

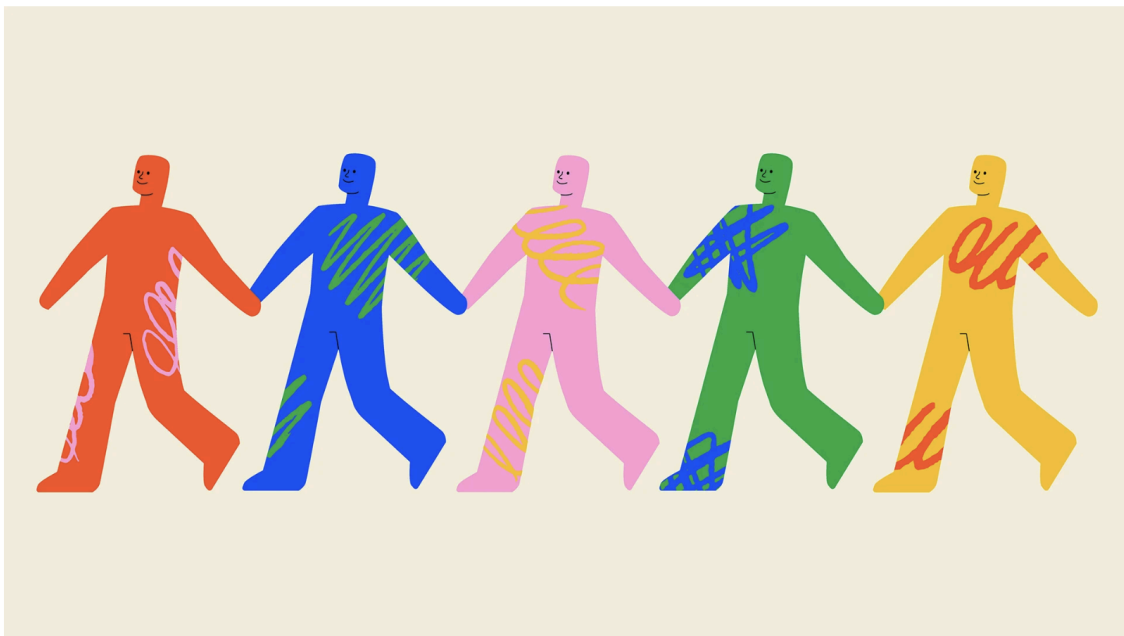
Inc.

Most Leaders Say 'People First.' Few Actually Mean It

Your values aren't what you say. They're what you do under pressure.

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Most leaders say they care about people. Far fewer are willing to organize their business around that belief. At [Rancho La Puerta](#), they've been doing exactly that since 1940. That commitment drives a set of operating decisions that, over time, have quietly built one of the most respected wellness destinations in the world.

Barry Shingle, director of guest experience, is adamant about people-first leadership.

“Love is number one,” he shared. “The guest experience and employee happiness come first. Then money.”

That might seem like it’s just a slogan Shingle and his team put on the boardroom wall until you see how consistently they’ve lived it.

Do this self-check now

Think of one recent decision you made under pressure. Now ask yourself: Did your values lead... or did your fear? Be honest. You already know the answer.

Where people-first leadership shows up

At Rancho La Puerta, love isn’t just expressed in speeches. It shows up in strategic priorities and everyday operations.

- **Hiring:** Co-founder Deborah Szekely has long emphasized hiring for kindness and happiness first. Skills can be taught. Character can’t.
- **Guest experience:** They listen and adapt. After 9/11, they expanded meditation offerings dramatically in response to what guests needed. After all, it was a bit stressful. Today, those practices are central.
- **Employee support:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, when they closed for six months, they continued paying hundreds of employees and invited them weekly to collect fresh produce grown on the property.
- **Environmental stewardship:** Under president Sarah Livia Brightwood Szekely, Rancho La Puerta made one of its largest-ever investments in wastewater processing. They made this investment not because it boosted margins, but because it was the right thing for the surrounding ecosystem.
- **Scaling:** They intentionally limit the number of guests — around 150 — so the guest experience and sense of community doesn’t get diluted.

That one is worth pausing on. Most businesses chase growth until culture breaks. Rancho La Puerta protects culture, even if it constrains growth. The real leadership question isn't whether you have values. It's whether your decisions, especially under pressure, make those values visible.

Why this works

Research consistently shows that when employees feel psychologically safe and respected, performance improves. A [2023 McKinsey report](#) on organizational health found that environments emphasizing trust, meaning, and belonging significantly outperform peers on long-term financial metrics.

Similarly, [research from the University of Warwick](#) has shown that happier employees are about 12% more productive on average. When people feel safe, seen, and valued, they give more of themselves. While none of that is surprising, it takes committed, principled, and consistent leadership to make it happen.

It can be profitable, too. Rancho La Puerta had its best year ever in 2025. [More than 60% of guests](#) keep returning for more.

Questions to consider

- Where are you saying “people first” but rewarding something else?
- What hard decision are you avoiding because it might cost you in the short term?
- If someone watched your company for a week, what would they conclude you actually value?

How operate with love and generate a profit

1. **Hire for character.** Prioritize kindness, curiosity, and emotional steadiness over résumé polish.
2. **Listen and take action.** Pick one area where feedback is clear, and act on it visibly.
3. **Invest beyond the spreadsheet.** Make one decision this quarter because it's right, not just profitable.
4. **Limit something.** Growth, meetings, and scope create space so quality and connection can deepen.
5. **Show up as a cheerleader.** Actively encourage your people. Great leaders do this well.

Leadership team talk

In your next team meeting, ask, “Where are we out of alignment between what we say matters and what we actually reward?” Then choose one small experiment to close that gap this week.

Why people-first leadership matters

The need for community right now is not subtle. It's acute. Loneliness and disconnection are rising across workplaces, even in high-performing organizations.

Most companies try to solve this with programs. Rancho La Puerta solves it by protecting conditions. They limit size so connection can happen, hire for warmth —

not just competence and create spaces where people feel safe to be human.

Your workplace doesn't need to become a retreat center to become a community where people feel a sense of belonging again. That's not soft. That's strategic.