

A photograph of a wooden pier extending into a calm lake at sunset. The sky is filled with soft, orange and yellow clouds, and the sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the water. The pier is made of weathered wooden planks and posts, leading from the foreground into the distance.

Lead with Light™

A White Paper on Virtue-Driven Leadership

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Executive Summary

Across industries and geographies, a growing set of organizations is challenging an old assumption: that leaders must choose between doing what's right for people and doing what's best for performance.^{1 2 3} These organizations demonstrate that clarity of purpose, virtue-driven behavior, and disciplined execution can reinforce—not dilute—financial success.^{1 2 3}

Lead with Light™, a leadership framework and operating system, offers a useful lens for understanding this pattern. It defines leadership as the alignment of:

- **Purpose (WHY):** a clear reason for existence beyond profit, including an understanding that profits aren't the goal. They're the fuel that enable you to pursue your purpose.
- **Virtue-driven Action (HOW):** observable, universally admired behaviors like accountability, truthfulness, honesty, courage, empathy, humility, and service.
- **Clarity (WHAT):** simple, repeatable messages aligned with actions and decisions that people can understand, see, feel, and trust.

Lead with Light™ is built on a simple rhythm: **Calibrate. Cultivate. Illuminate.**

- **Calibrate Your Compass** so purpose and priorities stay clear.
- **Cultivate Your Character** so values become visible behaviors.
- **Illuminate the Path for Others** so people feel safe, aligned, and able to deliver.

We lead with light, grounded in virtue-driven action, so people connect with purpose, gain clarity, align faster, communicate with impact, and deliver desired outcomes for their customers and colleagues.



When these elements are coherent, organizations create environments where people believe they matter, trust is high, and performance improves in sustainable ways.^{1 2}

The case studies that follow—Barry-Wehmiller, WD-40 Company, Patagonia, Honest Health, Microsoft under Satya Nadella, and Southwest Airlines—show how this works in practice and why virtue-aligned leadership is not just ethically compelling, but economically superior.^{1 2 3 4 5 6 7}

“Leadership is under siege. Short-term pressure, ego, and eroding trust are showing up everywhere. In a noisy, polarized, AI-saturated world, character plus clarity is a competitive advantage. Virtue-driven action builds trust, speeds decisions, and helps people feel safe enough to do their best work.”



– Al Viller

Be clear. Be kind. Lead with Light! ✨

The Fine Print: This business case offers an evidence-informed view of how a purpose-centered organization combined with a virtue-driven leadership approach, such as Lead with Light™, can strengthen culture and increase performance. It draws on public research, case studies, and professional experience.

The companies referenced **have not** worked with Al Viller Consulting LLC and haven't formally applied the Lead with Light™ framework. They're included as examples of what's possible when purpose, universally admired behavior, and decision-making align.

Results will vary. Outcomes depend on leadership commitment, culture, industry conditions, and consistent application over time. Any financial or performance references are directional and should be used to inform, not predict.

Lead with Light™ isn't a quick fix. It's a practice. It's also about progress, not perfection. Its impact comes from how consistently it's lived over time.

Use this business case to spark discussion and as a starting point for evaluation and intentional virtue-driven action based on the company's purpose and what it stands for.



Barry-Wehmiller: Scaling “Truly Human Leadership”

1. Company overview

[Barry-Wehmiller](#) is a large maker of industrial equipment, providing manufacturing technology and services across multiple businesses and geographies.¹ Under Bob Chapman, former CEO and Chairman of Barry-Wehmiller and the architect of ‘Truly Human Leadership,’ the company has grown through acquisitions while building a unified, people-centered culture.^{1 8}

2. Stated purpose or philosophy

Harvard Business School (HBS) describes [Barry-Wehmiller’s leadership model as “truly human leadership,”](#) in which “success is measured by the way we touch the lives of people.”¹ Internal leadership materials reinforce this, stating that the firm aims to balance “economic value and human value” and treat team members as people, not as functions.⁸

3. Values → actions alignment

Barry-Wehmiller translates its philosophy into programs, systems, and leadership expectations:

During the 2007–2009 Great Recession, the company went “to great lengths to avoid layoffs,” using shared-sacrifice approaches rather than traditional headcount reductions.¹

Barry-Wehmiller University (BWU), founded in 2008, offers leadership courses focused on communication and listening skills for people at all levels, not just executives.⁸

Recognition programs like Guiding Principles of Leadership awards celebrate those who best embody the vision of measuring success by how they impact the lives of others.⁸

These mechanisms make virtues observable and repeatable: leaders are expected to listen, recognize, and protect their people, even under economic pressure.^{1 8}

4. Culture and people impact

The HBS case notes that Barry-Wehmiller’s people practices are “unusual,” focusing on trust, listening, and recognition as core leadership skills.¹ Internal case descriptions of BWU’s communication course highlight how leaders are trained to be better listeners and to bring those skills back to their teams and families.⁸ This emphasis on human skills helps create an environment of psychological safety and shared responsibility.



5. Business results

HBS observes that, despite its people-first stance, Barry-Wehmiller has “generated enviable financial results” while pursuing its “truly human leadership” model.¹ Its choice to avoid layoffs during the Great Recession—while many peers cut headcount—demonstrates the company’s confidence that trust and loyalty are long-term performance assets.¹

6. Lead with Light™ connection

Barry-Wehmiller exemplifies Lead with Light™ in three ways:

1. **Purpose clarity:** success is defined as improving lives, not merely growing earnings.¹
2. **Virtue-driven behavior:** listening, shared sacrifice, and recognition are taught and measured as leadership skills.⁸
3. **Alignment:** crisis responses, internal education, and recognition systems all reinforce the same philosophy, making values visible, “walking down the hall,” not just in corporate statements or hanging on the wall.^{1 8}

7. Takeaways for leaders

1. Treat “how we touch lives” as a core performance metric, then build systems (training, recognition, crisis response) that reinforce it.^{1 8}
2. Make human-skills training (listening, recognition) a non-negotiable part of leadership development.⁸
3. In downturns, explore shared-sacrifice options before layoffs to preserve trust, skills, and culture.¹



WD-40 Company: The Power of a “Tribe”

1. Company overview

[WD-40 Company](#) is a global consumer products firm best known for its multi-use lubricant, sold in more than 170 countries.⁴ Under former CEO Garry Ridge, the company became a widely cited example of culture-as-strategy.⁴

2. Stated purpose or philosophy

Ridge describes WD-40 as a “tribe,” not a workforce, emphasizing belonging, safety, and mutual responsibility.⁴ The company’s internal narrative focuses on creating a community where people feel welcome, valued, and committed to a shared future.⁴

3. Values → actions alignment

In “The WD-40 Company Tribe Story,” culture is operationalized through:

- Clear values and behavioral expectations that reduce “interpersonal friction” and organizational disruption and churn.⁴
- Leadership accountability for creating a community of belonging, drawing on ideas from tribal-leadership research.⁴
- An explicit focus on teaching, knowledge transfer, and multi-generational learning, so that experience is continually passed along within the “tribe.”⁴

These choices embed virtue-driven action like caring, gratitude, embracing responsibility, acting as the owner of the business, and stewardship into daily practices and language.⁴

4. Culture and people impact

Ridge reports that WD-40 tracks engagement with a robust, multi-question survey to see whether people feel safe, appreciated, and energized, and links high engagement to fewer injuries, better collaboration, and stronger learning.⁴ Culture is treated as a core performance driver, not a side topic.

5. Business results

Ridge connects the tribe model to significant long-term increases in sales, market value, and shareholder returns, arguing that values drive the brand and the brand drives profits.⁴ He positions culture as a central factor in WD-40’s performance trajectory, not an afterthought.⁴



6. Lead with Light™ connection

WD-40's "tribe" philosophy aligns closely with Lead with Light™:

- **Purpose:** build a community of belonging where people can contribute to something bigger than themselves and grow, not just hit quarterly targets.⁴
- **Virtue-driven Action:** belonging, safety, learning, and stewardship show up in routines, language, and leadership expectations.⁴
- **Clarity:** the tribe metaphor gives people a vivid mental model for what's expected of them and what they can expect from leaders.⁴

Special Note: It's important to understand that some can be offended when groups refer to themselves as a "tribe," particularly if they're not Indigenous or part of a formal, traditionally recognized tribal nation.

To date, there has been no significant public backlash regarding the use of the term "tribe" at WD-40. In fact, it's frequently cited as a case study in positive, high-performing corporate culture. However, the "tribe" model has specific, strict expectations that might not appeal to everyone:

- **High Accountability:** The "tribe" culture requires individuals to be accountable for their commitments, which some may find intense.
- **Cultural Fit Requirement:** As former CEO Garry Ridge explained, "Individuals who do not fit within the team are simply not going to be viable employees." This suggests an intense loyalty that could be stifling to non-conformists in some environments, though it has worked well for WD-40.
- **Atypical Feedback:** In some employee reviews, while the culture is praised, a small percentage of employees (around 20%) have occasionally felt the culture wasn't improving or wasn't the right fit for them, though they still acknowledged it was strong.

Overall, the "tribe" label at WD-40 is considered a successful, deeply embedded philosophy that connects employees to a shared, purposeful mission

7. Takeaways for leaders

1. Name your culture in a way that resonates with your people. Select a word that people easily identify with and unites them (e.g., "band," "tribe," "community," "cohort," "team"). Feel empowered to be creative, inspired by your brand (e.g., Google has Googlers, Amazon has Amazonians, Microsoft has Microsofties). Then design programs, system, and behaviors to match.⁴
2. Treat employee engagement as a leading indicator of performance and manage it with the same rigor as financial metrics.⁴
3. Make teaching, mentoring, and knowledge transfer explicit leadership responsibilities to sustain performance over generations.⁴



Patagonia: Purpose as Strategic Spine

1. Company overview

[Patagonia](#) is a privately held outdoor apparel and gear company widely recognized for its environmental and social responsibility.³ It has built a global brand and substantial revenues while positioning itself as a business in service of the planet.³

2. Stated purpose or philosophy

Patagonia's purpose—"We're in business to save our home planet"—is described as a guiding principle that informs decisions across product design, sourcing, activism, and philanthropy.³ The company's vision is to use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.³

3. Values → actions alignment

[Causeartist's case](#) highlights multiple mechanisms through which Patagonia translates purpose into action:

- Donating a significant share of profits and at least 1% of sales to environmental organizations.³
- Launching Patagonia Action Works to connect customers with local environmental volunteer opportunities.³
- Running the Worn Wear program to repair, reuse, and resell gear, explicitly encouraging customers to extend product life.³

These choices demonstrate virtue-driven action like courage, service, stewardship, and patience in the form of long-term thinking, even when they may reduce short-term sales.³

4. Culture and people impact

Patagonia's culture encourages activism and aligns employee work with personal environmental values, which the case describes as a driver of loyalty and engagement.³ Initiatives like environmental internships and support for employee activism reinforce a sense of shared purpose.³

5. Business results

The Causeartist case concludes that Patagonia has "successfully balanced financial success with a profound commitment to environmentalism and social justice," and is "a powerful example of how purpose-driven business can be both ethical and profitable."³ Its



long history of growth while deepening environmental commitments suggests that values-aligned differentiation can be economically sustainable.³

6. Lead with Light™ connection

Patagonia exemplifies Lead with Light™ at scale:

- **Purpose:** a concise, demanding reason for being that clearly transcends profit.³
- **Virtue-driven Action:** environmental stewardship and integrity show up in donations, product design, activism, and programs like Worn Wear.³
- **Clarity:** the purpose is simple enough that employees and customers can use it to judge whether a decision is on-mission or off-mission.³

7. Takeaways for leaders

1. Make your purpose specific and demanding enough to guide real trade-offs.³
2. Design products, policies, and campaigns that may sacrifice short-term volume to reinforce your purpose.³
3. Use activism and advocacy, where appropriate, to align external impact with internal values.³

Honest Health: Purpose-Driven Transformation in Healthcare

1. Company overview

[Honest Health](#) is a physician-led, value-based care enablement organization that partners with health systems and providers to succeed in shared-risk and total-cost-of-care models, particularly for Medicare and Medicare Advantage populations.^{7,9} It offers technology-enabled care coordination, data analytics, and operational infrastructure to help legacy, volume-driven systems transition to value-based care at scale.^{7,9}

2. Stated purpose or philosophy

Honest Health positions itself as enabling “the path to value-based care,” explicitly focused on better outcomes, lower costs, and sustainable models for physicians and health systems.^{8,10} Its content emphasizes building “roadmaps with a clear, shared vision that redefines success and aligns the entire organization around measurable, meaningful goals,” and stresses that value-based care is fundamentally about people—patients, clinicians, and communities—not just payment models.^{10,11}



3. Values → actions alignment

Honest Health converts this philosophy into concrete operating choices:

- **Physician-centric design:** it “partners with physicians” and starts with “minimal disruption to the PCP clinic workflow,” building financial infrastructure that allows primary care physicians to thrive in risk-based models.⁸
- **Proactive, multidisciplinary care:** programs like Care at Home deploy nurse practitioners, social workers, pharmacists, and nurse care managers to deliver coordinated care in patients’ homes, supported by daily huddles and weekly multidisciplinary meetings where “everyone has an equal voice.”⁸
- **Governance and joint venture structures:** Honest’s own description of its “Honest difference” notes that in joint venture governance “everyone has a seat at the table” and “neither party can overrule the other,” ensuring shared decision rights between health systems and physician partners.¹²

Honest Health practices honesty by telling people the unvarnished truth about their care, clarity by turning medical complexity into simple next steps, stewardship by protecting people’s time, money, and wellbeing, accountability by staying with patients until real outcomes are achieved, and compassion by treating every person with dignity, patience, and humanity. Their virtue-driven actions aren’t abstract ideals. They show up in clinical workflows, governance, contracting and practical, everyday actions that make healthcare feel navigable, trustworthy, and human.^{8 10 12}

4. Culture and people impact

Honest Health’s thought-leadership series on change emphasizes strategies that “build trust, clarity, and shared purpose:” transparent communication about the “why,” highlighting early wins, aligning around shared goals, and celebrating progress.¹⁰ It explicitly calls for empowering physicians to lead, equipping clinicians with tools and real-time insights, and fostering collaborative cultures where teams feel “supported, valued, and aligned with shared goals.”^{10 11} This makes front-line clinicians and teams co-authors of the transition rather than passive recipients of top-down mandates.



5. Business results

Honest Health reports substantial, quantified impact from its programs:

- Patients in its Care in Motion transitions-of-care program have a 17% reduced readmission rate.⁸
- Patients in its Care at Home program show a 20% reduction in hospitalization and a 40% decrease in total cost of care.⁸

According to recent funding coverage, Honest Health manages more than 115,000 members and has raised roughly 140 million dollars to scale its enablement platform, backed by leading healthcare investors who cite its ability to deliver measurable improvements in outcomes and provider sustainability.^{7 9}

These results show that virtues like partnership and stewardship can be translated into hard performance metrics in a highly regulated, financially constrained sector.^{7 8 9}

6. Lead with Light™ connection

Honest Health illustrates Lead with Light™ in a complex ecosystem:

- **Purpose clarity:** it exists to help health systems and physicians succeed in value-based care in ways that improve outcomes and affordability for vulnerable populations.^{7 8}
- **Virtue-driven Action:** collaboration, transparency, and physician leadership are visible in how programs, governance, and contracts are designed.^{8 10 12}
- **Alignment:** data, analytics, wrap-around services, and risk models are all configured to make “doing the right thing” for patients also the economically rational choice for partners.^{8 9 12}

7. Takeaways for leaders

- **In complex systems, design for shared ownership:** joint governance, shared data, and co-designed models build trust and accelerate adoption.¹²
- **Tie purpose to clear, quantified outcomes and economics** so that clinicians and executives see that better care and better margin can move together.^{8 9}
- **Make front-line leaders central to transformation** by giving them tools, real-time insights, and a genuine voice in design and decision-making.^{10 11}



Microsoft under Satya Nadella: Culture Before Strategy

1. Company overview

[Microsoft](#) is a global technology company spanning cloud computing, productivity software, devices, and artificial intelligence (AI).² Under CEO Satya Nadella, it underwent a deep cultural and strategic transformation widely cited as a model of modern leadership.²

2. Stated purpose or philosophy

Nadella reframed Microsoft's culture around a "growth mindset," encouraging employees to be "learn-it-all" rather than "know-it-all."² He's described as having "prioritized culture before strategy," emphasizing humility, self-awareness, and openness to change.²

3. Values → actions alignment

[TalentSprint's analysis](#) highlights several concrete changes that translated philosophy into practice:

- Restructuring performance and incentive systems to promote collaboration instead of internal competition, aligning rewards with shared goals.²
- Broadening success metrics beyond short-term financials to include "power metrics" such as customer adoption, product usage, and satisfaction.²
- Reorganizing around core businesses like cloud and AI to break down silos and align structure with strategic capabilities.²

These moves embed virtues like humility, learning, and customer focus into how work is evaluated and rewarded.²

4. Culture and people impact

The same analysis emphasizes that the growth-mindset shift increased collaboration, innovation, and psychological safety.² By modeling listening and curiosity, Nadella signaled that it was acceptable to challenge assumptions and to surface what Microsoft needed to "unlearn," unlocking discretionary effort and cross-team learning.²

5. Business results

TalentSprint links Microsoft's cultural shift with its strategic success in cloud and AI, noting the company's rise as a "\$3 trillion powerhouse" built on renewed innovation and customer focus.² It underscores that culture change and performance were intertwined, not separate.²



6. Lead with Light™ connection

Microsoft's transformation demonstrates:

- **Purpose clarity:** a widely reported purpose to empower people and organizations to achieve more, operationalized via customer-obsessed metrics and collaboration.²
- **Virtue-driven Action:** humility, learning, and openness reflected in leadership behavior and evaluation systems.²
- **Alignment:** incentives, structure, and metrics redesigned to support the culture and strategy, not contradict them.²

7. Takeaways for leaders

1. **Put culture first;** redesign incentives, structures, and metrics to support the behaviors you say you value.²
2. **Use “power metrics”** (e.g., adoption, usage, satisfaction) alongside financials to maintain focus on long-term value creation.²
3. **Model learning and vulnerability** at the top to make growth mindset credible.²

Southwest Airlines: Employees First, for Decades

1. Company overview

[Southwest Airlines](#) is a major U.S. low-cost carrier known for its distinctive culture and sustained customer loyalty.⁶ It has long been recognized for strong employee engagement and a people-first philosophy.⁶

2. Stated purpose or philosophy

Southwest developed six values and created a Culture Services department to “retain focus on company values, the employees, and ‘low cost.’”⁶ Its ethos, often associated with founder Herb Kelleher, is that employees come first, then customers, then shareholders.⁶

3. Values → actions alignment

Human Synergistics' culture case highlights practices that translate values into behavior:

- “Culture Blitzes,” where a Culture Services team visits airports to connect with employees, bring food and fun, and even help clean planes.⁶
- Leadership development that recognizes “leaders at all levels,” teaching managerial best practices and “the way we do things around here.”⁶



- Empowerment and appreciation mechanisms, like involving flight attendants in uniform design and forwarding customer compliments directly to employees and their managers.⁶

These practices embody servant leadership, appreciation, and fun as daily, visible behaviors.⁶

4. Culture and people impact

The same case describes how Southwest encourages managers to know employees' needs outside work and to support them in life events (for example, sending flowers after a death or gifts for newborns).⁶ The airline receives thousands of compliments a month about employees, reinforcing positive behavior and pride in the culture.⁶

5. Business results

[Human Synergistics](#) connects Southwest's strong culture with its low-cost model and service reputation, noting that its culture is a competitive differentiator that supports long-term performance.⁶ A values-driven culture is positioned as core to Southwest's ability to maintain low costs and high loyalty over time.⁶

6. Lead with Light™ connection

Southwest shows how putting employees first leads to customers coming back and shareholders benefiting:

- **Purpose:** a commitment to low-cost, friendly air travel delivered by people who feel cared for.⁶
- **Virtue-driven Action:** service, gratitude, and joy, visible in everyday interactions and leadership practices.⁶
- **Alignment:** a dedicated Culture Services team, empowerment, and recognition mechanisms that make the culture tangible.⁶

7. Takeaways for leaders

1. **Invest in visible, hands-on cultural reinforcement** (e.g., “culture blitzes”) rather than relying solely on messaging.⁶
2. **Recognize and equip leaders at every level;** culture is delivered at the front line, not just set in the boardroom.⁶
3. **Build mechanisms that make appreciation and human care systematic,** not ad hoc.⁶



Cross-company insights

Common patterns

Across Barry-Wehmiller, WD-40, Patagonia, Honest Health, Microsoft, and Southwest, several patterns emerge:

- **Purpose is explicit**, simple, and demanding. Barry-Wehmiller’s focus on lives touched, Patagonia’s mission to save the planet, Honest Health’s mandate to make value-based care viable, and Microsoft’s growth-mindset reset all give stakeholders a clear “north star.”^{1 3 7 2}
- **Virtues are translated into systems, routines, and action.** Leadership universities, tribe rituals, value-based care programs, cloud-aligned structures, and culture blitzes embed values into daily work rather than leaving them in slide decks.^{1 4 7 8 2 6}
- **Trust is treated as a strategic asset.** Avoiding layoffs, building joint-governance models, and investing in culture services and engagement are viewed as investments in long-term performance, not discretionary extras.^{1 7 6}

How purpose becomes performance

The journey from purpose to performance looks similar across these cases:

- **Clarify the purpose and virtues** in language people can easily understand, remember, and test decisions against.^{1 3 7 2}
- **Redesign systems**—metrics, incentives, governance, training, and recognition—to reward virtue-aligned behavior.^{1 4 7 8 2 6}
- **Create reinforcing narratives and experiences that make the culture tangible:** stories of shared sacrifice, environmental activism, physician-led transformation, or employee heroics.^{4 3 7 6 8}

When this alignment holds, people can predict how leaders will behave under stress, which is the foundation of trust and resilience.^{1 4 7 6}

Purpose and profitability

The cases show that virtue-aligned leadership correlates with durable performance:

- Barry-Wehmiller combines unusual people practices with “enviable financial results.”¹
- WD-40’s tribe culture is linked by its former CEO to sustained growth in value and returns.⁴



- Patagonia is cited as proof that a company can “successfully balance financial success with a profound commitment to environmentalism and social justice.”³
- Honest Health shows that value-based care can reduce readmissions and total cost of care while attracting significant growth capital and scaling to over 100,000 members.^{7 8 9}
- Microsoft’s cultural reset is tied to its emergence as a “\$3 trillion powerhouse.”²
- Southwest’s culture is framed as essential to its low-cost, high-loyalty model.⁶

In each case, purpose and virtue-driven action shape how financial discipline is applied and where trade-offs are made, rather than sitting on the side as messaging.^{1 3 7 2 6}

Final argument: Leading with Light is a superior operating model

While these organizations don’t talk about why they do what they do or how they do it in terms of the Lead with Light™ framework and operating system, each one—in its own way—demonstrates the power of purpose and how they’ve turned their values into virtue-driven action. Each align systems, programs, and decisions with actions to consistently outperform peers on engagement, resilience, and long-term value creation.^{1 3 4 7 2 6}

The companies profiled here aren’t perfect; however, each show that such alignment is possible in manufacturing, consumer goods, healthcare, technology, and airlines.

Lead with Light™ captures this reality:

- Purpose without virtue-driven action becomes words on a wall, empty of meaning, and may come under fire as virtue signaling.
- Virtue-driven action without clarity conveys good intentions but is often inconsistent and potentially confusing.
- Only when purpose, virtue-driven action, and clarity are aligned—and made visible in everyday choices—do people trust leadership enough to bring their best selves to work, stay through adversity, and innovate over time.

The evidence across these cases is clear: leading with light—anchoring actions and decisions in purpose and virtue-driven action, then executing with rigor and radiance (i.e., competence and warmth)—isn’t just good for people. It’s a superior way to build strong, adaptive, high-performing organizations in a world that increasingly rewards trust, authenticity, and long-term value.^{1 3 7 2 6}



Footnotes with links

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