

RESEARCH BRIEF



# The Unlock

# Healthcare's Humanity Paradox

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# Introduction

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Recent research conducted by idealis., a human centered research and advisory firm, has highlighted several data points that individually capture the sentiments of healthcare workers in this moment, but when taken collectively, indicate the need to look deeper to understand more about the current tensions. The trends we are currently seeing include:

- Healthcare workers are leading the adoption of generative AI (GenAI), using it at higher rates than workers in nearly any other industry.
- Healthcare workers report lower confidence in their ability to lead and less fulfillment from the work of leading than the average U.S. worker.
- Across the healthcare sector, trust in their direct manager and their company has fallen meaningfully below national benchmarks.
- However, workers in healthcare are more trusting of strangers, have more trust in major institutions, and have workplace friendships that remain intact, at, or above national averages.

Few industries are more critical to humanity than healthcare; and few industries require more humanity than healthcare. Caring for people in their most vulnerable moments is, in many ways, the most human work there is.

In the words of Dr. Sumona De Graaf, founder and CEO of idealis.:

*"The eye-to-eye, shoulder-to-shoulder experience — that feels like what's lacking. And if it's lacking in healthcare, which is the most shoulder-to-shoulder experience one might have with another human being in some of the toughest moments in one's life, we have no fighting chance in financial services!"*

# The Healthcare Paradox

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Drawing on up to 10,000 weighted Pulse of the Workforce responses from August 2025 through April 2026, this brief explores where humanity is showing up in healthcare right now and where it is lacking. **We make the important distinction that the gap is not in the humanity of the people doing the work, but in the conditions surrounding their work.** Dr. Leah Brown, orthopedic surgeon and idealis board member, wrote in a recent article that physicians have shifted from “leaders of the healing space” to “cogs in a system.” We see it in the data, and we see it in the words of leaders inside the industry.

This brief offers three clear takeaways:

- 1. Healthcare workers are leading AI adoption.** They are integrating GenAI into clinical and administrative workflows to create efficiencies that allow them to focus more on the human in front of them and arm themselves with current medical information when they need it most.
- 2. Healthcare workers are lagging on leadership confidence and fulfillment.** If this trend continues, the industry faces a significant pipeline problem: the doctors and nurses with the most expertise are opting out of leadership roles at precisely the moment the industry needs them most to shape policy, training, and patient care models.
- 3. The trust gap is local, not generalized.** Healthcare workers have not lost faith in people broadly. Their capacity for trust is intact. What has eroded is their specific trust in the organizations and managers closest to them.

# Healthcare Workers Lead AI Adoption

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**50% of healthcare workers use generative AI for planning and organizing compared to 44% across all industries.**

Healthcare workers appear to be early adopters of AI compared to many other leading industries in the workforce. They are willing to experiment with AI by integrating it into many of their daily tasks such as medical imaging & diagnostics, personalized medicine, virtual assistants and chatbots, and operational optimization (Johns Hopkins University Engineering for Professionals, n.d.). Gen AI is becoming a tool doctors and nurses are bringing into both clinical and administrative settings.

**44% of healthcare workers say they trust AI generated information, compared with 39% of workers overall. And 44% of healthcare workers believe AI will improve their effective communication, compared to 40% of all workers.**

Our research shows that healthcare workers are also more likely to trust the outputs of GenAI. Clinicians have moved quickly to integrate AI documentation, decision support, and patient-communication tools into their daily workflows.

**Half of healthcare workers report using AI to generate and develop ideas, compared with 45% of workers across all other industries.**

This means that healthcare workers are not just using AI as a search engine to access information or to outsource administrative tasks. The data tells us that healthcare workers are integrating GenAI as a thought-partner in their ideation processes.

Imagine a patient comes in with the same issue three times. After trying multiple medications that have been ineffective or caused intolerable side effects, the patient is feeling hopeless. Using GenAI, their doctor can quickly gather the latest research on a new, experimental drug and combined with their expertise, they can form a judgment on whether to try out the new medication.

Or, a doctor encounters a patient with a unfamiliar, rare illness. Using GenAI, the doctor can quickly gather and synthesize the latest research studies on the condition to inform their thinking and provide support to the patient in a more expedient and reliable manner.

## **One caution worth raising: Healthcare workers on the front lines are raising concern about the responsible use of GenAI in the medical field.**

Only 34% of healthcare workers believe AI will increase their access to trustworthy information. So healthcare workers are using AI more, and trusting it more in their own hands, but they are slightly more cautious about relying on AI broadly as a source-of-truth tool.

Having elaborate and complex medical information at your fingertips is not always helpful, especially when isolated from human expertise and judgment. Access to GenAI may give some patients false confidence to self-diagnose and independently research new treatment options. GenAI is most effective and useful when used by a credentialed doctor or nurse who has formal academic training and years of experience in the medical field; someone unbiased who can prompt the AI with the right high-quality questions that won't generate generic, unverified outputs.

*“The difficulty with AI is that it is a result of the information that's input. And if you have biased information going in, then you're going to have biased information that's coming out. That's where we really have to lean into the integrity of what we're doing. It's the humanity of understanding this is about a greater good.”*

Dr. Leah Brown, Orthopedic Surgeon

As Dr. Brown wisely remarked, the quality of inputs determines the quality of outputs from GenAI, and human judgment is an integral part of AI adoption in any field. We need healthcare leaders who are willing to leverage their knowledge, expertise, and experience to help inform the development of policies, responsible guardrails, and effective use cases of GenAI in the medical field. This will help ensure that GenAI will continue to be a helpful tool at the right times, and will protect against non-credentialed professionals creeping into the health and wellness space offering tools and information that has not been appropriately researched and vetted.

# Healthcare is Lagging on Leadership

A workforce that is engaged with new technology, willing to integrate it, and discerning in how, is exactly the workforce we would expect to be confident, fulfilled, and equipped to lead. However, that is not what we found.

The Pulse Everyday Leader Quarterly Report (October 2025) found that healthcare workers feel **less confident in their ability to lead, less equipped with leadership skills, and less fulfilled by the work of leading** than workers across the broader workforce.

Listed together, the cumulative data tells an important story:

MEASURE	HEALTHCARE	ALL INDUSTRY	DIFFERENCE
Confident in their ability to lead others	69%	76%	-7pp
Enjoy leading others	66%	72%	-6pp
Feel equipped with leadership skills	66%	74%	-8pp
Find leadership personally fulfilling	58%	66%	-8pp
Want to lead the way their manager does	49%	54%	-5pp

It is tempting, looking at numbers like these, to read them as a story about motivation and to assume the healthcare workforce is tired or checked out. We think the data is telling us something different. Healthcare workers are watching what leadership looks like in their environment, and many are concluding that it isn't the type of leadership they want to mimic or the type of role they want to take on.

The lack of qualified healthcare professionals who are equipped with proper training, expertise, and leadership skills will continue to create a leadership pipeline problem until it is addressed systematically. These findings highlight the need for the healthcare industry to identify and incentivize potential leaders to take on roles of responsibility, give them the proper support to manage caseload while taking on administrative roles, and create more opportunities for training and development on non-clinical skills and behaviors.

# A Local Trust Gap, Not a Generalized One

The instinct, when reading the leadership data above, is to assume this is a workforce that has lost faith in people, in institutions, or in the systems they work inside of, but the data presented below suggests that is not the case.

## Where the capacity for trust remains:

MEASURE	HEALTHCARE	ALL INDUSTRY	DIFFERENCE
Trust major corporations	46%	40%	+10pp
Trust strangers	49%	22%	+27pp
Believe business leaders have a positive societal influence	30%	24%	+6pp

Healthcare workers, according to the data, are not generally cynical or distrustful. The above data demonstrates that healthcare workers have the capacity for trust, and that they are questioning the trustworthiness of their companies and the managers they report to. We see this local trust gap in many measures that reflect the immediate work environment of workers today.

## Where the deficit shows up:

MEASURE	HEALTHCARE	ALL INDUSTRY	DIFFERENCE
Happy in their job	56%	72%	-14pp
Concerned about their job	71%	57%	+15pp
Trust their direct manager	54%	66%	-12pp
Trust the company they work for	55%	69%	-14pp

This is a workforce whose immediate work environment has eroded their trust at the company and manager level; while their capacity for trust in nearly every other direction remains, in many cases, above the national average.

The opportunity for repair belongs in the relationships and structures closest to the healthcare worker: the manager, the leadership team, and the structures, systems, and policies that they encounter on a daily basis.

## Very few professions lead with their values as clearly as healthcare.

The tradition traces back to the Hippocratic Oath (Hippocrates, 1868), the physician's pledge that laid the groundwork for modern medical ethics and established several enduring concepts:

**Beneficence:** Pledging to use treatment to benefit the sick according to the physician's ability and judgment.

**Non-maleficence:** The obligation to abstain from causing harm or committing intentional injustice against patients.

**Confidentiality:** The promise to keep secret any private information learned about patients during the course of treatment.

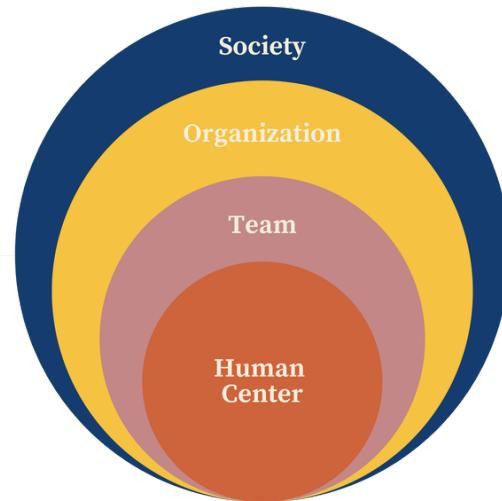
These principles reach well beyond medicine. Nurses affirm them through the Nightingale Pledge and their professional code of ethics; physical therapists, physician assistants, pharmacists, and other clinicians swear their own oaths and uphold their own codes built on the same foundation. Whatever the specific words, healthcare workers across professions commit to a shared standard the day they earn their white coats, nursing licenses, and specialty certificates. They are held to these commitments whether they are in a hospital setting, out to dinner with their families, or on an airplane.

Healthcare workers are in the trenches: ER's, waiting rooms, ICU's, post-op recovery rooms. They are tasked with looking family members in the eyes with either miraculous or horrific news. They are constantly exposed to the full spectrum of humanity in a way not many others are.

If the industry and its leaders can tap into these values and embody them in their day-to-day work with duty, care, and consistency, they have the capacity to bring those same Hippocratic values into their board rooms, meeting rooms, and training spaces.

# The Cost: What Happens When AI Outpaces Leadership Development

Healthcare workers are technically engaged but operationally exhausted, and they are increasingly opting out of leadership pathways at a time when the industry needs more capable, human-centered leaders, not fewer.



There is a human-level cost of an industry where the technology is beginning to develop faster than the leaders responsible for integrating it. It will be problematic if the healthcare industry continues to increasingly rely on AI without a strong foundation of trust in their leaders.

Applying the idealis Leading in Context model, the pressure is visible across every layer of context at once. At the Human Core, healthcare worker job happiness rests 14 points below the national average, a clear signal that the personal grounding from which leadership flows is under strain. At the Team layer, manager trust sits at 12 points below the national average, weakening the psychological safety that allows teams to function under pressure. At the Organization layer, company trust is 14 points below the national average, fraying the alignment that keeps people connected to a shared entity and purpose.

However, we can find hope at the Societal layer. Trust in strangers holds at 29 points above the national average. This signals that healthcare workers maintain a capacity for trust and faith in humanity, but emphasizes the need for trust to be repaired in their immediate workplace relationships and environments.

Healthcare workers still want to heal the world by fulfilling the call they signed up for when they chose their careers. However, they don't want to be saddled with administrative burden, politics, or leadership responsibilities they feel ill equipped for or that they fear will get in the way of the real work. The potential for healthcare workers to develop into high-quality leaders is intact, what needs attention is the cultural conditions for these leaders to be identified, developed, and supported to step up and take on more responsibility.

# Effective Strategies to Closing the Gap

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**The data pinpoints where the trust gap lives. We offer four strategies below, written for healthcare leaders, and applicable for leaders in any industry watching this pattern emerge in their own organizations.**

## Build trust locally

The work is in manager relationships and company cultures. For leaders, this means showing up where the work happens (rounds, shift changes, the hallway outside the ICU), being transparent about decisions and the tradeoffs behind them, and following through on small commitments. Healthcare workers need their leaders to be clear, consistent, and present.

## Make leadership a path worth pursuing

The leadership pipeline is narrowing because the roles as they are currently designed are asking more and offering less. Organizations can begin to close this gap by clarifying what leadership roles in their culture demands, what it offers in return, and what supports are in place for the person who takes it on. Redesigning middle-management roles so they are sustainable (e.g., manageable spans of control, protected time for development, real authority to act on the front line) is one of the highest-leverage changes a healthcare organization can make right now.

## Build AI fluency across the organization

The most effective examples of AI in healthcare today are the ones where technology restores the human relationship; clinicians returning their attention to the patient in front of them rather than the screen between them. Healthcare workers are already using GenAI. The question is whether their leaders understand the tools well enough to design healthy adoption, to set appropriate guardrails (around patient data, around clinical judgment, around moments when the technology shouldn't be in the room), and to integrate GenAI in ways that preserve and augment human judgment rather than slowly displace it.

## Cultivate presence

In an environment as noisy and depleting as healthcare in 2026, Dr. Leah Brown says:

*“Consistent humane conduct is itself a signal of legitimacy.”*

The leaders who close the credibility gap are the leaders showing up where the work happens. They are the managers who demonstrate medical competence through shared interactions with direct reports (Varga et al., 2023). They are also the leaders who notice the small human signs (e.g., the colleague who has stopped speaking up in huddles, the team member who has started declining the regular check-in) and who follow up without an agenda. This is what we mean by leading from the Human Core. It is the operating principle that sits beneath every other strategy in this section.

## Conclusion

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The gap is not in healthcare workers' humanity, but rather in the system and leadership around them. The capacity for trust, for warmth, for engagement, for adopting new tools with care, is all, by the numbers, intact. What is wearing thin is the experience of being led inside an environment that has changed faster than the leadership has been able to scale.

For the latest insights on AI Adoption in the workplace, subscribe to *The Pulse* for full access to the report.

### About the Pulse of the US Workforce

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At idealis, we know that employee experience is closely tied to business outcomes. Yet, while financial metrics are often tracked rigorously, the workplace experience is rarely measured with the same precision. Our Pulse of the U.S. Workforce, in partnership with Civic Science, captures real-time insights from thousands of U.S. workers each month. This data gives leaders a reliable and actionable view into how their employees feel, empowering them to make informed decisions that foster engagement and growth. To explore the insights and opportunities the Pulse can provide, visit our [Pulse website](#).



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# About the Authors

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## **Dr. Sumona De Graaf**

An organizational psychologist specializing in motivation and what drives people. She has worked with founder-led businesses, family offices, venture capital and private equity companies, and boards and management teams across the public and private sector. Her work across clients has one commonality:

Sumona is called upon by Boards and C-level executives to help them navigate their most challenging human issues. As a social scientist, she uses data to draw insights, and as a career practitioner, guides her clients to redesign habits, processes and practices to create lasting impact.

Sumona is the founder and CEO of idealis. She spends her time helping clients navigate their most pressing leadership challenges, amplifying the stories of human-centered leaders, and most importantly, creating the conditions for her team of exceptional humans to thrive.

## **Dr. Annie Hoover**

Annie is an industrial-organizational psychologist who brings curiosity and a rigorous approach to everything she does at idealis. Her research has focused on helping all employees feel empowered and like they truly belong. Through her work at idealis, she strives to deliver high-quality research and data insights that enable organizations and their leaders to bring their full selves to work and perform at their best.

## **Allison Williams**

A human-centered leadership and learning leader who has spent more than twenty years helping people and organizations grow in ways that are both high-performing and deeply humane. As Chief Learning Officer at idealis, Allison coaches C-suite and senior leaders, builds leadership and culture solutions that scale, and helps teams translate big priorities into real shifts in how they lead, collaborate, and perform.

Allison brings deep operator experience to this work. As an accomplished senior leader in higher education, she carried more than twenty years of strategic leadership and management responsibility, partnering with boards, executive leaders, and complex organizations to implement individual and organizational leadership development.

## **Kendall Gregory**

With a strong commitment to collaboration and content excellence, Kendall is dedicated to helping leaders articulate their vision and values through writing and inspire others to lead with authenticity and empathy.

At idealis, Kendall plays a role in content creation, research, and strategic communication, contributing to the firm's mission of fostering human-centered leadership.



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