

Nurturing the Human Dimension

Steelcase CEO Jim Keane joins the Global Peter Drucker Forum to explore redefining the work experience to help people do what they do best.



Today, people need to do what computers cannot. Machines are freeing people up to focus on things like creativity, social connectivity and emotional intelligence. So, how do leaders redesign the work experience to help people do what they do best?

As part of its 10th annual conference entitled *management. the human dimension*, the [Global Peter Drucker Forum](#) put together a panel of distinguished academics, company leaders, researchers and authors to offer ideas about how to approach the blended [future of work](#).

Empathy as a management practice

Steelcase CEO Jim Keane shared his first job — an elevator operator. The instructions were simple. Pull a crank to go up, push it to go down, and never talk to the people riding. Ten hours a day. Every day. To battle the boredom, he broke one of the rules. He started talking to his customers and learned he could quickly figure out how they were feeling, if they were having a good day or a bad one.

Today, computers have turned elevators into the first autonomous vehicle. Machines are taking over mind-numbing, back-breaking and dehumanizing jobs leaving people to celebrate the things that make them human. Keane focused on empathy.

“We have to learn about technology. But, we also have to reinvest in ourselves by building new management practices that make empathy something we do on a routine basis,” Keane says.

Try this

Keane gave an example from his first leadership meeting after becoming CEO. Instead of standing at a podium and trying to convince his team to follow a plan, he broke them into small groups, and sent them into nearby buildings and plants to listen to people and ask three questions: What’s getting better? What’s getting worse? How does that make you feel? The managers came back together with a new perspective on the company and its culture. Keane didn’t have to convince them changes were needed. They were now persuading him.

As an ongoing practice, whenever he travels, he always blocks an hour of his time to meet with people he’s never met before. He says he gathers tremendous insights from those unstructured conversations.

Rethink everything about work

Reskilling and lifelong learning are two commonly batted-about buzzwords in business today. John Hagel, co-chairman, Deloitte, Center for the Edge, says we need to rethink those ideas. He encourages leaders to ask: What should work be? If it’s about scalable efficiency, specialization and standardization, then machines can do it better. But now, he says, technology gives us a chance to revisit that fundamental question about work.

“Our belief is the work that will drive the growth and prosperity of economies around the world is a very different kind of work,” says Hagel. “Rather than routine tasks, it’s focusing workers on identifying and addressing unseen problems and opportunities to create more value. That’s a very different form of work.”

Try this

He says we need to reframe the conversation from reskilling, which he suggests is just teaching people new, process tasks, to developing new competencies which are more fundamental and able to be translated to a variety of contexts. Capabilities, he says, have to do with curiosity, imagination, creativity, emotional and social intelligence. Capabilities are like a muscle, he says. We all have it. For some, it’s atrophied and is just waiting to be exercised. When it comes to lifelong learning, he says it’s not something you can require. People need to be driven and motivated to learn all the time. He calls it “the passion of the explorer.” Replace the goal of “worker engagement” with that of “worker passion.” By redesigning the work experience with the primary goal of accelerating learning and performance improvement, the workplace can look very different than it does today. Companies can shift from a win-lose model, where employees are told what to do, burnout and ultimately lose, but the company may win, to a win-win model, where workers get to do the work they should be doing and the company wins.

Don’t let company culture just happen

Culture is another popular topic these days, but a tough one to get right. Yves Pigneur, professor of Management Information Systems, University of Lausanne, says he sees more and more students who are seeking out small companies or startups over large, more established organizations.

His advice – intentionally design your culture. Observe and map out existing behaviors to develop an As-Is Culture Map. Then, consider what kind of behaviors a human-centric culture requires. Well-intentioned organizations are appointing chief happiness officers, forming innovation teams or sponsoring hackathons. But, he says, these efforts will stall or die if they don't align with the overarching culture.

Try this

People who work in a culture created with them in mind have passion for their work, take ownership, collaborate and help others, trust their team members, help people grow and listen to ideas that bubble up from their teams.

A new culture isn't something you can declare. You have to make concrete changes to processes, routines and rituals," explains Pigneur.

You cannot just declare a new culture. You need a concrete change process, routine and rituals. What does it look like? Pigneur encourages leaders to test some things and watch for the impact. Some of his ideas: no compromise hiring, teleworking, fair and competitive compensation, risk acceptance, open door leadership policy, less meetings and leadership by example.

Questions are the answer

In the world of artificial intelligence and digital transformation, our ability as human beings to ask the right question is the capability that will help humanity succeed. So says Hal Gregersen, executive director, MIT Leadership Center, MIT Sloan School of Management.

The foundational issues facing business today such as globalization, transformation and innovation operate on the edge of uncertainty. Computers can't ask the right questions. Gregersen says we have to keep our ability to question deeply and vibrantly alive. His team interviewed more than 200 leaders over the last few years to discover how they ask the right questions. He says you need to be willing to be wrong, be uncomfortable, be empathetic and listen and be fully present. When you do these things, question emerge that open up windows of opportunity.

Try this

One CEO he spoke with said he actively seeks out passive data. He operates a logistics company. When he flies somewhere, he isn't picked up by a limo or a taxi. He has one of the company drivers pick him up. Though these conversations, he's learned critical things about how to improve his organization.

Another example involved a creative director for a major movie house. Before any idea gets a green light, it goes before a "brain trust." For three hours, colleagues have the responsibility to give you complete candor and tough feedback. According to one director, it's this process that turns movies that suck into blockbusters.

So, what questions are you asking when you show up to work? What questions is your company asking? Are you creating the space for conditions to thrive that allow people to ask tough questions? These are not the routines of a machine environment. These are the places that create the most human of the human future.

