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"Tell me about the people at the organization you just left," said the senior manager who was screening candidates to fill a key leadership role. "They were uneducated and lazy," the candidate responded. "You always had to keep an eye on them because they were constantly trying to goof off or rip off the company. They were lousy communicators, resisted change, and only cared about themselves." "That's too bad," replied the senior manager, "I am sorry to say that's the same type of people you'll find here. This doesn't sound like a job you would enjoy."

Once the next candidate was seated, she was asked the same question. "Oh, they were great," she said. "Although many of them couldn't read, and we had some trouble communicating with each other, they were very driven to succeed. Once we all got to know each other, they were constantly helping one other and working together." "Great," the senior manager responded, "That's the same type of people you'll find here."

The American poet and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, said "There is no rule more invariable than that we are paid for our suspicions by finding what

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we suspected." Physicists, philosophers, and psychologists are probing ever deeper into the murky realms of reality. It's becoming ever clearer that our perceptions really do create our reality. That's especially true in leadership.

This issue features a powerful new book by historian and author, Rutger Bregman. *The Guardian* describes him as "the Dutch wunderkind of new ideas." *Humankind: A Hopeful History* provides new perspectives on 200,000 years of human history. My review below highlights a number of its key points counterbalancing so many negative views on the "reality" of human nature.

Bregman digs deep into the origins of many negative assumptions about humanity. His research and historical perspective show core values and assumptions that stunt leadership effectiveness and cause so many organizations and nations to fail.

"One of the effects of power, myriad studies show, is that it makes you see others in a negative light. If you're powerful you're more likely to think most people are lazy and unreliable. That they need to be supervised and monitored, managed and regulated, censored and told what to do. And because power makes you feel superior to other people, you'll believe all this monitoring should be entrusted to you."

This also explains why some extraordinary leaders are so effective at building thriving, highly effective organizational cultures. As you'll see in this issue, The Fish Tank Factor creates a very different reality. Based on trust, a growth mindset, and treating people as responsible partners, highly effective leaders build nurturing environments where everyone thrives. Countless studies show the reality of those approaches lead to much higher performance for investors, customers, communities, employees, and the environment.

We don't see the world as it is; we see the world as we are. What are your assumptions about the reality of human nature?

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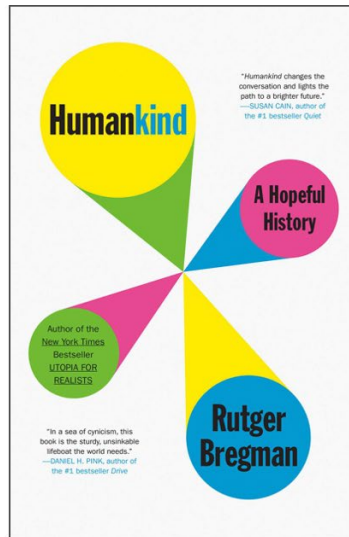
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Review of Humankind: A Hopeful History



How many of these assumptions describe the reality of humankind:

- Corruption and cruelty lie just beneath the surface and can easily be pulled out of people.
- Civility is a thin veneer covering people's selfish, sometimes evil tendencies.
- Laws and punishments are needed to curb dishonesty and violence.
- We're all born into a world of sin and need to be saved from wickedness.
- Most employees must be monitored so they don't take advantage of their organization.
- People are mainly motivated by rewards or punishments.
- The "bystander effect" shows most people are reluctant to get involved.
- Trusting others is naïve and sets us up to be taken advantage of.
- Books like *Lord of the Flies* or reality TV shows reveal how competitive and nasty humans are to each other in stressful situations.
- With enough authority and coercion, people will do horrible things to others.

From the beginning of civilization, countless philosophers, religious leaders, rulers, academics, and politicians held these beliefs. Many still do. These pessimistic views of humanity have created, and continue to spread, untold misery and needless suffering. What if this isn't reality at all? What if these widely shared beliefs are warped views of human nature?

Rutger Bregman's new book, ***Humankind: A Hopeful History***, disproves assumptions like these with deep research showing a more factual picture of reality. He probes deep into famous sociology and psychological studies to uncover fraud and deeply flawed methodology, painting humans as selfish, aggressive, panicky, hateful, power-hungry, and easily manipulated or intimidated.

Bregman writes, "Quite a few religions take it as a tenet of faith that humans are mired in sin. Many a capitalist presumes we're all motivated by self-interest. Lots of environmentalists see humans as a destructive plague upon the earth. Thousands of opinions; one take on human nature." *Humankind* provides a powerful, evidence-based negation of these destructive views of humanity. He explains, "If there's one thing I've sought to do with this book, it's to change the meaning of the word 'realism.' Isn't it telling that in modern usage the realist has become synonymous with the cynic -- for someone with a pessimistic outlook?"

My copy of this insightful new book is full of yellow highlights. Here are a few points that really stand out:

- The well-researched placebo and nocebo effects prove that when a patient gets an inert pill, expectations about a drug's effectiveness or side effects often produce what's expected. The same is true of beliefs or expectations leaders have about society, employees, or kids.
- Crisis often brings out the best in us. Most people aren't selfishly out to just save themselves. We often pull together and support each other.
- Neanderthals had bigger heads and were likely smarter than early humans. Our superpower is sociability and relating to each other. We flourished because we're friendlier, communicate better, and work together. He calls us "homo puppy."
- Less than 20% of soldiers fire their guns in combat. We're not wired to kill other humans face to face. The vast majority of killing in war comes from military leaders ordering the use of bombs, shells, land mines, and weapons of mass destruction from a distance.
- Power can corrupt. Many leaders see people as lazy and unreliable (classic **Theory X** thinking). They must be supervised, managed, regulated, and monitored (often with technology). Sound familiar? "And because power makes you feel superior to other people, you'll believe all this monitoring should be entrusted to you."
- The **Pygmalion** Effect's been thoroughly tested and proven hundreds of times over the last fifty years. Yet leaders, parents, teachers, coaches, etc. persist in holding low expectations and feeling proved right when people live down to them. Many of Bregman's recommendations for applying his findings center on raising expectations and elevating leadership behaviors to draw out the best in people.
- Most of us are intrinsically motivated. But most people believe money, power, status, or similar extrinsic drivers motivate others. Research clearly shows these assumptions -- which way too many leaders hold - are **wrong** and often **destructive**.
- Over 515 studies from 38 countries show that the surest way to reduce

prejudice and racism is by increasing contact with each other. It helps us see the world through other people's eyes, makes us more tolerant, and is contagious.

- Nonviolent resistance or campaigns for social justice have proven to be twice as effective as violence. Over eleven times more people will join nonviolent campaigns and can "overpower evil by outnumbering it."
- Small hate-mongering groups such as internet trolls on Twitter or Facebook can seem to represent humankind's true underlying nature just below the veneer. But the clear reality is the vast majority of people are kind, compassionate, and peaceful.

Rutger gives a five-minute video overview of the book [here](#). Many of its key points are summarized in a *Time* magazine [interview](#).

It's so easy to believe many of those opening statements -- especially with news and social media feeding our negativity bias to increase their views, clicks, and likes. I highly recommend ***Humankind: A Hopeful History*** as a thoughtful antidote to the poisons of cynicism, pessimism, and negativity.

Thoughts That Make You Go Hmmm on...Humankind

A few favorite excerpts (so many to choose from) of my [review](#) of *Humankind: A Hopeful History*.

...to stand up for human goodness is to take a stand against the powers that be. For the powerful, a hopeful view of human nature is downright threatening. Subversive. Seditious. It implies that we're not selfish beasts that need to be reined in, restrained and regulated. It implies that we need a different kind of leadership.

... cynicism is just another word for laziness. It's an excuse not to take responsibility. Because if you believe most people are rotten, you don't need to get worked up about injustice. The world is going to hell either way.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. But evil doesn't live just beneath the surface; it takes immense effort to draw it out. And most importantly, evil has to be disguised as doing good.

The premise of so-called reality shows, from Big Brother to Temptation Island, is that human beings, when left to their own devices, behave like beasts....But take the time to look behind the scenes of programs like these

and you'll see candidates being led on, boozed up and played off against each other in ways that are nothing less than shocking. It shows just how much manipulation it takes to bring out the worst in people.

Across the board, their results were the same. The experiments revealed that even at the tender age of eighteen months children are only too eager to help others, happily taking a break from fun and games to lend a hand, helping a stranger even when you throw a ball pit into the mix. And they want nothing in return.

When modern economists assumed that people are innately selfish, they advocated policies that fostered self-serving behavior. When politicians convinced themselves that politics is a cynical game, that's exactly what it became.

A few years ago, researchers at the University of Massachusetts analyzed fifty-one studies on the effects of economic incentives in the workplace. They found 'overwhelming evidence' that bonuses can blunt the intrinsic motivation and moral compass of employees. And as if that wasn't bad enough, they also discovered that bonuses and targets can erode creativity.

A British study recently found that a vast majority of the population (74 per cent) identify more closely with values such as helpfulness, honesty and justice than with wealth, status and power. But just about as large a share (78 per cent) think others are more self-interested than they really are.

If we believe most people can't be trusted, that's how we'll treat each other, to everyone's detriment. Few ideas have as much power to shape the world as our view of other people. Because ultimately, you get what you expect to get.

In a weird way, to believe in our own sinful nature is comforting. It provides a kind of absolution. Because if most people are bad, then engagement and resistance aren't worth the effort.

Every day, we make each other smarter or stupider, stronger or weaker, faster or slower. We can't help leaking expectations, through our gazes, our body language, and our voices. My expectations about you define my attitude towards you, and the way I behave towards you in turn influences your expectations and therefore your behavior towards me.

You Can't Raise Performance with Low Expectations



In his book, *The Excellence Dividend*, Tom Peters writes, "In an Oscar acceptance speech, the late director Robert Altman said: 'The role of the director is to create a space where the actors and actresses can become more than they have ever been before, more than they've dreamed of being.'"

You've likely had a limiting boss, teacher, sports coach, or parent who stunted your growth. And you've likely had someone who saw greater potential -- perhaps more than you saw in yourself -- and helped you grow.

This has been called The **Pygmalion** Effect. In his *Harvard Business Review* classic "Pygmalion in Management," J. Sterling Livingston draws upon the ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who carved a statue of a beautiful woman that was later brought to life. George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (which was the basis for "My Fair Lady") used a similar theme. In the play, Eliza Doolittle explains, "The difference between a flower girl and a lady is not how she behaves, but how she is **treated**." Livingston presents a number of his own studies, as well as other research, to prove that "If a manager's expectations are high, productivity is likely to be excellent. If his expectations are low, productivity is likely to be poor."

Dov Eden, leadership professor and author of *Pygmalion in Management: Productivity as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*, reports, "The Pygmalion Effect is great science that is under applied. It hasn't made the difference it should have in the world, and that's very disappointing."

The goldfish analogy illustrates the impact of expectations and beliefs. If you buy a little goldfish and keep it in a small bowl, it will grow a few inches for the rest of its life. Move that same fish to a large aquarium, and it will double or triple in size. Put the goldfish in a large pond, and it can grow up to a foot long. The key factor determining the size of the fish is the size of its environment.

Many managers see people as they are and treat them according to what they see. He or she would take a small goldfish and keep it in the little bowl because it would be inefficient and wasteful to put it in a larger environment. Strong leaders see people as they could be and coach them to grow that potential.

**MANAGEMENT
(SMALL FISHBOWLS)**

**LEADERSHIP
(LARGE FISH TANKS)**

Commanding

Coaching

Solving problems

Enabling others to solve problems

Directing and controlling

Teaching and engaging

Seeing people as they are

Developing people into what they could be

Empowering

Partnering

Operating

Improving

Pushing

Pulling

Heroic manager

Facilitative leader

Quick fix to symptoms

Search for systemic root causes

Are you a small fishbowl manager or large fish tank leader? How do you know? You can use our **Fish Tank Factor** mini quiz for a quick self-assessment. A far more accurate way to assess your coaching skills is a **360 assessment**.

Less effective managers often focus on fixing weaknesses. Highly effective leaders draw out and build on strengths. As organizational psychologist and executive coach, Doug MacKie writes in his **book**, *Strength-Based Leadership Coaching in Organizations: An Evidence-Based Guide to Positive Leadership*, "Both coaching and positive psychology share certain assumptions in their focus on the positive, the belief that people want to learn and most importantly that individuals contain within themselves, the solution to their own challenges."

Bridging the Distance: Reading, Leading, and Succeeding



Leaders bring hope, optimism, and positive action. That's really tough to do while social distancing and facing an uncertain future. We multiply misery if we allow the pessimism plague to infect us as well.

To counter Headline Stress Disorder and strengthen resilience, I actively scan a list of resources for research, articles, and tips on leading ourselves and others through these turbulent times. I post those articles every day.

Let's shorten our social media distancing. Follow or connect with me:

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Together we can Learn, Laugh, Love, and Lead -- just for the L of it!

Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments



The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly **blog** during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

Feedback and Follow-Up

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without his or her permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations (online these days) of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com or connect with me on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or my [blog](#)!

Let's leverage our leadership strengths to work together and get through this challenging time.



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