The Commoditization of Humanity

A Call to Courageous Leadership

A statistical and philosophical root cause paper for leaders governing organizations and influencing communities. Written for owners, chief executives, senior leaders, pastors, principals and elected officials who can authorise a decision without waiting for a committee.

THE CHALLENGE

Human beings are not commodities. Yet many institutions have become far more skilled at measuring output, cost, risk and efficiency than at understanding identity, belonging, resilience, dignity and human capacity. The engine for creativity and innovation is sustainable human capacity.

When people are valued primarily for what they produce, consume or contribute to institutional performance, short term gains can conceal long term deterioration. Creativity weakens, trust declines, human capacity is depleted, families absorb the pressure and communities inherit the consequences.

> Will we continue extracting short term performance from diminishing human capacity, or will we govern in ways that restore people, renew institutions and create the conditions for enduring fruitfulness?

Prepared for	Leaders in Durham Region and across corporate Canada
Companion to	The Courageous Leadership Challenge, Compassionate Horizons
Status	Working draft, evidence current to 2026

01

Executive thesis

The crises confronting leaders rarely arrive as one coherent problem. They arrive as fires: burnout, turnover, food insecurity, housing pressure, addiction, loneliness, conflict, declining trust, family strain, mental illness, workforce shortages and fiscal pressure. Because each fire demands an immediate response, organizations and governments become highly practised at reaction while losing the time and perspective required for root cause leadership.

This paper proposes that many of these fires share a deeper condition: the progressive commoditization of humanity, the reduction of people from persons with identity, relationship, purpose, limits and potential into units of labour, consumption, risk, cost, data or political category.

The claim is not that every social problem has one cause, nor that leadership alone can repair every structural failure. The claim is that systems organized primarily around extraction, acceleration and measurable output predictably exhaust human capacity, weaken belonging and transfer costs downstream into families, institutions and communities.

These pressures are not confined to the margins of society. The employee worried about food, housing, a child, an aging parent, addiction or financial instability does not leave that reality at the company door. Nor does the executive responsible for the next quarter, the next restructuring or the next difficult conversation. Community health and organizational health are not separate systems. They are reciprocal conditions experienced by the same people.

THE STARTING QUESTION

Compassionate Horizons does not begin by asking corporate Canada what it can do for us. It begins with the inverse question: what can Compassionate Horizons do for you? Meaningful participation does not require a new department, a large new budget or another layer of pressure.

02

The evidence is not one fire, it is a pattern

The figures below do not prove a single causal chain. They do reveal a pattern large enough to require more than isolated programs and short term responses. Each is a cost already sitting on an employer's books, whether or not it is named as one.

Signal	Scale	Leadership meaning
Senior executive strain	69% of C-suite respondents in 2022 were seriously considering leaving for a role that better supported well-being. The figure rose to 75% in 2023. [8]	Executive pressure is not insulated from the wider human crisis. It is intensified by isolation, concentrated accountability and relentless short term expectations.
Workplace mental health	12 billion working days lost globally each year to depression and anxiety, about US$1 trillion in lost productivity. [1]	Poor work environments are not only private health concerns. They are organizational design and economic issues.
Employee engagement	Low engagement estimated to cost the global economy US$8.9 trillion, about 9% of global GDP. Only 23% of employees were engaged in 2023. [2]	Disconnection at work has become a macroeconomic signal, not a marginal HR concern.
Canadian work stress	21.2% of employed Canadians reported high or very high work related stress in April 2023. Heavy workload and work life balance were leading causes. [3]	Pressure is widespread enough to affect culture, safety, retention and family life.
Food insecurity	In 2024, about 9.8 million people, 24.0% of Canadians, lived in households reporting some form of food insecurity. [4]	Vulnerability now reaches deeply into employed and outwardly stable households.
Loneliness	In early 2024, 13% of Canadians aged 15+ reported always or often feeling lonely. The share was 17% among ages 15 to 24. [5]	Belonging and social connection are infrastructure, not sentimental extras.
Housing pressure	CMHC reports that financial difficulty associated with increased rent or mortgage payments nearly doubled from 2018 to 2022. [6]	Housing stress competes directly with food, health, mobility and family stability.

03

The cost you are already carrying

This is not pure philanthropy. Every organization in this region is already paying for community breakdown, and paying at the most expensive point in the cycle, after the damage is done. The costs appear on the income statement under other names.

- Lost work days. Depression and anxiety alone remove 12 billion working days from the world economy every year. Absence, short term disability and the quiet cost of presenteeism are the visible edge of a much larger draw on human capacity. [1]
- Disengagement. Only 23% of employees are engaged. The rest are present, paid and producing a fraction of what they could. The estimated global cost is US$8.9 trillion, roughly 9% of global GDP. [2]
- Turnover and recruitment. Replacing an experienced person costs a multiple of salary in recruitment, onboarding, lost institutional knowledge and the time of everyone covering the gap. Much of the departure decision is made at home, not at work.
- Benefits and claims drift. Mental health, chronic stress and caregiver strain move steadily through drug plans, disability claims and premium renewals.
- Distraction and error. A worker facing eviction, an empty fridge or a parent in crisis carries that into safety critical work, customer conversations and judgment calls.
- Executive attrition. Three quarters of senior leaders have considered leaving for somewhere that treats well-being seriously. The most expensive people to replace are the ones under the most concentrated pressure. [8]
- Local demand and tax base. Households in crisis do not buy, do not hire and do not invest. Reactive treatment of the same crises is funded out of a tax base your business also pays into.

> **KEY INSIGHT**
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> Performance is often the last domino, not the first. By the time leaders see a measurable decline, the underlying human and cultural deterioration may have been accumulating for years.

04

The progression of human entropy

The following sequence is offered as a leadership diagnostic. A system can be highly organized, expertly designed, closely measured and efficiently administered and still move toward depletion, because disciplined execution accelerates deterioration when it efficiently advances the wrong purpose.

Stage	What happens	What leaders see
1. Ungrounded identity	Worth becomes dependent on achievement, approval, image, comparison or control.	Striving, appeasing, over-functioning, insecurity and fear based choices.
2. Distorted human energy	Chronic stress consumes attention, recovery and emotional regulation.	Fatigue, reactivity, presenteeism, avoidable conflict and reduced judgment.
3. Dysfunctional culture	Individual strain becomes collective climate and normalized behaviour.	Mistrust, silence, fragmentation, compliance, disengagement and loss of creativity.
4. Performance deterioration	The organization begins paying for conditions created earlier.	Turnover, absenteeism, errors, stagnation, customer harm and execution failure.
5. Community transfer	Costs leave the workplace but do not disappear.	Family strain, health demand, financial insecurity, isolation and increased pressure on social systems.

05

Leaders are the fulcrum between extraction and creation

Most leaders did not design the systems they now govern. They inherited accumulated expectations, bureaucratic inertia, quarterly pressure, public scrutiny, technological acceleration and cultures that reward immediate output more reliably than long term human health. Leaders are therefore part of the casualty list as well as the solution.

Yet leaders also occupy the point from which those forces can be redirected. Their decisions influence capital, culture, priorities, incentives, language and behaviour throughout the organizations and communities they govern. Change the governing conviction of a leader and the effects move rapidly through an entire institution.

The purpose of this paper is to confront without condemning, challenge without shaming, awaken without alienating and call leaders up rather than merely call them out.

> **THE LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLE**
>
> The culture may be stronger than the individual swimmer, but leaders still hold the greatest legitimate capacity to change the current.

06

Scarcity is a function of fragmentation, not lack

The principle is familiar at home. Basements, garages, workshops and storage rooms fill with tools used once, materials kept for a future project, furniture awaiting another purpose and equipment children have outgrown. Useful, valuable and disconnected from anyone who presently needs it.

Organizations contain the same latent capacity at a different scale: surplus and end of line inventory, returned or demonstration product, equipment, logistics capacity, professional knowledge, supplier relationships, facilities, purchasing power, communication reach, employee goodwill, executive experience and community trust. These resources are not necessarily obsolete. They are simply fragmented from the people for whom they could become provision.

Repurposing means the intentional redirection of latent products, assets, relationships, expertise and organizational capabilities through their natural life cycle so they create greater value for both the organization and the community. Participation can therefore begin through better deployment rather than net new cost.

07

The confidential table

The second half of this invitation is not about goods at all. It is about the room. Senior leaders rarely have a place to discuss what they are actually carrying with peers who understand the weight and have no interest in selling them anything.

- Cohorts of roughly 10 to 16 qualified owners, chief executives and enterprise leaders.
- A confidential, evidence informed discussion that begins with the leadership story rather than a funding request.
- Non-competing participants where confidentiality matters, peer referral only, no vendor dominated agenda.
- One practical organizational or community stewardship question brought to the table.
- Direct access to credible frontline intelligence without turning vulnerable people into promotional content.
- A defined next step: a diagnostic, an introduction, a product lifecycle opportunity, a culture initiative or another bounded pilot.

FORUM POSTURE

The first question remains: what can Compassionate Horizons do for you? The forum earns the right to ask leaders for participation by first helping them see, understand and steward what they already carry.

08

The challenge

Four commitments, ninety days, no cheque required.

01 Name it	Put your name to the challenge publicly. Not a logo on a wall. A leader saying out loud that the health of this community is part of their remit.
02 Release one thing	One decision from what you already control: a pallet run, a floor of furniture, a van on Thursdays, a warehouse bay, a payroll skill, a vacant unit. Something real, inside 90 days.
03 Open one door	Bring one peer with you. A supplier, a client, a fellow board member, another church. Leadership travels along relationships faster than it travels along advertising.
04 Let it be measured	Your contribution is referenced, tracked and reported like everything else. You will be able to show your board, your staff and your family exactly what it did.

> A community does not rise because its charities work harder. It rises when the people who can decide, decide.

Evidence boundaries

The Deloitte and Workplace Intelligence survey covered the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia and should not be represented as a Canada only statistic. A generalized annual business cost from psychological distress is deliberately excluded from this paper until a sufficiently clear and current Canadian source is confirmed. Business counts, employment, income and education figures are official Canadian statistics. Counts and eligibility standards for executive networks are self reported by those organizations and are included to identify concentration points, not as validation of their effectiveness.

References

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4. Statistics Canada. Canadian Income Survey, 2024. Released 29 April 2026.

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6. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. 2022 Canadian Housing Survey. 10 September 2024.

7. Mental Health Commission of Canada. National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.

8. Deloitte Insights and Workplace Intelligence. Advancing workplace well-being. 2023.

9. Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. Key Small Business Statistics 2025.

10. Statistics Canada, 2021 Census tables 98-10-0586-01, 98-10-0447-01 and 98-10-0593-01.

Compassionate Horizons. A fund creation, conversion and distribution facility for the frontline of Durham Region. To take the challenge or request a seat at a confidential leadership table, visit the Courageous Leadership Challenge page.