

Managing companies from a personalist humanism perspective

Committing to a humanist model isn't a sign of nostalgia or blind idealism. It's a real option to build organizations that are fairer, more sustainable and more appealing to workers.



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The pressure for results, the accelerated speed of digitalization and our performance-centered culture are leading many managers into an uncomfortable paradox: the more

efficient their companies, the more fragile their teams.

IESE professor [Domenec Melé](#), drawing on years of research and reflection, proposes a radical paradigm shift in his book [The Humanistic Person-centered Company](#). He proposes leaving our dominant techno-economic vision behind and adopting a personalist humanist perspective, where a person is not a means to turn a profit, but the origin, center and end point of business.

From “manpower” to instrumental talent and beyond

Melé takes us on a historical journey through the different perceptions of people within companies and shows how those perceptions continue to evolve. From the Medieval guilds, where vocational, communal and artisanal work was practiced, to the Industrial Revolution and its reduction of work to mere “labor” and into the 20th century, which introduced new terms such as “producers” and “human resources,” the individual’s relationship with employment has always been in flux. Now, although the language has changed to include terms like “talent” and “collaborators,” the view of human workers as instruments persists — so much so that we talk about investing in a company’s “greatest asset” or “human capital.”

Yet Melé reminds us that reducing people to resources is, in the end, dehumanizing. “We all have names, indicating our uniqueness and dignity; we are not instruments or assets.” Even when kinder language is used, human workers are still often viewed in functional terms.

The personalist humanism approach

The humanistic approach proposed here is nourished by a personalist philosophy that includes deep reflection on the human as a person. It is about recognizing the dignity and capacity for growth intrinsic to each person. Melé argues that business ethics should not be limited to avoiding bad practices or reinforcing corporate reputation but should be a guide to human excellence. The company, from this viewpoint, is understood as a community of people who cooperate to achieve a shared goal.

That goal is the common good, which here is not “the general interest” or the aggregation of individual benefits, but a set of conditions that allows human flourishing. It includes an environment based on authentic human relationships, which recognizes the dignity of work

and favors personal growth. This should contribute to creating a culture of trust and cooperation.

But what about profit?

Taking a [humanistic path](#) doesn't mean giving up on being profitable. Financial success is always important but with this approach, profit is no longer seen as a company's supreme goal, but is a means for that company to contribute to its own and society's shared success.

Contributions to the common good give a company moral legitimacy, and they don't preclude strong financial results in the least. A company based on personalist humanism is perfectly poised to generate trust and a sense of belonging and to promote personal initiative, all factors that have a positive impact on the bottom line.

But the main reasons to adopt personalist humanism are ethical rather than economic. Managing companies requires exercising responsibility and cultivating virtue. "Treating people well is not a means to improve results. It is an end in itself," Melé concludes.

La Fageda, a personalist humanism success story

The food cooperative [La Fageda](#), based in northern Catalonia, was born 40 years ago with the purpose of providing work to people living with intellectual disabilities. Since then, it has successfully combined business excellence with social vocation.

La Fageda embodies many of the basic elements of the personalist humanism that Melé proposes: a belief that every person counts, deep [respect for people](#) and for the dignity of their work, and a dual focus on the economic and social aspects that contribute to the good of the company. In a [study of La Fageda](#), Melé, with [Inigo Gallo](#), points out that the humanistic-personalist framework is more comprehensive than many other ethical approaches based exclusively on justice, human rights or the ethics of care.

The principles guiding La Fageda on its singular journey are universal. It's not just a model for social enterprises, but an invitation to rethink the nature of the person within the company.

Though it can be difficult to find time to reflect on the nature and purpose of our companies, that time is never wasted for managers who aspire to lead with humanity and impact.

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