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Leadership as Human Art

A Humanist Approach to Transformational Practice

Abstract

This essay explores a humanist approach to organizational leadership, inspired by Abraham Zaleznik's concept of the "humanist leader" in *Hedgehogs and Foxes*. Rejecting reductive, technocratic models of leadership, it argues for a model grounded in moral character, emotional intelligence, and imaginative vision. Drawing on the practical philosophy and services of Division Group, this paper presents a human-centered model for guiding strategic change that balances structure with meaning, purpose with poetics, and execution with ethical reflection.

1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations operate in complex, volatile environments. While conventional leadership models emphasize control, efficiency, and metrics, such frameworks often neglect the emotional and moral dimensions of organizational life. This essay offers an alternative paradigm: leadership as a human art. Anchored in Abraham Zaleznik's theory of the humanist leader, and informed by the practice of Division Group, it repositions leadership as a creative, ethical, and transformational act.

2. Leadership Begins with Character

Zaleznik posits that effective leadership stems not from technique, but from character. At Division Group, we view leadership as a moral endeavor. Integrity, empathy, and trustworthiness are prerequisites—not aspirations. Leaders serve by shaping context and enabling others, not by asserting control. Leadership is thus inseparable from moral agency: the responsibility to act with conscience in the face of ambiguity and consequence.

3. Vision as Emotional Architecture

Humanist leaders, Zaleznik notes, use imagination to reframe reality and unlock possibility. Division Group approaches organizational design as emotional architecture: systems and structures that communicate identity, inspire commitment, and enable purpose. Like great buildings, well-designed transformations are both functional and symbolic. Our leadership philosophy fuses purpose with poetics, producing solutions that not only work—but resonate.

4. Bringing Structure to Experience

Transformational change is not purely rational; it is emotional and experiential. Division Group's interventions are structured to cultivate energy, pride, and shared purpose. Through design thinking, we shape experiences that engage hearts as well as minds. We guide clients through complexity by providing rhythm and focus, enabling teams to move decisively without losing sight of meaning.

5. Designing for Meaning

We assert that change must be felt to be embraced. Our work centers on co-creating emotionally engaging environments where people find connection, significance, and motivation. By aligning operational goals with human experience, we help organizations tell their story—and live it. This is not aesthetic embellishment; it is strategic and cultural design.

6. Ethical Leadership and Future Design

Humanist leadership carries with it what Zaleznik calls the “burden of command.” Division Group accepts this responsibility with humility and rigor. We are not content with technical success. We strive to help organizations design futures that are ethically sound, emotionally rich, and operationally viable. Our approach is guided by conscience, accountability, and a long-term view of value creation.

7. Conclusion

Leadership, at its best, is interpretive, ethical, and generative. Division Group does not simply manage change—we humanize transformation. By placing character, imagination, and emotional resonance at the core of our leadership practice, we affirm the enduring

relevance of the humanist model in modern organizational life. We lead not as technicians of control, but as architects of possibility.

Keywords

leadership philosophy, humanist leadership, Abraham Zaleznik, organizational change, design thinking, emotional intelligence, transformational practice, ethical leadership, Division Group

References

Zaleznik, A. (2008). *Hedgehogs and foxes: Character, leadership, and command in organizations*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Footnote

All references to Abraham Zaleznik's concept of the "humanist leader" and the "burden of command" are interpretive summaries of themes explored in his work, particularly in Hedgehogs and Foxes (2008).

Disclosure

This essay reflects the original authorship and perspective of Eric Teunissen, CM. AI-assisted tools were used in the drafting process to support clarity, structure, and refinement. All conceptual framing, interpretations, and final content represent the human judgment and authorship of the writer and Division Group.