Human Learning Through Connections and the Debate Over Where Work Takes Place

It is a taken for granted assumption in much of the literature on workplaces that being together in a common place fosters learning, trust, companionship, and innovation. And yet, we also know that relying on working at the same place in person is not systematic. Further, the richness of communication between people is limited. As Thomas J. Allen famously discovered, once people are located more than about 60 feet apart, the richness of the information they exchange with one another drops off dramatically—from a high of 80% of shared, rich information to lows of something like 20%. And our wondrous channels of communication—telephone, email, short messages, and so on—don't make any difference to this reality (McGrath, 2023). As Allen himself noted, we don't substitute such communication vehicles for one another. When it comes to complex learning and problem-solving, there is no substitute for people being physi-cally together (Allen and Henn, 2006).

This is perhaps the reason so many companies are hungry for their people to return to their offices—to the point at which some are punishing those who don't "badge in" (Cutter, and Chen 2023) enough with poor performance rating and financial consequences. Work by Keith Ferrazzi (2024) and others, however, suggests that companies have misunderstood the implications of the Allen rule. This is that the Allen effect takes place in situations of "serendipitous" bonding—bumping into one another accidentally, for instance. The level of team bonding reported by teams in Ferrazzi's study, on a 5-point scale, hovers on average around 2.8. That is hardly world-changing levels of team effectiveness! While the level of team bonding did drop a bit during the pandemic, the level achieved through serendipitous bonding leaves a lot to be desired. Instead, Ferrazzi suggests putting in place practices that foster the creation of bonding, trust, and common commitment proactively. The practices of team formation and execution that we have inherited from the past are not fast enough or reliable enough for the level of performance teams need to achieve today.

In other words, evidence suggests that intentionally designing teams for mutual success, bonding, and trust is what matters to human groups, not where they randomly happen to be working.

Humans as Costs—Leaving Value on the Table

Sadly, both in the United States and across the globe, systems have emerged that treat people, particularly frontline people, as cost centers. Efficiency-oriented systems therefore seek to minimize those costs as much as possible. As Zeynep Ton has argued in her marvelous books, *The Good Jobs Strategy* (2014) and *The Case for Good Jobs* (2023a), we have created a virtual epidemic of bad jobs. Low pay, unpredictable hours, little opportunities for advancement, and few opportunities to learn a variety of skills

have cemented many employers' activities as essentially treating valuable humans like poorly performing robots. The business effects are not great either—high turnover, decreased customer satisfaction, poor productivity, and high levels of active disengagement are all outcomes.

Instead, Ton's work suggests that thinking of employees as units of revenue, rather than of cost, can yield tremendous benefits, even in low-margin sectors of the economy. As she puts it, ". . .what happens if your turnover level is one fifth of the industry average? That means that now for every new worker you can spend five times as much on hiring, on training, on performance management without increasing your hiring, training, or performance management budget. Can you imagine the competitive advantage that these companies have when they operate with such low turnover? There are so many other things that they can do. For example, they can ensure that their customers don't wait. They can ensure that their customers get service from people who are empowered, who know exactly what they're doing. They can ensure that their employees can constantly improve performance. These are all the things that are not available to companies that operate with high turnover" (Ton, 2023b).

Given that human learning is cumulative, it isn't surprising that firms that have figured out how to keep people, help them learn together, and adopt practices that are good for the enterprise outperform those that don't. One fascinating example of this is in the transaction led by Peter Stavros of KKR, in which CHI Overhead Doors was acquired by the private equity firm. In a departure from the standard playbook, however, every employee received an ownership grant of shares in the company through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP), and when the company was eventually sold to Nucor Steel, employees made life-changing returns on their equity. What made this possible was attention to day-to-day improvements at the company. KKR had acquired the company in 2015 for US$700 million and sold it to Nucor Corp for US$3 billion in early 2022.

It became one of KKR's best investments historically, on the basis of treating humans as the ingenious, cooperative creatures they can be.

Connections—No Permission Required

Some companies, such as CHI Overhead Doors, have found that humans can put their ingenuity and learning to marvelous use, given the right organizational design and structure. Ricardo Semler, chief executive officer of the Brazilian company Semco, explains the success of a similar approach in his 1993 book, *Maverick* (1993). Semler observes, "We hire adults and then we treat them as adults. Think about that. Outside the factory, workers are men and women who elect governments, serve in the army, lead community projects, raise and educate families, and make decisions every day about the future. Friends solicit their advice. Salespeople court them. Children and grandchildren look up to them for their wisdom and experience. But the moment they walk into the factory, the company transforms them into adolescents. They have to wear badges and name tags, arrive at a certain time, stand in line to punch the clock or eat their lunch, get permission to go to the bathroom, give lengthy explanations every time they're five minutes late, and follow instructions without asking a lot of questions."

Other organizations offer early examples of facilitating more human connection and agency in their workplaces. Buurtzorg is a self-managing network of nurses in the Netherlands. Morning Star in the United States has grown extraordinarily in its tomato-processing sector. Haier in China makes appliances using the principles of micro-enterprises. The Ner Group in Spain espouses a flat hierarchy as part of its secret sauce. South Africa's Bidvest prides itself on decentralization, particularly in its services area.

As William Gibson once reportedly said, "The future is already here; it just isn't evenly distributed yet." So too with the human

side of our changing technological universe. Let the gems in this collection show you the promise of a more connected future.

—Rita McGrath
Columbia Business School, New York, June 2024

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Introduction

On a recent trip to Tibet, the Harvard professor and happiness guru, Arthur Brookes, met the Dalai Lama. His Holiness imparted six lessons on how to transcend our narrow focus on ourselves and shift our attention to other people instead. Brookes asked him why we find it so hard to focus on other people rather than ourselves—to which the Dalai Lama replied that we are under an illusion of ignorance about our individuality. The hidden truth is that we are all interconnected. We are all interdependent.

So how can we learn to live interdependently? Lesson no. 1 from His Holiness is that the way to remember the truth of interdependence throughout the day is to put love at the center of your work. No matter what your job, find a way to remind yourself that someone needs you, and the work is making their life better. In some jobs (raising kids), says Brookes, this is more obvious than in others, but it's true of all productive activity.

It may seem a bit of a stretch from the mountaintop monastery in Tibet to the busy and boisterous world of modern business, but it's not such a huge leap. In November 2023, when we invited the world's thought leaders to join us in London for the 2023 Thinkers50 Awards Gala, it was the first time the Thinkers50 Community had been able to meet in person since the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the three themes of the Gala was Reconnecting (the other two were Rethinking and Resetting).

Reconnecting

The Reconnecting theme was important because we had not gathered face-to-face as a community since 2019. The 2021 Awards Gala was a virtual event, and although it was inspiring to get together online, for 2023 we sensed a pent-up hunger for in-person human connection. We weren't disappointed. The sense of connection in the room and throughout the two-day 2023 Gala was extraordinary and has been remarked upon many times by those who experienced it. It reminded us of what it is to be human. It reconnected us with old friends and introduced us to new ones in a way that simply is not possible online.

A video call is not the same as being present in the same room; connecting digitally is not the same as connecting physically. The pandemic may have hastened the advance of technology in a time of crisis, but it also brought the realization that we may have been losing the human touch with colleagues, peers, customers, managers, leaders, family, and friends over the last two decades, as the digital world unfolded before us. It's easy to pin the blame for the disconnection that many of us feel on COVID-19, but in truth, it was already there: a creeping sense of separation and isolation that has become widespread in our modern society. Many more people now live alone and at a distance from family and friends. Technology, while at one level offering new ways to connect, has also contributed to our isolation.

There is an epidemic of loneliness.

In his turn of the century book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam explored the decline of social capital in the United States, including the decrease in civic engagement and social connectedness since the 1960s. Putnam used the metaphor of bowling alone to illustrate the trend, explaining that while the number of people who go bowling had increased, the number who bowled in leagues had declined. Putnam put this down to a combination of factors, including the rise of television, two-income families, migration

patterns, and changing generational attitudes. He argued that this had led to a decline in the quality and frequency of social interactions, resulting in a reduced sense of community and social trust.

Today, we can add a few more factors to Putnam's list: the amount of screen time we spend across multiple devices—including gaming, smart phones, and virtual work—as well as the lingering impact of the pandemic and the impending impact of artificial intelligence (AI). Some of the trends Putnam's book outlined have since reversed—most notably participation in US elections, which has risen. (Roughly two-thirds—66%—of the eligible population turned out for the 2020 presidential election—the highest for any national election since 1900.) But sadly, this can also be equated with a growing polarization in politics—and the disconnection and anger that many voters feel, a phenomenon that has been amplified and exacerbated by social media.

At the Thinkers50 Awards Gala, when we announced the topic of this book and invited contributions, we did not realize how acutely the theme would resonate. The response was almost overwhelming. It struck a nerve with people at the event and beyond. The fact that it coincided with the rapid advancement of generative AI certainly played a part too. What it is to be human and to connect with other humans was and continues to be on the minds of those who research, write, and speak about the future of business and management.

Game Changer or Whole New Game?

Right now, AI is still in its infancy, but it is already having a profound influence on how we work and live.

Few doubt that AI has the power to transform business, but how do we ensure that it does so in a way that benefits human beings and society? AI promises groundbreaking productivity and efficiency gains, but it also raises concerns about job losses,

algorithmic biases, ethical dilemmas, and a host of other issues. It is also the question on the minds of business leaders: Is AI simply the next in a series of "disruptive innovations," or is it a new paradigm altogether? Do our existing strategy and innovation frameworks, tools, and theories still hold in this brave new world? Or do we need new thought-leadership to make sense of and navigate humanely through the AI inflection point?

Many of these questions remain unanswered and will only become clear in the coming years. But one thing does seem certain: AI threatens to remove many of our opportunities for connection. Meetings can be missed and summarized in seconds. Interactions with chatbots have already replaced human-to-human customer service (to the point where we often no longer know if we are talking to a person or a machine). Many tasks previously performed by human beings will be taken over and executed by more efficient algorithmically tuned AI tools. So where does that leave us?

The truth is that we don't yet know. What is certain, however, is that the fundamental human desire —need—to connect will not go away. We are hardwired for human connection. The question, then, becomes how will we connect with the new technology—will we fight it or embrace it? Will human beings and AI duel or dance? And how can we create stronger and more nuanced connections through technology?

"In the intricate dance of life and work, genuine connections are the rhythm that keeps us moving forward," observed Martin Lindstrom, branding and business culture expert, at the 2023 Thinkers50 Awards Gala. Lindstrom is right. There is something very special about human beings connecting. Something almost magical. That magic was present in the room in London's Guildhall when the Thinkers50 Community came together. Its potential is present wherever human beings come together and connect.

Collective Effervescence

"Things happen here that don't happen in real life," Norman Cook, AKA Fatboy Slim, declared when he came on stage at the Glastonbury music festival—a gathering of 200,000 people in a field in Somerset, England. Sociologist Émile Durkheim called this "collective effervescence," which, Wharton organizational psychologist Adam Grant explains, is "the energy of being in a group with a shared purpose. It's the joie de vivre of being in synchrony with strangers on a dance floor, colleagues in a brainstorm, friends on a soccer field, or family at a holiday dinner" (Grant 2021). It refers to the unifying excitement generated when people experience the same heightened emotion, an emotional contagion that can stimulate human connections from a music festival or sports event to a wave of creativity or innovation.

Grant reminds us that joy is a group phenomenon, a team game. "Joy shared is joy sustained," he says. In a nod to the Dalai Lama and Buddhist doctrine, he advocates "a Declaration of Interdependence."

Things happen when people get together, at an event, in a meeting, in the workplace, or even in a queue at the sandwich shop. Community matters. Relationships matter. "Every relationship that you form and nurture has a significant impact on you and can be the difference between success and loneliness. I've learned to never underestimate the power of investing in community," says Ruchika Tulshyan, author of *Inclusion on Purpose* (2023).

It's worth repeating. Relationships matter. Community matters. Harnessing the power of connections is the way to build trust and boost productivity. Connections (building relationships) are also intrinsic to good leadership.

Connections are essential to the sharing of ideas to make the world a better place, which is the mission of Thinkers50.

So how can leaders foster better connections between their people, customers, and other collaborative organizations, in this brave new world? How can we create our own pockets of collective effervescence? And what do the leaders of tomorrow need to know about human connection?

That's the question we put to the thinkers who make up the Thinkers50 Community. This book is their response. It is the second of our curated collections of short essays addressed to the leaders of the present and future, to help them not only to survive but also to thrive (Dearlove 2023). As ever, we hope that the advice and fresh thinking they contain will help you—the leaders of tomorrow—nurture and sustain the human touch on your journey.

Readers' Guide

The topics covered in the following pages center around the theme of human connection. The book is structured to help readers dip in and dip out or read as a complete guide.

How can we cultivate positive working relationships? Michael Bungay Stanier provides a framework. Andrew Barnes argues the benefits of implementing a 4-day week (something we have adopted at Thinkers50 and heartily recommend). How can we reconnect when we have lost touch? Pia Lauritzen reveals the power of questions. Making every word count: Matt Abrahams illuminates on building effective communication skills. Taking the lead in the dance with AI, Kate O'Neill outlines a human-centric approach to AI, and Hamilton Mann addresses the thorny scourge of biases in AI models.

There are lessons for leaders too, from Kirstin Ferguson on intellectual humility; developing a human touch from Susie Kennedy; perfecting meeting intelligence (MQ) from Thomas Roulet and Soulaima Gourani; and tackling the loneliness epidemic from Constance Noonan Hadley.

How do we create a connecting culture within our organizations? Poornima Luthra presents seven steps to active allyship; Malissa Clark unpacks the issues of remote work versus return-to-office; and Neri Karra Sillaman shows us that resilience is stronger in a community than within an individual. We also need to connect with true inclusivity, and Ludmila Praslova offers the canary code to embracing neurodiversity.

Focusing on people development and nurturing talent, Kandi Wiens addresses burnout; Jenny Fernandez explains how to unleash the powers of Gen Z; and David Lancefield shows how to cultivate strategic people through empowerment, reframing, and teamwork.

Connecting the Dots

Connection is our most important human superpower. Lack of connection is our biggest threat as individuals and as a species. Connections matter. They are what make us human. We are interdependent and our work is interdependent. On our own, we are just individual dots. Together we are so much more. The future of management and business is all about how we connect those dots.

—Des Dearlove & Lisa Humphries, London, June 2024

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We, Human

1

Every Working Relationship Can Be Better

Here's How

Michael Bungay Stanier
Author of The Coaching Habit

Okay, perhaps not every working relationship. But *almost* every one.

I know that's a bold statement. It's also an urgent one.

Our happiness and our success at work are deeply dependent on the quality of our key working relationships, not just our bosses, our team, and our collaborators, but also our peers, our customers and clients, and our vendors.

Think of what it's been like to work with those key people. When things are good between you, there's a strong likelihood that the work is good too and you feel at your best. When things between you are off, the work is a struggle, and you feel stressed.

Hope Is Not a Strategy

You know this to be true from our lived experience. And yet, mostly, you do nothing about it. It's in the lap of the gods, you've got your fingers crossed, you're rolling the dice, you're hoping it will be good this time, and then you wait and see.

You start each working relationship with mixed feelings, some balance of hope and anxiety. Your past experiences and to some extent your inherent wiring will determine your own particular blend of optimism and pessimism.

Sometimes you've got lucky and found yourself working with someone who's fabulous. You clicked. You were greater than the sum of your parts. You brought out each other's best, and you managed to step lightly through the tricky moments.

Sometimes you've got unlucky. They wound you up, set you off, and brought out the worst in you (just as you did for them). You were diminished by the experience, "less" not just in the quality of the work you did and the impact it had, but in the way you felt about yourself.

And mostly, the working relationships have been somewhere in the middle. They're mostly okay. There are ups and downs. You can live with it, but it's been defining.

But what if you stopped just *hoping* that you'd get lucky and actually did something about it?

What if you were active in shaping the working relationships you had so that they were closer to what you hoped for? What if each of your key working relationships was the best version that it could be?

What if it could be the best possible relationship (BPR)?

The Best Possible Relationship

Spoiler alert: not every working relationship can be wonderful. Would that it could be true . . . but, no. However, every one of