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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Emerging Concept of the Human-Centered Organization: A Review and Synthesis of the Literature

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Abstract

Both practitioners and scholars are increasingly interested in the idea of the human-centered organization. This term first appeared in the late 1950s and has gained attention in the last ten years. Awareness of the need for human-centeredness grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which many organizational leaders were compelled to focus on employee health, safety, and well-being. In this paper, we review and synthesize the rather fragmented scholarly and practitioner literature on human-centered organization (HCO) to develop an integrated definition and framework. The 26 sources reviewed in depth indicate that the HCO construct is primarily utilized in two ways. First, human-centered design scholars and practitioners conceive of HCOs as employing human-centered design practices. The second discourse involves the humanistic management and culture literature, which conceives of HCOs as embodying humanistic values and cultures. After reviewing these separate discourses, we synthesize them in an integrated definition as well as framework of HCO. The framework starts from humanistic values such as dignity, well-being, and justice, which are pivotal in creating organizational practices characterized by a common good purpose, positive human experiences on the job, team structures to coordinate work, and participatory tools and approaches.

Keywords Human-centered organization · Human-centered design · Organizational culture · Workplace · Literature synthesis

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Introduction

Since McGregor's *The Human Side of Enterprise* was published in 1957, various models, methodologies, and tools have been designed to operationalize his famous Theory Y in the Western workplace (McGregor and Cutcher-Gershenfeld 2006). All these approaches treat people as innately motivated problem-solvers, who are capable of enjoying work and willing to accept responsibility. Moreover, organizational forms drawing on Theory Y thinking have emerged, such as sociocracy (Romme 1995) and B-corp (B Lab 2023). An organizational form inspired by Theory Y which has not yet been codified (as have sociocracy and B-corps) is the human-centered organization.

The term *human-centered organization* (HCO) was first mentioned in the late 1950s, experienced a bump in interest in the 1990s, and then surged in popularity around 2015 (Google Books Ngram Viewer n.d.). This surge in popularity may be partly due to efforts by IBM and the International Standards Organization. In 2012, IBM embarked on an initiative to develop a HCO development practice (Lohr 2015), and several years later, the International Standards Organization (2016) issued ISO 27500:2016, which outlines the principles of a HCO.

The discourse on HCO increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, which motivated many to rethink the role of people in the workplace. As governments struggled to protect citizens from contagion, almost all organizations grappled with human and social challenges arising from the pandemic: for example, how to support co-workers with sick family members, grieve lost colleagues, protect employees from illness and death, and facilitate employees working from home (Kaushik and Guleria 2020; De Peuter et al. 2023). The first author of this paper, in her work as an organizational consultant, observed managers who previously had little appetite for relational conversations, but started reconnecting with their humanity. They began meetings by asking, "How are you really?" and "How can I support you?"; they listened, empathized, and advocated for team members' health and safety.

Today, with the pandemic subsiding, many organizations are still adjusting to the complexity of the moment. Many who worked from home during the pandemic prefer to continue this pattern, while some leaders worry that working remotely will weaken organizational culture and productivity (Galanti et al. 2021; Manko 2021). Moreover, the racial reckoning in the United States led many companies to engage in initiatives that explore how racism and inequity are embedded within their organizational practices and to develop more equitable and inclusive environments—although some evidence suggests that these efforts are being curtailed in the United States (Telford 2023) and that inequalities remain entrenched within organizations despite work being done to address them (Amis and Greenwood 2021). In this respect, lack of engagement at work appears to remain high: globally, only 21% of all employees are actively engaged in the workplace, while 19% are actively disengaged (Gallup n.d.); and only 20% of those polled in the United States are extremely satisfied with their workplace and only 20% believe that "their managers truly value their differences" (Emtrain 2021; Gallup n.d.).

In this context, the HCO idea has been gaining traction. While still few scholarly articles are devoted to HCO, it is the focus of many blog posts, consulting projects, and conferences. This article therefore serves to explore the nascent topic of HCO, in terms of the following question: *How are scholars and practitioners conceptualizing HCO in the*

literature and can we integrate the main findings from this review into an inclusive framework for HCO? The next section describes the method used in reviewing the literature. We then turn to the main findings and synthesize these findings into an integrated framework for human-centered organizing. The article closes with a discussion section.

Method

The literature review was conducted between January and May 2023 using the keywords "human-centered organization" along with variations such as human-centered + business, human-centered + enterprise, people-centered + organization, and person-centered + workplace. The following databases were searched: Google Scholar, ABI/INFORM, ProQuest, APA PsychInfo, Business Source Complete, Psychology and Behavioral Science Collection, Small Business Reference Center, SocINDEX, and Women's Studies International. Articles about artificial intelligence technology were omitted from this review, as were those concerning human-centered education and healthcare. Moreover, only articles written in English were included.

In an emerging, rather uncodified body of knowledge like HCOs, it is critical to not only review what academics write about it, but also how professionals practicing HCOs engage with it. This is in line with how systematic review protocols have been advocated and implemented in adjacent disciplines (Tranfield et al. 2003; Briner and Denyer 2014; Adams et al. 2017). Combining the academic body of knowledge with practitioner knowledge also serves to prevent the rise of a rigor-relevance gap (in the HCO discourse), which prevails in various management research domains (Huff 2000; Romme et al. 2015; Aguinis et al. 2022). Therefore, in addition to searching scholarly databases, a Google search was conducted to find articles, blog posts, websites, and podcasts developed by practitioners.

As a result of these searches, we identified 220 sources. Of these sources, 40 are directly related to HCOs and 26 sources contain conceptualizations of HCO, which are included in the final analysis. The 12 non-scholarly sources in this group range from blog posts to a formal standard created by the International Standards Organization. Notably, only two of the 14 scholarly articles have an empirical component.

A key challenge was to create boundaries between what is in and out of scope. Adjacent publications such as those about people-centered cultures (Black and La Venture 2016), shared destiny relationships (Ghoshal et al. 1999), humanistic management (Pirson and Lawrence 2010), humanizing bureaucracy (Borry and Reuter 2022), theory of community (Korten 2019), and essentials for workplace well-being (Office of the US Surgeon General 2022) share similarities with HCOs, but were excluded since they do not focus explicitly on HCOs. Fifty scholarly case studies that focus on what could be called human-centered approaches were also excluded since they do not specifically use the term *human-centered organization*. Also excluded from the analysis were books that used "human" in their titles but did not focus on HCOs. However, we did consult many of the 220 sources in these adjacent literatures, emerging from our initial searches, to develop a research agenda in the last section of this article. The Appendix lists the scholarly and non-scholarly publications included in the final review.

Most of these sources were published in the last 10 years; only three articles, all of which were scholarly, were written earlier than 2013. The lead authors of the reviewed sources represent fifteen different countries, with 42% based in North America, 42% in Europe, 8% in Asia, and only one article each from the South American and African continents.

After finalizing the list of sources, quotes describing conceptualizations of HCO were extracted from each source. The conceptualizations were coded using Dedoose (https://www.dedoose.com/), a process resulting in 446 codes, which were sorted into eight overarching categories: Who, Relationship to Work, Reason for Being, Culture &

Table 1 Coding results

Category	Number of unique codes	Representative subcategories	Number of mentions
Culture & Attributes	52	Agile and flexible	4
		Care for others	9
		Connection	9
		Empowered	5
		Learning	16
		Morality	6
		Trust	4
Human Needs	19	Belonging	5
		Health and well-being	17
		Human rights	9
Methods	60	Empowerment methods	7
		Giving to community	3
		Human-centered leadership	4
		Human-centered management	4
		Human resources	4
		No managers	3
		Strategic	4
Outcomes	41	Innovation and creativity	15
		Performance	20
		Thriving experience	36
		User experience	4
Reason for Being	16	Common good	10
		Purpose	18
Relationship to Work	23	Competence	4
		Engaged and committed	19
		Meaningful work	5
Who	49	Diverse/diversity	5
		Extended who	28
		Organizations	23
		Staff	25
		Those affected and involved	12
		Whole person	28
Miscellaneous	6	[No subcategories]	16

Attributes, Human Needs, Outcomes, Methods, and Miscellaneous. Table 1 shows the representative subcategories in each overarching category, along with the total number of codes per subcategory.

Findings

This section outlines the main findings arising from the literature review. Table 2 provides an overview of the frequencies of the main categories that were coded. The *Who* category represents the largest percentage of codes (28%), followed by *Outcomes* (19%), *Methods* (16%), and *Culture and Attributes* (14%). Codes representing *Relationship to Work* (7%), *Human Needs* (7%), *Reason for Being* (6%), and *Miscellaneous* (3%) comprise the rest of the codes (see Table 2).

While scholars and practitioners share similar levels of concern in several categories such as *Who, Methods*, and *Culture & Attributes*, there are some minor differences in other categories such as *Relationship to Work*. Notably, more significant differences exist between scholars and practitioners if we zoom into the code counts within various categories (not reported in Table 2). For example, in the *Human Needs* category, practitioners appear to be more interested in *Health and Well-Being* (36% of practitioner codes versus 15% of scholarly codes), while scholars are more interested in *Human Rights* (21% of scholarly codes versus 6% of practitioner codes).

Differences in Philosophical and Theoretical Roots

The term HCO is claimed by authors with different philosophical backgrounds and theoretical roots. The two largest groups are *human-centered design* (e.g. International Standards Organization 2016; Mochimaru 2017; Picchi 2017; Augsten et al. 2018; Ghassemi 2019; Rodríguez 2021; Magistretti et al. 2023) and *humanistic management* (e.g. Winstanley and Woodall 2000; Ainamo 2013; Bardy 2016; Kim et al. 2018; Bissola and Imperatori 2019; Bam and Ronnie 2021; Lepeley 2021). These groups are represented by nine and eight publications respectively. The authors of the remaining sources have a background in culture studies (4 sources), conscious capitalism (3), sustainability (1), and systems thinking (1).

Table 2 Code counts for main categories and by type

Code	Overall count	Scholars	Practitioners
Culture & Attributes	14%	14%	16%
Human Needs	7%	7%	8%
Methods	16%	17%	13%
Outcomes	19%	16%	23%
Reason for Being	6%	7%	5%
Relationship to Work	7%	10%	2%
Who	28%	27%	28%
Miscellaneous	3%	2%	5%
	100%	100%	100%

Table 3 Total of codes allocate to each category by roots

Code	Humanistic management	Human-centered design	Other
Culture & Attributes	14%	17%	13%
Human Needs	6%	7%	10%
Methods	13%	12%	23%
Outcomes	18%	21%	18%
Reason for Being	9%	5%	4%
Relationship to Work	10%	1%	5%
Who	27%	34%	24%
Misc	3%	4%	3%
	100%	100%	100%

The two primary groups differ in terms of their priorities (see Table 3). Humanistic management writers are more interested in *Relationship to Work* (10% versus 1%) than human-centered design (HCD) authors, whereas HCD authors are slightly more interested in *Who* questions (34% versus 27%). Within the *Who* category, the humanistic management publications prioritize the whole person (33% of codes versus 6% of practitioner codes) while HCD focuses on the extended network of stakeholders affected by the organization (20% of codes versus 10% of scholarly codes).

Another split occurs in the *Relationship to Work* category. Unlike humanistic management writers, HCD authors do not mention issues associated with belonging. Instead, they focus on health, safety, and employee well-being on the job, with 71% of the codes associated with this topic in comparison to humanistic management scholars (38% of codes). Scholars and practitioners have a similar interest in *Methods* (see Table 3); within this category, however, humanistic management authors discuss humanistic leadership and HR management practices, topics that are completely absent from HCD articles.

The Intervention Focus of Practitioners and Scholars

The implicit assumption underlying many conceptions of HCO is that organizational change is overdue. In this respect, HCO conceptualizations represent proposed interventions into the current organizational state. Both practitioners and scholars believe that, for HCO to become a reality, major changes are needed in how organizations are conceptualized and managed. But there are also substantial differences between the two groups. Tables 4 and 5 provide an overview of representative quotes regarding interventions, from the practitioner and the scholarly publications respectively.

Some practitioners prioritize the idea that people are more important than organizational charts or profits (see Table 4). Others advocate for more care for human needs in the workplace. Yet others envision organizations more focused on morality and purpose. Another group of practitioners focuses on creating meaningful work experiences, while the final group prioritizes problem solving; see Table 4.

By contrast, scholars appear to have a somewhat distinct focus on interventions (see Table 5). A priority for scholars is employee self-direction; as such, several authors envision organizations in which managers' roles are radically rethought (Sandberg 1993; Hamel and Euchner 2021). Some of these organizations are (claimed to operate) without

Table 4 Practitioners' intervention focus

Primary intervention	Representative quotes
Person at center of activity	• "A 'human-centered' organization creates solutions to challenges by **placing the perspective of the involved and affected humans in the center** of the solution creation process" (Ghassemi 2019) • "A human-centric organization **views the individual as the core of value creation**, not job titles and organization charts" (Grove 2019) • A human-centered organization "exists to fulfill a purpose for its users, customers, and community, and **orients all of its innovation and operations activities around those people**" (IBM n.d.) • "Human-centered organizations are companies whose **company culture puts the person at the center of their activity**, rather than allowing results (sales, productivity, money, etc.) to take up all the value" (Rodríguez 2021)
Employee care and well-being	• "Ensure **health, safety, and well-being** are business priorities" (International Standards Organization 2016, p. 18) • "Blending the organization with the non-negotiable intention of the **well-being** of employees" (Kolar 2020) • "Human-centric organizations look at the whole person and their **needs as a human**" (Lynch 2023) • "A workplace concerned with the "**care and resilience** of human workers" (Vojnovski 2022)
Purpose and morality	• "Human-centric organizations are places where both people and productivity thrive because they build from a **clear moral centre** and are aligned towards their **highest, most human purpose**" (Broadbelt 2021, p. 39) • "Exist to fulfill a **purpose** for its users, customers, and community" (IBM n.d.) • "Human-centered and life-centered organizations don't just offer a kinder, gentler employee experience; they also do markedly better business and **leave the world better** than they found it" (Vojnovski 2022)
Meaningful work	• "Focuses on creating **better human experiences**" (IBM n.d.) • "Workers of human-centered organizations are provided with **meaningful work** and opportunities to exercise their skills" (Kolar 2020) • "Value employees and create a **meaningful work environment**" (International Standards Organization 2016, p. v)
Problem solving through human-centered design	• "Create **solutions** to challenges" (Ghassemi 2019) • "Instill the principles of **human-centered design** and apply them in their most pure form to every aspect of the organization" (IBM n.d.) • "In a human-centered organization, every person must possess the ability to get 'a deep and holistic human understand' [sic] to **drive or contribute, to the human-centered problem-solving activity**" (Picchi 2017, p. 5)

Emphasis in bold text added by the authors

managers (Hamel and Euchner 2021), while in other companies, employees are presumed to be capable of self-motivation, self-management, and problem-solving without intensive managerial oversight (Sandberg 1993). Interestingly, none of the practitioners advocate for reconceptualizing the managerial role.

Table 5 Scholars' intervention focus

Primary intervention	Representative quotes
Employee self-direction	• "The time has come for the **employee who knows how (and is allowed) to think**, to react, to modify, and so on" (Ainamo 2013, p. 226)
	• "When you break organizations into small teams, when people feel a deep sense of ownership within the teams, when they have all the data they need in order to know whether they are doing a good job or not, when they can explore the collective intelligence of the entire network, **you do not need managers**" (Hamel and Euchner 2021, p. 16)
	• "In Uddevalla, a small work-group of around nine people built the whole car. **There were no supervisors.** Instead, there was a rotating job 'group ombudsman' who related to the other groups into the factory manager" (Sandberg 1993, pp. 83–84)
Reconceiving the purpose of the organization	• "Virtues are practiced with the dual purpose of nurturing individual wellness and **serving the common good** of the community and businesses that provide services. HCM [human centered management] based on fundamental economic principles is anchored in ethics, moral values, freedom and eudemonic personal responsibility to advance self and to continuously improve institutions and society" (Bam and Ronnie 2021, p. 77)
	• "The purpose of the firm is not solely to maximize stockholders' wealth; they must **deploy their power in a socially responsible manner** to line up the competing interests of all stakeholders" (Bardy 2016, p. 286)
	• "Virtuous and sustainable integration of entrepreneurship, leadership, and human resources management of which successful implementation leads to **beneficial increase in wealth and quality job creation, perpetuated in a continuous cycle**" (Kim et al. 2018, p. 1)
	• "The term 'human centered' can be used to reflect that organizations not only have an impact on their customers (the users of their products and services) but also on their **employees, their families, and the wider community**" (Mochimaru 2017, p. 1)
	• "The good of all persons is achieved by the good of the individual, and vice versa, so **individuals and communities are interdependent**" (Winstanley and Woodall 2000, p. 5)
Humanistic culture	• "Change the lived experience of the employees and outsiders and how they **experience their relation** [sic] **to work**" (Ainamo 2013, p. 225)
	• "HCM [human centered management] promotes development and strengthening of **virtuous organizational culture** that prioritizes human interactions and collaborative actions as instrumental efforts for **moral flourishing**" (Bam and Ronnie 2021, p. 77)
Respect and understanding of the whole human being	• "Know him or her as a **human being** and an active and willing accomplice to reaching heights of liberation" (Ainamo 2013, p. 226)
	• "Taking time to understand the **profound needs of all humans**" (Augsten et al. 2018, p. 1230)
Workplace justice, fairness, and inclusion	• "Fostering mutual understanding that is essential to deter and **eliminate prejudice and conflict** between individuals and teams in modern organizations" (Bam and Ronnie 2021, p. 77)

Table 5 (continued)

Primary intervention	Representative quotes
	• "**Diversified people practices for diverse workforce** that… balance the organization people's expectations in a sustainable and fair way" (Bissola and Imperatori 2019, p. xvi)
	• "One aim of humanistic ethics should be to **seek out the 'missing subjects' and attempt to view the organization and its practices from their perspective**" (Winstanley and Woodall 2000, p. 4)

Emphasis in bold text added by the authors

Another type of intervention in the publications written by scholars, outlined in Table 5, is reconceiving the purpose of the organization. Here, several scholars discuss the need to move beyond a narrow focus on profit to prioritizing contributions to communities and society. Some advocate for treating individual employees as allies, and others argue that employees are sources of creativity rather than costs to be managed and therefore activities need to be reframed within the organization to better connect with human needs (see Table 5). Accordingly, work becomes an "occasion for self-expression and pursuit and satisfaction of personal desires and interests" (Ainamo 2013, p. 226).

Interventions to reconceive organizational purpose overlap somewhat with the other three intervention types identified in Table 5, which each has its own distinct identity. These are humanistic culture interventions; interventions to create respect and understanding of the whole human being; and workplace justice, fairness, and inclusion interventions.

Challenging the HCO Concept

While our review thus far captures the content and focus of the vast majority of publications on HCO, some voices criticize the HCO perspective. The best example is Midouhas (2017) who challenges advocates of HCO by arguing that human-centering minimizes the importance of the natural ecosystems in which humans and their organizations operate. She therefore calls for extending the stakeholders of any HCO beyond humans and embedding sustainability goals, social responsibility, and triple-bottom-line thinking firmly into the organization. Midouhas' framework, based on Scott (2014), involves regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars that could be used to support nature-centered organizations.

Synthesizing the Literature: Toward an Integrated Model

Many writings on HCO use the term *human-centered* without defining it or clarifying what is meant by it (Taylor 2000; Wilcox and Lowry 2000; Nouri et al. 2019; Reza Zahedy et al. 2021). These authors seem to employ the term to indicate the desire for some form of humanity in the workplace, but do not elaborate on the specifics. As demonstrated in the previous section, those authors that do clearly define do so in distinct ways, implying there is no agreement (yet) on what constitutes human-centeredness. Later in this section, we seek to synthesize the

two distinct discourses in the literature (identified in the previous section) in order to develop an integrated definition and framework of HCO.

Two HCO Perspectives

The literature review in the previous section served to identify two distinct discourses: human-centered design and humanistic management. The *human-centered design* (HCD) perspective foregrounds user needs and addresses these needs by means of innovative product or service designs. This perspective has been popularized by IDEO, taught by Stanford University Design School, and embraced by companies such as IBM and PepsiCo (Brown 2008; Buell and Otazo 2016; Liedtka 2018; Auernhammer and Roth 2021). Structured design-thinking processes begin with a creative, participatory exploration of user needs, desires, and gaps; the entire process centers around empathy for users and developing a deep understanding of their perspectives and experiences (Brown 2008). Moreover, multiple engagement and creative thinking techniques are adopted to stimulate divergent and creative thinking (LUMA Institute 2012; IDEO 2015).

For those with an HCD orientation, a human-centered organization integrates human-centered design into all aspects of its operations. HCD thus becomes a baseline philosophy and methodology, as it did at IBM (Lohr 2015). As described by IBM, the HCO "creates better human experiences, builds resilience (…) through continuous iteration and learning, cares as much about the experience of its diverse, and powered teams as it does about its customers, [and…] actively embeds these principles into the fabric of the organization" (IBM n.d.). Today, IBM also offers HCD training services to other organizations.

The other discourse on HCO is informed by *humanistic management* values and ideas (e.g. Petrick 2000; Bissola and Imperatori 2019; Bam and Ronnie 2021; Lepeley 2021). The humanistic management perspective implies that contemporary organizations have not yet broken away from the Taylorist legacy of treating humans as cogs in complex systems of production; these organizations have (implicitly) embraced McGregor's concept of Theory X and conceive of employees as innately unmotivated, needing threats or bribes for performance, and treat them as a cost to be controlled (Winstanley and Woodall 2000; McGregor and Cutcher-Gershenfeld 2006; Ainamo 2013). Ainamo (2013) even argues that many organizations replicate class-based structures in that most employees are expected to labor without thinking, while an elite of managers, planners, analysts, and consultants engage in intelligent thinking about the organization. In contrast, humanistic management writers envision organizations as sites of human dignity, respect, and justice and employees as capable of problem solving and innovating. They believe that businesses should be "all embracing communities (…) where humans are at the center and compassion for others supports diversity" (Bam and Ronnie 2021 p. 78). The company's purpose is not solely wealth creation, but instead organizations "deploy their power in a socially responsible manner to line up the competing interests of all stakeholders" (Bardy 2016, p. 286).

These HCD and humanistic management perspectives are distinct but also complementary lenses on HCOs. We integrate these perspectives in the framework presented later in this section.

Cultural Reformation

Embedded in the human-centered organization concept is the idea that organizational cultures need to change significantly. From the HCD perspective, such cultural reformation encourages increased connections with customers and users, experimentation behaviors, and innovative development processes. From the humanistic management perspective, a cultural reformation starts by envisioning environments in which people can bring their whole selves, be treated and treat others with dignity, caring, and empathy, and enjoy some level of autonomy and ownership for their work.

Sweet Rush, a San Francisco-based e-learning company, deliberately designed its culture to be human-centered; it believes that employees seek employers who prioritize the "care and resilience of human workers" (Vojnovski 2022). The company's commitment to care, inclusion, and justice includes avoiding scarcity practices that would encourage competition for limited benefits as well as fear of blame and humiliation (Vojnovski 2021). Instead, Sweet Rush encourages a culture of psychological safety in which people learn techniques for discussing sensitive issues such as underperformance, microaggressions, and discrimination in the workplace. To accomplish this, Sweet Rush embraces radical candor, which balances personal care with confrontation, and attempts to share responsibility and accountability for actions and commitments on the job (Scott 2019).

Volvo's Uddevalla site innovated differently (Sandberg 1993). A car manufacturing plant, the Uddevalla location departed from the commonly-used automotive production model that divides work into specialized, narrow, predictable tasks. Instead, the Uddevalla plant created a system in which small work groups were each responsible for building an entire car. This model of flexible specialization allowed workers to engage in joint problem-solving and holistic product construction. These teams did not have supervisors; instead, a group ombudsman was responsible for cross-functional and cross-team communication and negotiation. The Uddevalla plant closed in 1992 (Sandberg 1993).

While Sweet Rush and Uddevalla (and several other cases) provide alternatives to organizational orthodoxy, neither sought to transform the company hierarchy, as do advocates for sociocracy, holocracy, and other novel organizational designs (Lee and Edmondson 2017). Instead, both cases honor traditional hierarchies of authority within the organization as a whole, while supporting hierarchies of responsibility and innovation within teams (Romme 2021). In addition, while Sweet Rush and Uddevalla encourage self-management, autonomy, and ownership at the individual level, they do not challenge traditional leadership roles (e.g. at the level of top management).

Fuzzy Practices

Most publications we reviewed do not refer to specific organizations, such as Sweet Rush or Uddevalla, but instead discuss HCOs in general terms. When authors do share specific practices, there is little agreement on what HCOs specifically accomplish in these practices, as demonstrated in the previous section.

Exceptions are writings by humanistic management authors, who describe various practices employed by HCOs. For example Bam and Ronnie (2021) outline specific actions that support people with disabilities within organizations, such as implementing universal design, providing greater access to employment, and engaging employees

more actively in making decisions about disability disclosures. Winstanley and Woodall (2000) advocate specific actions for finding the "missing subjects," those whose voices are not typically included in deliberations, and examining decisions from their perspective.

The theme of increasing employee ownership is echoed by writers who draw on cultural perspectives. For example Vojnovski (2022) explains that Sweet Rush enables employees to choose their home, hybrid, and office schedules and work locations. Most other authors provide rather general guidelines regarding inclusive decision-making processes (e.g. Lynch (2023) and engaging people who are affected by change in helping lead the change (e.g. Broadbelt 2021).

HCD authors appear to be able to specify HCO practices in more detail. These authors cite multiple methods of developing empathy and understanding customer and user needs and concerns (Ghassemi 2019; Magistretti et al. 2023; IBM n.d.). Specific methods include soliciting customer stories (Ghassemi 2019), engaging in primary research with customers and users (IBM n.d.), and engaging external stakeholders in design thinking (Magistretti et al. 2023). Other practices often cited are associated with HCD methodology, such as using prototypes to test ideas and gauge their value at interim stages (Magistretti et al. 2023), iterative development (International Standards Organization 2016), and experimentation (Ghassemi 2019). Mochimaru (2017) outlines how several Japanese sushi restaurants used measurement tools to track employee activities during service encounters; the resulting data was used to debrief these employees and learn from their experiences.

Overall, there appear to be no specific practices that can serve as hallmarks of HCOs. However, there is widespread agreement around two ideas. The first is that *increasing employee ownership, engagement, and participation on the job is desirable*: "What [employees] do in or for the firm must be experienced as a real extension of themselves, as an occasion for self-expression and pursuit and satisfaction of personal desires and interests that optimally will converge with those of the firm" (Ainamo 2013, p. 225). The second idea is that an organization *needs to be guided by a purpose that extends beyond generating profit*, as explained by Bardy: "the purpose of the firm is not solely to maximize stockholders' wealth; they must deploy their power in a socially responsible manner to line up the competing interests of all stakeholders" (2016, p. 286). Similarly, Broadbelt (2021) argues HCOs have a "clear moral center and are aligned towards their highest, most human purpose." Beyond these two ideas, there is little explicit agreement on what defines HCOs.

Leadership

While extant conceptualizations of HCOs refer to various topics such as culture, human well-being, and work experience, one topic of leadership is notably missing. Aside from oblique references to human-centered leadership in a scholarly article by Kim et al. (2018) and a practitioner article by Zidaru (2021), the leadership dimension is almost entirely absent in the HCO literature (Petrick 2000; Bardy 2016; Ghassemi 2019; Broadbelt 2021; Lepeley 2021; Vojnovski 2022; Magistretti et al. 2023; IBM n.d.). Several authors provide leaders with guidance on how to implement HCOs, but none of the publications reviewed challenges associated with conventional corporate hierarchies or attempts to rethink the role of leadership. That is, the HCO literature does not provide any theoretical or practical alternatives to traditional leadership roles nor does it question traditional hierarchies.

An Integrated Framework of HCOs

We now turn to synthesizing the (rather fragmented) literature reviewed and assessed thus far into an integrated definition and framework. We already identified two ideas that are widely shared in the HCO literature: (a) the organization needs to be guided by a purpose that extends beyond profit and (b) the importance of positive human experiences on the job, in terms of ownership, engagement, and participation. In addition, our assessment thus far implies that the humanistic management and HCD perspectives offer highly complementary lenses. Based on these elements, we propose to define HCO as follows:

> An HCO is an organization dedicated to creating a positive impact, by embedding practices that further human dignity, growth and other humanistic values into its culture, and intentionally creating positive human work experiences via participatory methods and team ownership for work.

This definition ties together all core elements in the literature reviewed earlier.

Informed by this new definition, we now turn to presenting a novel framework that integrates the commonalities and strengths of both perspectives into a synthesized HCO model (see Fig. 1). This framework has five elements: a common good purpose, positive human experiences on the job, team structure, participatory practices and tools, and humanistic values at the center. Each of these elements is fleshed out below.

Humanistic Values

At the heart of the framework outlined in Fig. 1 are humanistic values such as *dignity and well-being* (Ainamo 2013). These values acknowledge the person in his or her "dignity, rights, uniqueness, sociability and capacity for personal growth" (Melé 2003, p. 5), recognizing "the whole person, without reducing the human being to a few aspects"

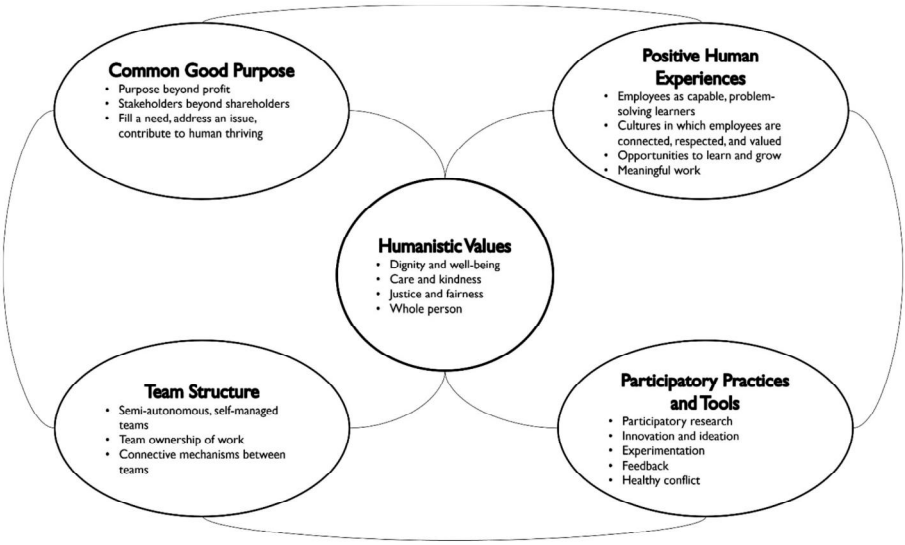

Fig. 1 Integrated model of human-centered organizing

(Melé 2016, p. 41), and emphasizing "the well-being of employees, fair and balanced relationships with stakeholders, and embracing the common good" (Majluf 2021, p. 110). Employee well-being and safety are also key values for the International Standards Organization (ISO); its standard for HCOs emerged from the ISO Ergonomics Committee and, as a result, foregrounds health, safety, usability, accessibility, and well-being (International Standards Organization 2016).

The importance of *care and kindness* as core values is most strongly stressed by Vojnovski (2021, 2022), who explains that Sweet Rush "is built upon caring, commitment, and goodness" (2021, p. 3). The care notion here includes self-care as well as expressions of care and kindness toward colleagues (Vojnovski 2022).

Many scholars stress the importance of justice. For example, Borry and Reuter (2022) write that "employees are human beings with human rights that need to be respected" (p. 164). Bardy (2016) defines core values in the area of *justice and fairness* in terms of "impartiality and equal treatment" (p. 275). Sweet Rush describes its commitment as follows:

> We seek to create socially just interactions with our team and clients. We celebrate autonomy, personal growth, and expression as keys to elevating the work we share. Our love of diversity, confidence in the role of empathy in business, and appreciation of fair exchanges govern our actions as individual contributors and as a company. (Vojnovski 2021, p. 35)

For Sweet Rush and many of the authors reviewed in this study, fairness is integrally connected to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Bissola and Imperatori 2019; Bam and Ronnie 2021; IBM n.d.). For others, fairness and justice refer to the ways in which organizations treat their employees (Winstanley and Woodall 2000).

Threaded throughout these values is the conception of human beings as whole people to support "the centrality of human beings within new labor processes" (Bissola and Imperatori 2019, p. xiv), and understand the "profound needs of all involved humans and reframing the activities in the organization based on (…) human needs" (Augsten et al. 2018, p. 1230). For these writers, human beings are not simply tools to be used in service of the organization, but unique entities possessing and worthy of being treated with human dignity.

In sum, values are central to any HCO. While values are less present in the HCD discourse, we propose to make them pivotal to any attempt to create an HCO. As such, the HCD literature can learn from the humanistic management discourse to more clearly articulate and embody humanistic values (i.e., dignity, well-being, care, kindness, justice and fairness, and whole person), especially in relation to employees.

Common Good Purpose

As demonstrated earlier, most writers on HCOs agree that organizations exist for something *greater than profit* (e.g. Ainamo 2013; Bardy 2016; Kim et al. 2018; Broadbelt 2021; Vojnovski 2021). Accordingly, an HCO has to think *beyond the needs of its shareholders* and consider the broader ecosystem of entities affected by it. These stakeholders include users, customers, suppliers, partners, and employees as well as employee families and the communities and other environments in which HCOs operate (Winstanley and Woodall 2000; Midouhas 2017; Mochimaru 2017; Bam and Ronnie 2021; Broadbelt 2021; Vojnovski 2022; IBM n.d.). The goal of HCOs is to improve the world by *fulfilling a need, addressing an issue, or otherwise contributing to well-being* (Broadbelt 2021;

IBM n.d.). HCO writers claim that a purpose focused on human well-being or improvement not only motivates and inspires all people involved, but also better positions the organization for economic viability and financial success (Bardy 2016; Kolar 2020; Vojnovski 2022).

Positive Human Experiences

As also demonstrated earlier, the HCO literature agrees that employees and others connected to the organization should have positive human experiences at work. The basic assumption here is Theory Y: employees are *capable, problem-solving learners* (McGregor and Cutcher-Gershenfeld 2006). Consequently, workplaces must provide employees with opportunities to *connect to their colleagues, be respected for their experiences and perspectives, and be valued for their contributions*. Moreover, employees need to have multiple *opportunities to learn and grow*, develop skills, and increase knowledge and experience. Their jobs are designed and co-created so that they engage in *meaningful work* (Sandberg 1993; Ainamo 2013; International Standards Organization 2016; Bissola and Imperatori 2019; Hamel and Euchner 2021; IBM n.d.).

Team Structure

HCOs tend to be structured around teams. While these teams elsewhere operate within traditional hierarchies, teams in HCOs have more authority and autonomy than in other organizations. HCO authors describe teams that are *semi-autonomous and mostly self-managed* and have *ownership of their processes and outputs* (Sandberg 1993; Hamel and Euchner 2021). A major gap in the HCO literature involves the *connective mechanisms* that coordinate teams; few writers on HCOs talk about the need to coordinate across boundaries, although such mechanisms are a widely recognized necessity in the field of organizational studies (Cohen and Prusak 2001; Gittell 2003; Gittell and Weiss 2004; Ernst and Chrobot-Mason 2011; Cross and Carboni 2020). In this respect, the HCO discourse would benefit from reviewing and consulting the literature on sociocracy, holocracy, and related organizational forms in which coordination mechanisms across teams have been extensively designed and tested (Lee and Edmondson 2017; Romme 1995; Romme and Endenburg 2006).

Participatory Practices and Tools

While HCD writers focus less on values than humanistic management practitioners, the HCD literature has developed a robust set of tools that operationalize human-centered practices. The imperative to deeply understand the needs, concerns, and desires of customers and users in order to develop innovative solutions has led to a robust toolset that includes methods for *participatory research, innovation and ideation, experimentation*, and so on (IDEO 2015). These practices (implicitly) draw on humanistic values such as participation, dignity, and learning and growth. The challenge for HCO scholars and practitioners is to redirect these tools toward the domain of organizational design and change, by using them to create organizations that embody humanistic values and treat employees with as much empathy and care as customers.

One practice that does not appear broadly in the HCO literature involves methods for working through differences. In this respect, HCOs need methods for effectively working

across differences, in ways that escape traps of domination and coercion. Here, Sweet Rush appears to rely on the practice of radical candor as a micro-method that invites employees to provide *feedback*, voice concerns, and intervene before situations erupt into destructive conflict (Scott 2019; Vojnovski 2021). Another example is a group ombudsman, used in the Volvo Uddevalla plant to negotiate and mediate conflicts (Sandberg 1993). Overall, there is little attention to *healthy conflict* in the HCO literature; this topic thus warrants further research.

Discussion and Conclusion

Contribution to Literature

HCOs still are an emerging concept in the literature, one that is distributed across many publications and multiple separate discourses. This paper is the first study to compile a comprehensive list of HCO conceptualizations from both scholars and practitioners. Our examination of these conceptualizations shows that the field has not yet settled and agreed on a common definition. Especially scholars and practitioners rooted in the HCD literature and those writing from a humanistic management tradition appear to have developed different perspectives on HCOs. These two perspectives are, however, also rather complementary. In the second part of this paper, we therefore sought to develop an integrated framework for studying and developing HCOs. Figure 1 outlines this framework.

Implications for Further Research and Limitations

Our literature review suggests that thinking about HCOs is still in its initial stages. The HCD discourse appears to be more mature, but has merely applied the notion of human-centeredness to interactions with users and customers. By contrast, humanistic management writers largely focus on human rights principles and values. Nonetheless, all authors (can be assumed to) encourage employee ownership over their work and the development of meaningful jobs that recognize employees as having the potential to be intrinsically motivated problem solvers. Most authors in the HCO literature also envision teams as a core organizational mechanism.

There are many questions to be resolved in relation to the HCO concept. For example, how does the prioritization of human rights, which is important to humanistic management writers (e.g. Borry and Reuter 2022), align with human-centered organizations adopting the HCD approach? How do advocates of HCD think about the development of caring cultures (Vojnovski 2022) that recognize individuals as whole people, a concept that is pivotal for humanistic management practitioners? And how do humanistic management writers propose to operationalize humanistic values in the workplace, as HCD practitioners have done with design thinking (LUMA Institute 2012; IDEO 2015; Picchi 2017)?

As argued earlier, another key challenge for HCO practice and theory pertains to the connection and coordination mechanisms that help teams remain aligned. This challenge is closely related to the lack of attention to leadership in the HCO literature. As demonstrated earlier in this paper, the leadership dimension is almost entirely absent from the HCO discourse, which calls for studies on how conventional organizational hierarchies can be transformed into hierarchies that enable HCOs to thrive and what role CEOs and other powerful actors should play in such transformations (Romme 2021).

Future work also needs to be done in the form of in-depth case studies of organizations that (seem to) qualify as human-centered, such as Sweet Rush (Vojnovski 2021), to identify the tools and practices that shape organizational processes and outcomes. Finally, we also called for more attention in the HCO literature for how to address and manage healthy conflict. These are all promising areas for future research.

There are various limitations associated with this literature review and synthesis. The most significant limitation is that the field lacks robust scholarship on HCOs. As a result, the review's sample size is twenty-six, which is smaller than would be ideal for an extensive literature review. Twelve of these sources were drawn from the grey literature, an indicator of how little research has been done thus far on HCOs. Moreover, several of the more detailed descriptions of HCOs are written by (representatives of) the organizations themselves. A minimum amount of primary research has been done to confirm that companies' rhetoric about their HCOs align with the lived experience of those within these organizations. Consequently, we need much more in-depth studies of how HCOs are actually created and sustained, to fill the existing knowledge gap on human-centered organizing—as argued earlier.

Concluding Remarks

While the discourse about HCOs is still in its infancy, it has emerged from a long-standing desire to transform organizations from instruments of domination (Morgan 1997) and replicators of class-based structures (Acker 2006; Amis et al. 2020) to places where human beings can thrive. The current context, in which the world is learning how to manage pandemics and people are grappling with the innate injustice embedded in many of our systems, creates a ripe environment for transforming organizations.

This article began with the twofold question as to how scholars and practitioners are conceptualizing HCOs in the literature and whether we can integrate the main findings from this review into an inclusive framework for HCOs. To date, scholars and practitioners conceptualize HCOs in various ways; as a result, there is not yet consensus on what exactly constitutes an HCO. More evidence-based research is therefore needed to understand the realities of HCOs. In this article, we reviewed the fragmented literature on HCOs and synthesized it in an integrated framework. This framework implies that an HCO centers around humanistic values and is characterized by a common good purpose, positive human experiences in the workplace, semi-autonomous and self-managed team structures, and a set of people-centered tools and practices. This integral ideal can serve as an inspiration and prototype for organizations seeking to create environments in which humans can thrive.

Appendix: Sources Included in the Literature Review

Scholarly Publications Included in the Review

1. Ainamo, A. (2013). Integrating thinking globally and acting locally to design a sustainable human-centered organization. In: W. Amann & A. Stachowicz-Stanusch (Eds.), *Integrity in Organizations* (pp. 219–229). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137280350_11

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Non-Scholarly Publications Included in the Review

Blog posts and online articles	1. Ghassemi, B. (2019, July 9). *What is a human-centered organization?* LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-human-centered-organization-banafsheh-ghassemi/?articleId=6554382188220080130
	2. Grove, M. (2019, August 7). Human centric organizations. *Collabworks*. https://www.collabworks.com/2019/08/07/human-centric-organizations/
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