



HUMANITY AND AUTHENTICITY

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Introduction: Welcome to the Living Landscape

If you're reading this, you probably already sense that something in your organization—something in the terrain itself—needs tending. You've felt it in the undercurrent of meetings, in the fatigue that lingers even after a "good" day, in the quiet intuition that our work is not only about efficiency or outcomes, but about relationship. *Relational Landscaping* begins here, with that awareness.

Relational Landscaping is the art and practice of tending the human terrain of an organization. It invites us to see workplaces not as static structures of policy and procedure, but as **living ecosystems**—dynamic, interdependent, and always growing or changing in response to the environment around them. In a healthy ecosystem, balance is sustained through relationship: roots feed soil, soil feeds roots. When one element is neglected, the whole suffers. The same is true of organizations.

Throughout these readings, you'll find **reflective journaling prompts** and **implementation invitations**. These are not appendices—they are the practice itself. Reflection deepens awareness; implementation translates insight into living culture. They are the in-and-out breath of transformation.



You'll also notice the use of **poetic “third things.”** These poems open and close chapters not as decoration, but as mirrors—organic reflections that help us see ourselves and our organizations more clearly. Poetry creates space for intuition and metaphor, allowing the heart to speak alongside the mind. Just as a gardener observes the light before planting, these poems invite stillness before action.

The rhythms and practices in this book grow out of the same soil as our previous work, CircleBridge. There, we introduced a framework for relational learning grounded in dialogue, storytelling, and deep listening. Many of those same principles are woven through this book, especially the use of the Circle of Trust® model developed by Parker Palmer and the Center for Courage & Renewal (Center for Courage & Renewal, n.d.). Circles of Trust offer a container for reflection and transformation—a place where people can speak truth, listen deeply, and reconnect inner values with outward action.

At the heart of these circles are the Touchstones—shared agreements that create trustworthy space for authentic dialogue. These Touchstones, used with permission from the Center for Courage & Renewal, remind us how to be present with one another in ways that make growth possible:

Touchstones for Creating Trustworthy Space

(adapted from the Center for Courage & Renewal)

1. **Give and receive welcome.**

People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle, we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.

2. **Be present as fully as possible.**

Be here with your doubts, fears, and failings as well as your convictions, joys, and successes—with your listening as well as your speaking.

3. **What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.**

This is not a “share-or-die” space. Do what your soul calls for, and know you do it with our support.



4. **Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.**

Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth does not mean correcting or debating another's. Speak from your center to the center of the circle.

5. **No fixing, saving, advising, or correcting one another.**

This guideline invites us to trust the "inner teacher" within each person rather than rushing to help or instruct.

6. **Respond to others with honest, open questions.**

Instead of offering advice or analysis, use questions that invite reflection and help "hear each other into deeper speech."

7. **When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.**

When judgment or defensiveness arise, pause and ask:

"I wonder what brought them to this belief?"

"I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?"

8. **Attend to your own inner teacher.**

Listen for your own wisdom and insight as it stirs within, noticing what resonates and what resists.

9. **Trust and learn from the silence.**

Silence is a gift in our noisy world—a way of knowing in itself. After someone speaks, pause before responding.

10. **Observe deep confidentiality.**

What is shared in the circle stays within it. This practice of confidentiality builds trust and safety.

11. **Know that it is possible to leave the circle with whatever you needed when you arrived—and that the seeds planted here will keep growing in the days ahead.**

Throughout *Relational Landscaping*, these Touchstones quietly shape the work. They invite us to slow down, listen deeply, and trust that the wisdom we need is already within and among us.

Like any living landscape, an organization changes with the seasons. The work of leadership, then, is not to control that change, but to tend it—to notice where growth is happening, where something has withered, and where the soil may need renewal.



Human beings are living, relational organisms—always learning, always adapting to the other life around us. The same is true of our institutions. When we tend them as ecosystems rather than machines, we nurture cultures that can heal, grow, and thrive over time.

So take a breath. Step into this garden of words and practices. The tools are here—the poems, the questions, the stories, the invitations. What grows from them will depend on how you listen, what you notice, and how you choose to tend the ground beneath your feet.

Welcome to the work of tending human terrain.



Chapter 7: Reflective Rhythms for Collective Growth

The Bell

He set a small bowl
on the table,
asked us to breathe,
to lower our shoulders,
lift our chins.
Then the ring—
thin, steady,
moving through the room
like light.
No one spoke.
The bell asked
nothing of us
but presence.

We begin with the invitation to slow down, guided by the poem "The Bell," which reminds us that what matters in reflective practice is not performance, but presence. The small ritual of a bell, a breath, a moment of quiet, becomes a signal to return to ourselves and to each other. In our increasingly fast-paced workplaces, this kind of pause can feel radical. But it is essential.

The Need for Rhythm and Rest

Modern organizational life often operates like a race without a finish line. Calendars are filled edge to edge, meetings stack without margins, and the pace can leave people breathless. There's an unspoken belief that more hours mean more dedication—and that rest is a luxury rather than a necessity.



Yet research paints a different picture. One study showed that employees who took just fifteen minutes at the end of the day to reflect on lessons learned performed significantly better after just ten days[1]. Meanwhile, overwork and burnout have been linked to declines in creativity, cognitive performance, and decision-making capacity[2]. When our days are packed to the brim, there's no room for the very thing that makes good work possible: thoughtful, human presence.

Leaders across disciplines are recognizing the need for reflection. U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz reserved an hour a week for uninterrupted thinking, and Warren Buffett famously protects reading and reflection time in his schedule (Schwantes, 2024). The message is clear: reflection is not the opposite of action—it's what makes wise action possible.

The Costs of an Urgency Culture

Urgency can serve a purpose in moments of crisis. But when it becomes the default, it erodes our well-being and our work. The constant push to do more, faster, leaves little space for meaning-making or integration. It can quietly shape a culture where busy is the badge of worth and silence is mistaken for slacking.

Teams that operate under constant pressure report higher levels of miscommunication, reactivity, and conflict. The relational fabric begins to fray. People lose sight of the larger purpose. We've seen teams abandon thoughtful decision-making in favor of speed, only to regret rushed choices later. Over time, this frantic pace undermines trust and creativity—the very things innovation and cohesion require.

The Power of Collective Slowdown

The antidote to urgency isn't stopping altogether—it's rhythm. Intentional pauses allow teams to regroup, reconnect, and reimagine. Think of a team that begins each meeting with a moment of silence or reflection. The shift in tone is immediate. People arrive more fully. They listen more generously. Decisions become more grounded.

In one organization, leaders introduced a brief reflective prompt at the end of weekly meetings. Just a single question: What stood out to you this week? Over time, the answers revealed shared values, moments of challenge, and overlooked successes. The team began to



understand itself not just as a collection of roles, but as a living system of interdependent humans.

Another group—a nonprofit supporting trauma-informed schools—implemented 10-minute breathing and journaling pauses in the middle of high-stakes planning sessions. Initially met with skepticism, the practice soon became indispensable. "It's the only time I hear myself think," one participant said. "And the only time I realize what others might be holding."

Metaphors for Growth

We often use metaphors to make the value of reflection more tangible. One such image is "relational soil." Just as healthy plants require rich soil, thriving teams need emotional and relational depth. Reflection is the compost that nourishes that soil. It makes room for nutrients like empathy, insight, and trust.

Another powerful metaphor comes from the Circle of Trust framework: gathering in a circle, without hierarchy, where listening is sacred and silence is honored. These circles function like hearths. Around them, warmth grows. Hard truths can be spoken and heard. New understanding arises not from debate but from collective presence.

We might also think of reflection as a musical rest—not an absence, but a necessary beat that gives shape to the melody. In jazz, the spaces between notes are as important as the notes themselves. Likewise, in organizational life, moments of pause give contour and depth to our work.

Embedding Rhythms into Culture

Rhythmic reflection becomes most powerful when it is woven into the fabric of organizational life—not as an extra, but as a core practice (Nobel, 2014). Here are a few structures teams have used:

- **Weekly pauses:** A 15-minute reflection built into a standing meeting. One question. One round of sharing. No fixing, just witnessing.



- **Monthly circles:** A 60–90 minute space with a shared prompt (e.g. "What are we learning this season?") and a chance for each voice to be heard (Sturm, 2018). Often accompanied by silence, journaling, or a poem.
- **Quarterly retreats:** Half-day or full-day gatherings for deep reflection. These often include team storytelling, silent walks, art-making, or guided dialogue. The goal isn't output—it's insight.

One engineering firm holds seasonal offsites on a local farm. Amid hay bales and thermoses of tea, they circle up to name what's working, what's not, and what they're dreaming about. The unhurried pace allows truths to emerge that would otherwise remain buried under deadlines .

Journaling Prompts and Practices

Writing is one of the most accessible forms of reflection. Here are prompts teams and individuals have used:

- What did I learn this week that surprised me?
- What story from this month do I want to remember?
- Where am I feeling rushed, and what might need more time?
- When did our team feel most aligned recently?
- What is a question I'm sitting with?

Teams often set a timer for 5 minutes of silent journaling before sharing. Others do a "silent round" where each person types a response into a shared document, then everyone reads in silence before discussing. The format matters less than the intention: to slow down enough to notice.

Invitation to Implementation: Establish a Rhythm of Reflection

In a world that equates movement with progress, the simple act of pausing together becomes a radical form of leadership.



This month, choose one of the following rhythms to test with your team or community. Begin not with explanation, but with intention. Frame it as an experiment in becoming more aware, more connected, and more human.

1. Begin with a Bell (or Breath)

Start your next meeting with a grounding moment: a bell, a breath, or 30 seconds of quiet. No performance, no preamble—just shared presence.

Why it matters: This small pause sets the tone. It tells people, “You matter more than the agenda.” Repeated over time, it becomes a ritual of respect.

2. Weekly Reflection Prompt

Choose a weekly question and make five minutes of space—before a staff meeting, at the end of Friday, or during lunch. Ask:

- *What stood out this week?*
- *What challenged you recently—and what did you learn from it?*
- *Where are we growing together?*

Invite responses aloud, on paper, or in silence. Don’t analyze—just witness.

3. Create a Monthly “Circle of Trust” Moment

Once a month, host a 60-minute gathering that honors reflection. Bring a poem, a prompt, or a meaningful object. Invite people to share stories or insights. Use a talking piece or simple guidelines: no fixing, no interrupting, no urgency.

Why it matters: These gatherings cultivate relational soil. They build capacity for listening, patience, and mutual understanding.

4. Build a Shared Journal Wall



Set up a shared document, wall, or physical notebook where team members can contribute responses to a rotating question:

- *What are we learning this season?*
- *What's something we don't want to forget?*
- *What are we making room for next?*

Why it matters: A collective journal becomes more than a record—it becomes a mirror of team values, voice, and vitality.

Final Word

You don't need a retreat center or a day off to begin. You only need five minutes and the willingness to slow down together. Over time, these small reflective rhythms nourish the whole ecosystem of your work.

As the poem reminds us:

"The bell asked / nothing of us / but presence."

So ring it. Begin again. Let presence—not pace—shape your path forward.



Chapter 9: Identity, Inclusion, and Belonging

After the Meeting

The room is empty now,
but the chairs remain—
three gathered close
as if still listening,
one turned slightly aside,
another left facing the window.
No one planned this pattern,
but it tells a kind of story:
who leaned in,
who drifted away,
who kept an eye on the clock.
Tomorrow they'll sit again,
different hands pulling
the circle wide or small.
We'll talk about projects,
deadlines, next steps—
but beneath the words
something else arranges itself,
quiet as dust settling,
deciding who belongs
where.
And yet, sometimes,
someone moves a chair—
just a few inches closer—
and the whole room changes,



a little more space
for light to fall between us.

Belonging Beyond the Surface

Inclusion begins not with policies or programs, but in the invisible choreography of everyday encounters: who is invited to speak, who is listened to, whose jokes land easily, whose silences are misread. These moments are not peripheral to culture—they *are* culture. And they reveal, often before words are exchanged, who feels they belong.

The poem “After the Meeting” reminds us that even when the room is empty, stories linger. Chairs remember. The way we sit—literally and metaphorically—reveals our sense of place in a group. And just as a chair nudged closer can shift the room, so too can a small invitation to someone who’s been on the margins.

Belonging is not merely an outcome; it’s a relational practice.

Identity: Seen, Unseen, and Interwoven

Organizations often approach diversity through what’s visible—race, gender, age, or disability. These dimensions matter. But much of our identity is unseen: culture, trauma, neurodivergence, faith, upbringing, or sexual orientation. These internal diversities shape how we walk into a room, how safe we feel, how we interpret tone, and how we read silence.

Intersectionality—a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw—offers a lens to understand how identities layer. A queer woman of color may experience workplace culture differently than a white gay man or a Black heterosexual man. These intersections are not additive but compounding. A workplace that engages only one axis of identity misses the full complexity of how belonging is experienced.

Sometimes, inclusion fails not from hostility but from assumption. We assume someone’s okay because they’re quiet. We assume shared language means shared understanding. A new employee once noted, “Everyone here seems nice. But I still feel like a visitor in someone else’s house.” She didn’t need friendliness—she needed cultural fluency.



That's why inclusion starts with curiosity, not certainty. What do I assume about professionalism? About what leadership looks like? Whose emotional expression is normalized here? Whose silence is read as confidence, and whose as disengagement?

The Unspoken Curriculum of Culture

Every organization teaches a hidden curriculum. Beyond the mission statement or handbook, there are unofficial lessons about how to belong. These show up in hallway conversations, leadership styles, and who gets invited to informal gatherings. Who laughs first. Who stays quiet when jokes are made.

These signals add up. Microaggressions—those subtle slights, jokes, or offhand comments—aren't isolated. They are cumulative. Each one deposits a pebble in someone's shoe, making it harder to walk comfortably in the culture.

Belonging isn't just a feeling—it's a pattern of reinforcement. Who gets corrected gently, and who is shamed? Who gets second chances, and who is seen as difficult?

In one organization, a Latinx staff member shared: "I was promoted, but people still come to my white colleague with questions I'm supposed to answer." No one was overtly undermining her. But the cultural terrain had been fertilized with certain expectations—and she was not the expected leader.

Safety Isn't Just a Feeling

Psychological safety is the foundation of inclusion. It's not about being coddled. It's about being real. It's about knowing that you can say, "I don't know," or "I disagree," without paying a price.

When safety is absent, feedback becomes dangerous. People hide mistakes. Or worse, they hide themselves.

In high-trust cultures, people take creative risks. They ask naïve questions. They share uncomfortable truths. These cultures aren't free from conflict—they're fluent in it.



A diverse team is not automatically an inclusive one. Without safety, diversity just means more people feeling invisible in new ways.

Moving from Forced Belonging to Structural Belonging

Meagan Pollock draws a useful distinction: forced belonging versus structural belonging. The former asks people to contort themselves to fit in—code-switching, downplaying parts of identity, reading the room with constant vigilance. It's exhausting. Structural belonging, by contrast, means the organization adapts itself to include diverse ways of being. This includes policies (like parental leave that includes all family types), rhythms (meetings at times that respect various faith practices), and spaces (offices with prayer rooms or quiet zones for neurodivergent staff).

Belonging becomes sustainable when it's baked into how the system operates—not just how individuals try to survive it.

The Power of Story and Circle

At the heart of structural change is a simple practice: telling the truth together. That's what CircleBridge emphasizes: circles of trust where people speak from the "I," listen without fixing, and allow silence to do its work.

Imagine beginning a staff retreat with a simple prompt: "Share a time you felt different—and what helped you stay." As stories unfold, so does empathy. Walls dissolve. Policies gain depth. Leaders listen with new ears.

In one organization, using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) alongside story circles allowed people to see both data and human texture (Intercultural Development Inventory, n.d.). A graph showed how far a team had come in cultural competence. Stories explained why the work mattered. Together, they created a shared mirror—and a shared path forward.

Revisiting the Chairs



So much of inclusion is like that moment after the meeting. The room is quiet, but the arrangement tells a story. One chair turned away. One too far from the circle. One perched near the door.

Our job as culture-builders is not only to invite people in but to notice where the chairs have been placed. And, when necessary, to move them. A few inches closer. A little more space for light to fall between us.

Reflective Journal Prompts

1. **When have I felt like a visitor instead of a member in a group or team?**
What signals—subtle or overt—shaped that feeling? What might have helped shift it?
2. **What assumptions do I carry about “professionalism” or “leadership”?**
Where did those ideas come from? Whose ways of being might they exclude?
3. **How do I respond to difference—especially when it’s unfamiliar or challenges my norms?**
Where might curiosity deepen my understanding?
4. **Where in our culture might belonging still feel conditional?**
Whose stories are centered, and whose are missing or misread?

Invitation to Implementation: Rearranging the Chairs

Culture lives in the small details. This month, take intentional steps to “move the chairs” in your organization—both literally and metaphorically—so that belonging becomes not just possible, but practiced.

1. Map the Room

Observe the subtle dynamics of space, speech, and silence in your team. Who consistently speaks first? Whose ideas are echoed or ignored? Who sits nearest power—physically or in the conversational flow?

Try this: Ask each team member to reflect anonymously on when they feel most included—and most unseen. Collect responses and discuss patterns together.



2. Expand the Narrative

Use storytelling to surface identity and complexity.

Try this: Begin your next meeting with a circle prompt like, “What’s one part of your identity that shaped how you show up at work?” or “Share a time you felt ‘different’ and what helped you stay.” Let listening be the only goal.

3. Audit for Structural Belonging

Evaluate current systems (policies, meeting norms, communication styles) through an inclusion lens.

Try this: Choose one team rhythm (e.g. meeting times, recognition practices) and ask: Whose needs does this serve? Whose might it exclude? What’s one small shift we could try?

4. Create a Culture of Consent

Belonging can’t be coerced. Normalize the freedom to pass, to disagree, to be fully oneself.

Try this: Revisit your group agreements. Add one that reads, “Participation is always invitational, never expected.” Then practice honoring it.

Final Thought

Belonging is built chair by chair, story by story. It is not a one-time initiative, but an everyday practice of seeing more clearly, listening more deeply, and adjusting more generously.

So tomorrow, look at the room—*the physical one, and the cultural one*. Ask:

Who’s missing? Who’s silent? What would it mean to move just one chair closer?



Chapter 11: The Living Organization – Foundations of Relational Restructuring

Imagine a forest after a storm. The old canopy has shifted, a few trees lean in new directions, light breaks through where once there was only shade. Life doesn't stop. It reorganizes. Roots reroute. New shoots emerge. What looks like disruption is actually the forest's way of adjusting to new information—wind, sunlight, space. In the same way, organizations—when we let them live—can adapt organically. They are not machines with parts to swap, but ecosystems that evolve through relationships, trust, and purpose.

This is the heart of relational restructuring. It begins with a belief that organizations are not static. They breathe. They grow. They recalibrate in response to shifting conditions. Margaret Wheatley reminds us that real change happens not in charts or strategy decks, but “in the tangled webs of relationships – the networks – that characterize all living systems.” That's where we begin: not with boxes on an org chart, but with the people inside them, the connections between them, and the shared stories that give shape to the whole.

Structure Must Serve the Story

To restructure a living system, we must listen to its internal rhythms. When change arrives—new leadership, shifting markets, a collective sense that something no longer fits—it sends signals through the system. The first impulse might be to impose order, to control the outcome. But living systems resist force. Instead, they reorganize when they are given purpose, trust, and space.

A more organic approach doesn't discard structure. It reframes it. The goal is not to control behavior but to align energy. Leaders still need to set clear intentions and shared goals. But they must also let go of micromanagement, allowing teams to self-organize around those goals. A system in motion needs direction, not dictatorship.

Imagine a team that once worked in silos now invited into a shared space of cross-functional dialogue. They begin not with tasks, but with stories: what's working, what hurts, what hopes

they carry for the future. From these stories, patterns emerge. Trust builds. And only then do new structures—new reporting lines, shared workflows—begin to make sense.

The Relational Model of Change

A powerful framework for this kind of transformation is the Relational Model of Change. It weaves together three strands: structural shifts, work process changes, and relational development. All three must move together. Like threads in a braid, each strengthens the others:

- **Structure:** Realign teams or roles to match strategic goals.
- **Process:** Improve day-to-day workflows with input from those doing the work.
- **Relationship:** Invest in the trust and culture that allow people to adapt with resilience.

For example, say you introduce new cross-functional teams (structure). You must also create shared routines—like weekly learning huddles or reflection circles (process)—and tend the human side by naming fears, celebrating small wins, and ensuring every voice is heard (relationship).

Start with Cultural Diagnosis

Before you move a single box on the org chart, pause and ask: How does work *really* get done here? Where are the informal leaders? What norms shape decision-making? These are not questions for an audit—they require listening. Host story circles. Invite honest feedback. Use surveys not just to check a box, but to uncover what people value, fear, and need.

As one leader in a restructuring effort noted, "Our biggest mistake was assuming we knew the culture we were trying to change. It wasn't until we sat down and listened that we saw what needed tending."

Align Leadership Around a Shared Why



No transformation thrives without alignment at the top. Leaders must first align with each other—on the purpose of the restructuring, the desired culture, and the values that will guide the journey. Then, they must model those values daily.

This alignment is not just strategy. It's presence. When leaders show up with vulnerability, consistency, and care, they begin to reweave the relational fabric of the organization. As one executive reflected, "I stopped trying to sell the plan and started asking what people were grieving. That's when things started to shift."

Weave Change Into the Work

Restructuring cannot live in PowerPoint slides. It must be felt in daily practice. Set up structures—like cross-functional teams, regular debrief circles, or learning cohorts—that embed the new culture in action. Make the work itself the container for change.

Build feedback loops into every layer. What are we learning? What's working? Where is resistance showing up, and what does it have to teach us? Think of these as vital signs of the system. Monitor them not as a judge, but as a gardener feeling the soil.

Communicate With Honesty and Care

Transparent communication is relational oxygen. People don't just want information—they want to be seen. Regular updates, clear rationale, and space for questions signal respect. Even when the news is hard, honesty builds trust.

One team introduced "Ask Us Anything" sessions during a major shift. Nothing was off-limits. At first, the questions were sharp, even accusatory. But over time, something changed. People started asking, "How can I help?"

Support People in the Transition

Restructuring evokes loss, even when the future is bright. Acknowledge this. Offer training and coaching to help people step into new roles. Create quiet spaces—literal and figurative—where people can process, grieve, and imagine.



Treat early stumbles not as failure, but as data. What needs more clarity? More support? More listening? The system is learning. So must we.

A Living Reorganization

To reorganize is not to erase. It is to compost. What is no longer needed gets returned to the soil. From that, new growth emerges. Relationships carry the nutrients. Culture holds the memory. The organization becomes not a rigid machine, but a living, learning system.

Done well, restructuring becomes an act of stewardship. We hold space for new life to take form, while honoring the roots that brought us here. We do not manage change. We cultivate it.

The Garden Remakes Itself

Not all beginnings are loud.

Some come in the hush
between decisions—
a slow recognition
that what we've built
no longer fits the shape
we are becoming.

So the trellis comes down.

A new path is cleared.
What once grew tall
makes room
for something low and blooming.

And the garden remakes itself

not by force,
but by a listening hand,
a season of rest,



and the promise
of roots
reaching
again.

Learn From the Living Organization – Reflective Prompts

- Where in your organization are people already adapting organically? What can you learn from them?
- What informal networks or relationships carry more influence than formal roles?
- When has change felt generative in your own experience? What made it work?
- What relational soil needs tending before new structures can take root?
- What part of your organizational story needs composting? What new story is emerging?

Use these reflections to guide your journaling or team conversations. Remember, the goal is not control. It is connection. Through connection, the living system grows strong.

Implementation Invitations: Cultivating the Living Organization

1. Host a “Cultural Listening Circle”

Before making structural changes, gather diverse voices to explore:

- What’s working that we don’t want to lose?
- What feels outdated or misaligned?
- What hopes are quietly waiting for space?

Why it matters: Listening uncovers invisible dynamics and reveals where trust and alignment already exist—or need tending.

2. Map Your “Relational Ecosystem”

Gather a small team and sketch how work *actually* gets done—not just via formal roles, but through influence, trust, and informal collaboration.

Prompt: Who do people go to when they need real insight, encouragement, or clarity?

Use it to: Inform redesign efforts that align with lived experience rather than org charts alone.

3. Compost the Old Together

Create space for collective reflection before launching new structures. Host a "Composting the Past" workshop or session with prompts like:

- What have we outgrown?
- What still holds wisdom?
- What can we let return to the soil?

Why it works: Honoring what's ending creates emotional space for something new to begin—and strengthens cultural continuity.

4. Align Leadership Through Practice, Not Just Planning

Invite leaders into a shared "relational rehearsal": a circle to practice vulnerability, ask questions, and name values they want to embody during change.

Example: Ask, "What's one belief we need to release in order to lead this transformation well?"

Outcome: Alignment rooted in lived values, not just strategic vision.

Closing Thought

In a living system, the best structures are *responsive*, not rigid.

The most powerful change doesn't arrive fully formed—it *emerges* from terrain that has been tended with trust, care, and collective wisdom.

Let your reorganization be a season, not a sprint.

Let it listen. Let it breathe. Let it grow.



Chapter 12: Compassionate Workforce

Transitions – Layoffs and Redeployments

Restructuring, at its heart, is human work. Every shift in an org chart carries the weight of lives—of rent checks, families, and morning routines. The work of transformation can't ignore that truth. Change may be necessary for survival, but how it is carried out determines whether the organization emerges brittle or whole.

Imagine a late afternoon meeting in a quiet office. A manager sits with an employee, the air thick with what's about to be said. On the desk lies a letter—an emblem of what's ending. In this moment, the organization's values aren't written on a wall. They're spoken—or left unspoken—through tone, posture, and presence. The work ahead isn't about perfect words. It's about dignity.

Layoffs and redeployments are the most sensitive kind of change. They test whether our systems of care are real or performative. Even those who remain feel the tremors. When trust fractures, morale drains away. But when leaders act with empathy, transparency, and fairness, even painful transitions can seed resilience and future trust.

Leading with Humanity and Fairness

Compassionate transition begins long before the first conversation. It starts with the mindset that organizations are living ecosystems. A pruning may be needed, but the gardener trims with care—never in anger, never with haste.

That means balancing efficiency with empathy. Avoid the easy path of “last in, first out”—a policy that often undoes years of diversity progress. Instead, assess by skills, roles, and evolving needs, checking regularly for unintended bias. Analyze demographic impacts carefully before decisions are finalized. Adjust the plan if the cuts would disproportionately harm underrepresented employees. The health of the ecosystem depends on its diversity.



In the rush to protect budgets, it's tempting to reduce this work to spreadsheets. But data without compassion is a blunt instrument. What sustains the organization long-term is not only who remains, but how people were treated on their way out.

Communicating with Clarity and Care

When the time comes to share difficult news, leaders must choose presence over perfection. People remember how you made them feel, not just what you said.

Communicate early, honestly, and consistently. Share the “why” and the “how” behind every decision. Transparency doesn't eliminate pain, but it eases fear. When employees understand the reasons—the financial context, the strategic vision—they can begin to process and plan.

Everyone deserves to hear at the same time, through a clear, humane process. Avoid leaks and rumors. Hold all-hands meetings to explain the overall plan, but deliver personal news in private. If remote, use video, not email. These are not just logistical choices—they are ethical ones.

When meeting with someone directly affected, remember: this is a sacred conversation. Offer facts clearly and compassionately. Provide written details—severance, benefits, next steps—but leave time for silence and questions. A person's first response may be shock or grief. Your role is not to fix that, but to witness it with respect.

One leader described it this way: “I learned to breathe with people in those moments. To give them a sense that they still mattered—to us, and to themselves.”

Supporting the Whole System

A layoff doesn't just end employment—it reshapes the whole ecosystem. Those who remain, often called “survivors,” face their own form of loss: guilt, fear, disconnection. Their trust in leadership is fragile. This is when relational leadership matters most.

Support must flow in all directions. For those departing, provide tangible help—career counseling, mental health support, financial guidance. Partner with external coaches or employment networks. Encourage colleagues to extend goodwill—referrals, introductions,



heartfelt messages. These acts of care ripple outward, restoring a sense of belonging even in separation.

For those who stay, communication and acknowledgment are vital. Host open Q&A sessions. Invite emotion, not just efficiency. Say thank you—often. Celebrate contributions of those leaving, publicly and sincerely. Let people see that values are not suspended in hard times. They are tested and proven there.

After the Pruning

Think of spring pruning in a garden: branches cut back so new growth can find light. The act itself can look harsh, even cruel, to an untrained eye. But over time, the shape returns stronger, more balanced, more alive.

Layoffs are never easy, but they can be approached as an act of stewardship. The goal is not to sever but to sustain. To honor each person's contribution while preparing the soil for what's next. Done with empathy, the process preserves the organization's integrity—and its humanity.

An organization that survives a layoff with its values intact will find, in time, that trust has deepened. Employees remember that when the hard moment came, leadership chose compassion over convenience.

When handled with care, the pruning makes space for renewal.

After the Cut

The shears are sharp,
the air still.
A hand hesitates—
then moves with care,
tracing the line



between what must go
and what might grow again.

Leaves fall,
soft as letters
unwritten.

Tomorrow, the branch will ache,
but sunlight will find
new paths through the green.
Roots, unshaken,
will remember.

This, too, is tending—
to cut with kindness,
to hold what's living,
and to trust
that what remains
will reach for light again.

Learn from Compassionate Transitions – Reflective Prompts

- Recall a time when change meant loss—for you or your team. What helped you feel seen or supported?
- When you think about announcing difficult news, what fears arise? How might compassion shift the tone?
- What rituals or gestures could honor the contributions of those leaving?
- How can leaders help remaining staff feel safe, appreciated, and connected after layoffs?



- What does it mean to “prune with care” in your own leadership practice?

Use these questions in journaling or team dialogue. Let them soften the edges of hard change. Let them remind you: even in endings, life continues—and care is what allows it to grow again.

Implementation Invitations: Leading Compassionate Transitions

1. Design a “Dignity Protocol” for Difficult Conversations

Before any layoffs or redeployments occur, create a team-wide agreement on how transitions will be handled—with dignity and consistency.

Include: tone guidelines, timing standards (e.g., no Friday afternoon notices), clear language templates, and personal follow-up commitments.

Outcome: Everyone involved knows how to act with care, clarity, and humanity.

2. Use a “Relational Impact Lens” in Decision-Making

When identifying roles for redeployment or reduction, go beyond functional analysis. Ask:

- What is this person’s relational role in the system?
- Who relies on them for informal leadership or emotional support?
- What’s the demographic impact of this decision?

Tool: Create a cross-functional review panel to surface blind spots and ensure equity in decisions.

3. Create Departure Rituals That Honor Contribution

Hold simple, meaningful gatherings—virtual or in-person—to acknowledge departing team members. Share stories. Name what will be missed. Celebrate their impact.



Examples: A team-crafted tribute letter, a “legacy” story shared at a meeting, or a symbolic gesture (planting a tree, lighting a candle, gifting a book).

Why it matters: Rituals help people process grief and reinforce shared values, even in difficult times.

4. Provide Care Packages for Those Leaving

Move beyond severance by offering a wraparound support package that reflects real care.

May include: personalized references, access to a coaching session, curated job board leads, LinkedIn recommendations, or a “career bridge” stipend for retraining.

Message: “You matter beyond your time here.”

5. Initiate a Renewal Campaign

Frame what follows as a season of renewal—not erasure.

Examples: Invite staff to share “seeds of hope” for what they want to grow in the new phase. Host “visioning workshops” focused on team strengths, not just gaps.

Outcome: Renewal is grounded in shared ownership, not top-down directives.

Closing Thought

Layoffs are never just logistics—they are human thresholds.

How we cross them determines what kind of culture we carry forward.

In this season of pruning, let your care be visible.

Let every action—every word, silence, and choice—say this:

We are still human. We are still whole. We are still reaching for light.