

SETH GODIN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LINCHPIN*



A NEW MANIFESTO FOR TEAMS

THE SONG OF SIGNIFICANCE





The Song of Significance

A NEW MANIFESTO FOR TEAMS

Seth Godin

PORTFOLIO • PENGUIN





Portfolio / Penguin

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2023 by Do You Zoom, Inc.

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Godin, Seth, author.

Title: The song of significance: a new manifesto for teams / Seth Godin.

Description: New York: Portfolio/Penguin, [2023]

Identifiers: LCCN 2023001871 (print) | LCCN 2023001872 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593715543 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593715550 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Leadership. | Employee motivation. | Organizational behavior.

Classification: LCC HD57.7 .G6323 2023 (print) | LCC HD57.7 (ebook) | DDC 658.4/092—dc23/eng/20230113

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023001871>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023001872>

Cover design: Brian Lemus

Cover image: IADA / Shutterstock

BOOK DESIGN BY MEIGHAN CAVANAUGH, ADAPTED FOR EBOOK BY ESTELLE MALMED

pid_prh_6.0_143736954_c0_r0

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[1. You Don't Need Me to Tell You This](#)

[2. We Can Do Work Better](#)

[3. The Best Job You Ever Had](#)

[Three Songs](#)

[4. The Song of Increase](#)

[5. The Song of Safety](#)

[6. The Song of Significance](#)

[Toward Significance](#)

[7. What Do People Want?](#)

[8. What Do Companies Need?](#)

[9. When You See a Fork in the Road](#)

[10. McDonald's Is Safe](#)

[11. The Challenge of Having It Both Ways](#)

[12. Learning from the Edges](#)

[13. Let's Get Real or Let's Not Play](#)

[14. Kinds of Work](#)

[15. Which Kind of Work Do We Actually Value?](#)

[16. Significant Organizations Create an Impact](#)

[17. Toward Better](#)

[18. The Song of Safety_\(Chorus\)](#)

- [19. Where Are the Leaders?](#)
- [20. Blame All the Way Down](#)
- [21. The Impartial Conversation](#)
- [22. Questions Worth Asking](#)
- [23. Before We Begin](#)
- [24. Together toward Significance](#)
- [25. A Compass before We Draw the Map](#)

[What Happened to Management?](#)

- [26. The End of Industrialism and the Sputtering of Productivity](#)
- [27. Where Did the Productivity Go?](#)
- [28. Stakes and Trust](#)
- [29. The Race to the Bottom](#)
- [30. Prizes for Standing on the Red Dot](#)
- [31. Searching for an Even Better Stopwatch](#)
- [32. The Half-Life of a Great Organization](#)
- [33. Return on Assets](#)
- [34. The Free-Market Exchange of Labor](#)
- [35. Kinko and Sleepy](#)

[This Time, with Meaning](#)

- [36. When We Sing the Song Together](#)
- [37. Loose/Tight Properties](#)
- [38. Carpets Are a Dirty Business](#)
- [39. Compliance and Change](#)
- [40. Trick or Treat](#)
- [41. The Problem with Human Resources](#)
- [42. Two Years That Changed the World](#)
- [43. Simplified into Jerks](#)
- [44. How Do I Get People to Do What I Want?](#)
- [45. Opening the Door to Possibility](#)
- [46. The Generous Audacity of Significance](#)
- [47. Searching for Kokoro](#)

- [48. Washing a Car Is Significant If You Do It Right](#)
- [49. Focusing on the Extreme User](#)
- [50. Beware False Proxies](#)
- [51. Becoming Resilient](#)
- [52. Fear Is Easy.](#)
- [53. Impacts on the Future](#)
- [54. Labor, Work, and Action](#)
- [55. Relocating the Center](#)
- [56. Go Back and Get It](#)
- [57. Creating the Conditions](#)
- [58. The Opportunity to Contribute](#)
- [59. What People Want](#)
- [60. Innovation Is a Form of Resilience](#)
- [61. The Places In Between](#)
- [62. And We Linger](#)
- [63. Golf or Surfing?](#)
- [64. Beware the Trickster](#)
- [65. The Lintel and the Limen](#)
- [66. Significant Work Is Project Work](#)
- [67. The Work to Be Done](#)
- [68. Kathrin Jansen Saved the World](#)
- [69. "My Stomach Doesn't Know That My Pocket Is Empty"](#)
- [70. James Daunt Saved the Bookstore](#)
- [71. Where Does the Water Go?](#)
- [72. Filling In the Blanks](#)

[The Commitments](#)

- [73. The New Way of Work Is Mutual](#)
- [74. The Significance Commitments](#)
- [75. We're Here to Make Change Happen](#)
- [76. We Are Acting with Intention](#)
- [77. Dignity Is Worth Investing In](#)
- [78. Tension Is Not the Same as Stress](#)

- 79. Mistakes Are the Way Forward
- AN ASIDE ABOUT THE SCOUT BEES
- 80. Take Responsibility, Give Credit
- 81. Criticize the Work, Not the Worker
- 82. Turnover Is Okay.
- 83. Mutual Respect Is Expected
- 84. Get to vs. Have to
- 85. Standards Instead of Obedience
- 86. Do the Reading
- 87. Show Your Work
- 88. Make It Better
- 89. Celebrate Real Skills

Let's Get Real: New Skills for a New Way of Work

- 90. Real Skills Are a Way Forward
- 91. What Can We Teach?
- 92. Work to Be Done
- 93. The Power of a Confident Coach
- 94. Harry Brighthouse Is Calling on You
- 95. Autocratic Bullying Is Not Enrollment
- 96. Leadership and Dissent
- 97. Professionals Say No
- 98. The Risk of Listening
- 99. Clarity and the Words Unsaid
- 100. Aunt Helen Was Tough

What We Make and How We Talk About It

- 101. What We Produce Is Change
- 102. You Can't Make Me Stop Caring
- 103. The Federation
- 104. The Challenges of the Journey (Starting and Stopping)
- 105. Hurt People Hurt People
- 106. How Am I Doing?

- [107. Thin-Slicing](#)
- [108. What Time Does the Gym Open?](#)
- [109. Work Worth Doing](#)
- [110. A Word List](#)

[Pathfinding](#)

- [111. Don't Bring a Stopwatch to a Poetry Slam](#)
- [112. Who Decides What's Next?](#)
- [113. If We Make Decisions . . .](#)
- [114. Pivots and New Paths](#)

[Meetings Are a Symptom](#)

- [115. Meetings Are a Problem and a Symptom](#)
- [116. Before the Digital Age, We Came Together In Person](#)
- [117. Zoom, Wasted](#)
- [118. Honeybee Democracy](#)
- [119. A Week without Meetings](#)
- [120. What Are Meetings For?](#)
- [121. A Significant Meeting Is Different](#)
- [122. Toward a Zoom Agreement](#)
- [123. The Modern Meetings Challenge](#)

[Creating a Significant Organization](#)

- [124. Mileposts on the Road to Significance](#)
- [125. Important Organizations Make Change Happen](#)
- [126. Humans Are Not a Resource](#)
- [127. Management Is Not the Same as Leadership](#)
- [128. Enrollment Is More Powerful Than Coercion](#)
- [129. Culture Can Amplify Enrollment](#)
- [130. Seek Out Useful Impostors](#)
- [131. Leaders Create the Conditions for Culture](#)
- [132. Page 19 Opens the Door](#)
- [133. It's the Work, Not the Worker](#)

- [134. Embrace Uncertainty](#)
- [135. Seek Out the Benefit of the Doubt](#)
- [136. Withhold Definition](#)
- [137. Avoid False Proxies](#)
- [138. Rigorous Standards](#)
- [139. Scale Is Not the Point](#)
- [140. Hiring Is Not Dating](#)
- [141. Find Positive Uses of Tension](#)

[The Broomstick](#)

- [142. Management vs. Leadership](#)
- [143. Perhaps the Yellow Brick Road Is the Point](#)
- [144. The Wonder of the Swarm](#)

[Acknowledged](#)

[Appendix](#)

[About the Author](#)

*When you dance on the edge of infinity,
there's always enough . . .
because you aren't taking opportunity
from anyone else, you're creating it.*

1. You Don't Need Me to Tell You This

If you've been paying any attention at all, you already know: work isn't working.

If you're a boss, you're probably frustrated, confused, and under a lot of pressure. You see missed opportunities and broken promises.

And if you're working for a boss, my guess is that you're feeling the very same thing.

The problem lies with us.

It's due to decisions we unknowingly made years ago, to the indoctrination we force on each other, and to our terrible reflex to double down when things get hard. We're getting better and better at making it worse.

This is a short book about a fork in the road, about a decision we all get to make. Each of us can show up in our own way, but the choice is the same: to lead, to create work that matters, and to find the magic that happens when we are lucky enough to cocreate with people who care.

We can do well and do better at the same time. In fact, it's the only useful way forward. We can create the best job someone ever had, the best experience any customer can imagine—and build organizations that are regenerative, resilient, and powerful.

We've lived with the grind for so long that it's easy to imagine that we're stuck with it, but better is within our reach.

2. We Can Do Work Better

We're letting our employees and bosses down. They're letting us down too.

They need more from us, and we need more from this job.

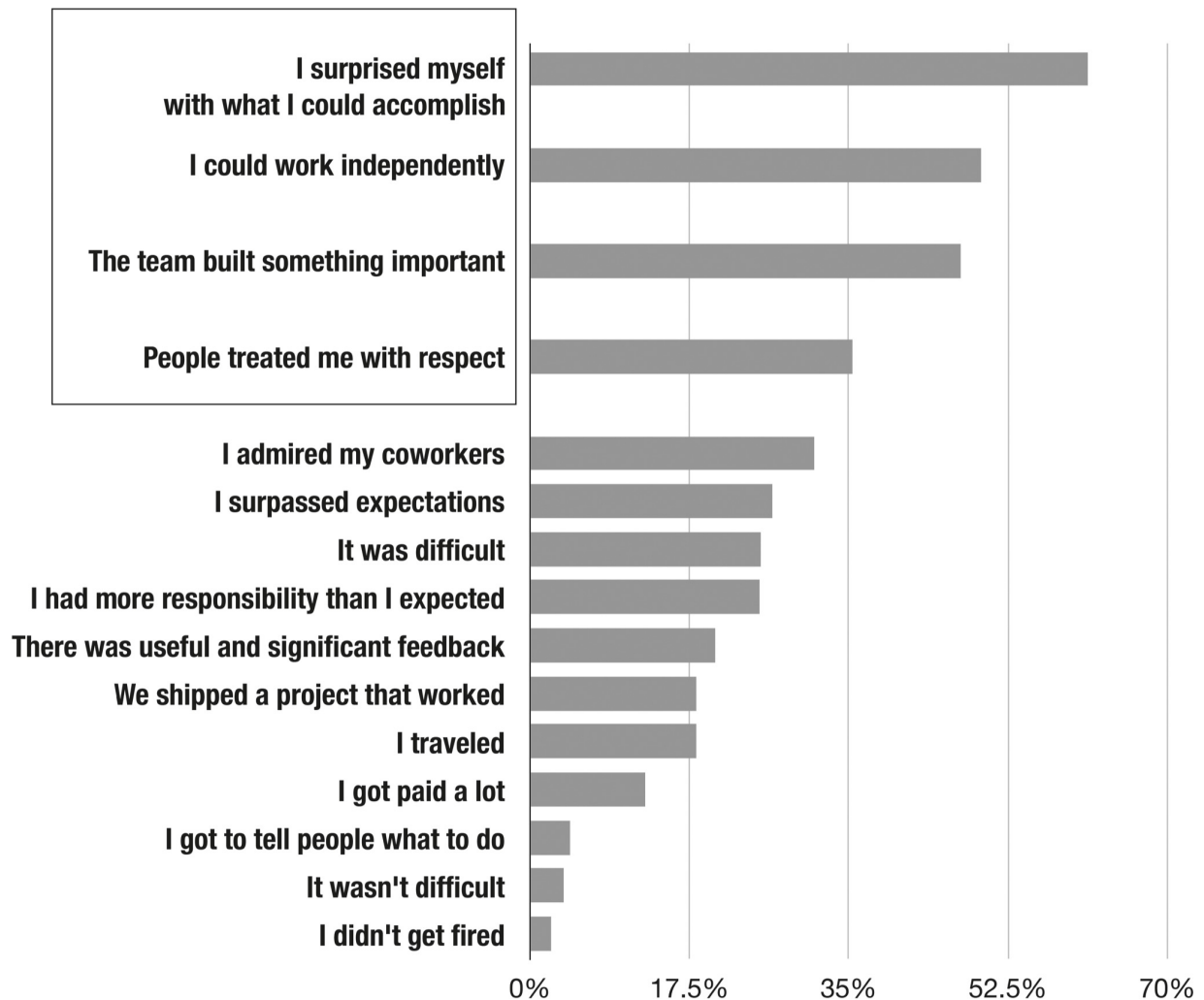
We go to work with dreams and energy and drive but leave each day a bit more depleted. We bring trust and enthusiasm, but it feels wasted.

Our team can do better. Our effort can matter. If we want to do work better, we'll need to understand what's possible. Let's get real.
We can choose to lead.

3. The Best Job You Ever Had

What would today be like if you could honestly describe your job that way? And what if all your coworkers felt the same way? Imagine being an investor, a customer, a participant in that sort of organization.

I asked ten thousand people in ninety countries to describe the conditions at the best job they ever had. Here are the characteristics they chose most often:



The top four items (people could choose more than one answer) overwhelmingly came out ahead:

- I surprised myself with what I could accomplish
- I could work independently
- The team built something important
- People treated me with respect

Nothing else compares.

Yes, we need to make a living.

But how do we make a life?

It might not be simply about the money.

When the world is in turmoil, when our health is at risk and the future seems murky, perhaps paychecks and productivity simply aren't enough.

Perhaps we can't manage our way into the future.

What if we created the best job someone ever had?

What if we built an organization people would genuinely miss if it were gone?

How much better would our work be if we could simply talk about the work without hesitation?

What if the work we did made things better?

Mozart, not Muzak.

Three Songs

*If you're not drowning,
you're a lifeguard.*

4. The Song of Increase

At the end of a long winter, if the weather cooperates and the flowers are in bloom, a hive of honeybees will move into overdrive.

Working in sync, each available bee will work to collect as much pollen as possible, creating a rebound in the hive's honey supply.

Then, the queen's council will build a special egg cell. The maidens will instruct their queen to lay a fertilized egg there and will feed it lavishly with royal jelly, allowing it to develop into another queen.

Now the stage is set for the song of increase. Author and apiarist Jacqueline Freeman writes about this magical moment, an oft overlooked transition in the life of the hive.

One day, as the new queen is about to be born, the existing queen and as many as half the bees in the hive—her oldest and most experienced workers—will swarm and leave. In just a few minutes, tens of thousands of bees, coordinated without a coordinator, will fly away.

They will leave behind their home, filled with food, for a smaller, younger crew and a new queen.

The sound the swarming bees make is thrilling to hear. The entire swarm is seeking possibility and growth, without knowing precisely where they're headed. They'll find a tree branch a few hundred feet away and gather into a tight ball to preserve their warmth. From there, they'll quickly send out scouting parties, covering as much as thirty square miles, to find a new place to build a hive. The swarm only has a few days to locate, agree upon, and inhabit a new home—or they'll perish.

What a bold leap into possibility. These bees embrace the challenge to get from here to there without a precise map, and to do

it with cooperation, dignity, and connection.

Without the song of increase, the hive stifles and fades away. And right now, many of us are living through a similar experience.

5. The Song of Safety

People are not bees, but we have many things in common.

When facing an existential threat, it's hard to move forward, difficult to create, and challenging to be generous.

Like humans, bees must maintain a hive temperature close to 98 degrees Fahrenheit. If it gets cold outside, they hunker together, shivering to raise the heat. When it gets too warm, they spread apart, allowing air to flow. But outside the safety of their swarm, bees exposed to temperature extremes enter a state of fatigue, becoming static and unresponsive.

In our culture, we've seen the same things happen. The global recession and the pandemic depressed innovation and connection. People sought refuge in their homes and had little energy to spare for positive forward motion.

At work, this same instinct prevails. When people feel disrespected, unseen, or unsafe, they can shut down, phoning in the work and doing as little as possible, hoping to simply hold on to their job—at least until a better one comes along.

Burnout, dissatisfaction, and the banal parade of meetings conspire to stifle productivity and make work less engaging. We are pushed to seek safety, not increase.

Until our existential needs are met, it's difficult to produce the emotional labor needed for progress and possibility.

6. The Song of Significance

How do we move beyond our paralyzing desire for safety?

We've indoctrinated ourselves to embrace industrial fealty, where our main job is to do what we're told. We've built massive systems designed to produce goods and services beyond imagination, while we simultaneously market enough insufficiency and jealousy to sell them.

Give up your dreams and your soul, we promise each other, and you can buy some things that will give you status and satisfaction. Or at least let you forget what you gave up.

While that promise may have worked well half a century ago, it rings hollow today.

There is an alternative. It's a different sort of increase, a better sort of safety.

It's work that matters.

It's creating a difference, being part of something, and doing work we're proud of.

This is the song of significance.

This is what motivates people to do the work that can't be automated, mechanized, or outsourced.

And this is the song that humans yearn to sing together.

Toward Significance

*Work that matters created by people
who care.*

7. What Do People Want?

Once their basic needs are met, workers are very clear about what they want from work. It's not more stock options or a fancier office. It's much more fundamental: agency and dignity.

Agency gives us control over our time, and it encourages us to choose what our contribution looks like. Because it demands responsibility and some authority, agency is antithetical to controlled industrial piecework.

Dignity flows from agency, allowing us to be treated as humans, not cogs. To be respected for our work and treated with as much kindness as the situation allows.

The industrial regime, magnified by pervasive ideas of class warfare and strife, has stripped both agency and dignity away from most of us.

8. What Do Companies Need?

John Henry worked on the railroad, driving holes into rocks so they could be detonated to make way for the trains.

According to Neal Miller, "When the agent for the steam drill company brought the drill here, John Henry wanted to drive against it. He took a lot of pride in his work and he hated to see a machine take the work of men like him."

Henry won that round, at least in his song, but it's said he died of exhaustion. His Pyrrhic victory reflected a new reality: from that point on, manual labor was no match for the machines that industrialists could make.

As each machine was developed, displaced workers were encouraged to increase their education and move up to jobs that the machines hadn't taken over yet.

As of 2023, those machine-done jobs include robots working in hotels, algorithms doing stock trades, and machine learning systems sketching illustrations and reading X-rays.

What companies need has shifted, and suddenly. Instead of cheap labor to do the semiautomated tasks that machines can't do (yet), organizations now seek two apparently scarce resources: *creativity* and *humanity*.

Both skills involve dealing with other humans, creating strategies, and finding insights in a fast-moving world.

9. When You See a Fork in the Road

Perhaps you should take it.

The choices have never been as clear as they are now:

Industrial capitalism (industrialism) seeks to use power to create profits.

Market capitalism seeks to solve problems to make a profit.

Industrial capitalism was built on the extraordinary productivity of the machine age. Feed the machine first, turn everything (including workers and customers) into machines, and scale up the enterprise. It evolved to incorporate the network effect and natural (or unnatural) monopolies to gain more power. It then used that power to capture the efforts of government to create even more power.

This is the brutal way that bully bosses treat current and former employees, Big tech uses surveillance immorally, and workers face deplorable working conditions in factories worldwide. Profit creates power, and power is the goal.

Often, the bad outcomes of that power happen slowly, incrementally, with plenty of notice. We settle or compromise,

readjust our standards, and ultimately accept the corrosion of our humanity and the loss of joy that goes with it. When it happens again, sunk costs shift our perspective, and since we settled once before, we are tempted to settle again. We spend a lot of our lives defending past decisions instead of considering new paths forward.

Market capitalism, meanwhile, continues to create most of the jobs and value worldwide. This is the never-ending work of finding problems and solving them. Market capitalists have no power over customers (or even, in most cases, their employees). Instead, they work to bring effort and insight to a rapidly changing marketplace in service of their customers.

The fork is right here, right now. Perhaps it's time to notice it and to choose a path.

Together, we can make something better. Something worth our time, our effort, and our imagination.

10. McDonald's Is Safe

Your experience at McDonald's or another fast-food chain will always fall into a specified range—whether you are a customer or an employee. The food doesn't vary from one restaurant to another. The prices are low. Employees can get up to speed in a few hours, and many of them don't have to shoulder much individual responsibility.

Most of all, though, it's convenient. That's the essence of productive consumer-focused industrialism. To create convenience.

To be fair, industrial capitalism works. It creates leverage and productivity then delivers expected results, all while lowering prices and increasing access to goods and services.

The modern world wouldn't exist without the progress that industry allowed, and for many, the safety these jobs offer is a lifeline and a useful way to live.

There's also a certain brutal beauty to the inexorable process of mechanization. Armed with stopwatches, surveys, and calculators, we can sort through variations of design and process until we find the right answer. There's no doubt. The product is the product, the service is the service, and all those random and emotional elements of humanity aren't part of the equation.

But late-stage industrial capitalism is different. It doesn't know where to stop. It not only captures those seeking safety, but also shackles those seeking significance.

11. The Challenge of Having It Both Ways

For a long time, there's been room for all of it. For the safety and certainty of industrial processes, combined with the humanity and possibility of change, growth, and personal agency.

It's tempting to simply want more of that. All of the corporate commercial upsides along with the best job you ever had.

But the stopwatch comes for all of us.

If we are going to compete with those who seek the perfection of industrial capitalism, we should know that they will out-measure, out-standardize, and out-manage us. It's a race to the bottom.

The work of significance embraces the very things that industrialism seeks to stamp out.

Significance is inconvenient.

We've built powerful tools. Tools for communication, production, and amplification. Tools that allow humans to leverage their insights and care to produce value for others. And now those tools are there for us to use to make things better. If we choose to.

But using these tools well requires our commitment, as bosses and employees and consumers. We're signing up for a new sort of engagement and a different set of rules.

12. Learning from the Edges

In the extremes, we can see the choice in front of us.

It's possible to build an organization where every worker is monitored at all times, where every job is sliced as thinly as possible and outsourced to the cheapest possible person. That organization can be centrally controlled, algorithmically managed, and brutal in the way it makes choices. The CEO might earn an hourly wage ten thousand times higher than the average employee.

And it's also possible to build an organization where each employee is a valued contributor, where work schedules and locations are set with flexibility, and where the decisions are surfaced close to the customer and cycled through the organization. An organization like this might pay people really well, or it might be fully volunteer, where the work itself is the reward.

Most organizations fall somewhere in the middle, but technology and competition are pushing managed organizations very quickly in the direction of the first sort of organization, while community, change, and possibility are pushing led organizations to become more like the second.

We need to decide what work is for. Whether we want to spend our days creating scarcity and harm, or if we want to commit to the regenerative work of building the best job any worker has ever had, and the best organization any customer has ever encountered.

But how? How to teach and how to unindoctrinate, how to change the systems we've worked so hard to build for generations? The answer begins simply with: we need to choose.

13. Let's Get Real or Let's Not Play

Mahan Khalsa's breakthrough book on selling has a message for every manager: We shouldn't be doing management to our

employees. If we're good, though, we might be able to do it with them.

The collection of literature, systems, and organizations devoted to managing *at people* is nearly endless. It's built deep into everything we think is normal about the world we live in.

We have an entirely separate vocabulary and systems stack for the things we do *with* and *for* other people. We call this coaching or mentoring or sparring.

In *This Is Marketing*, I wrote about the power that comes when we start marketing for people, to solve their problems instead of focusing on our own. The same is true for organizational leadership.

No one goes to the gym to willingly get punched in the face by the senior vice president of boxing. But some folks eagerly pay for a sparring partner when it's time to get better.

The difference is obvious, but we've forgotten to say it out loud.

No grades, no check marks, no badges. I'm not in charge of you, and I'm not manipulating you. I'm simply establishing the conditions for you to get to where you said you wanted to go.

You tell me where you're going and what you need. You make promises about your commitment and skills development.

I'll show up to illuminate, question, answer, spar with, and challenge you. I'll work tirelessly to make sure you're part of a team of people who are ready to care as much as you do.

We can get real.

Or let's not play.

14. Kinds of Work

There's the creative work of the solo individual engaged in a productive practice. There's the work of community, of affiliation, of being in an organization. There's the industrial work of doing what you're told under surveillance, and between and among all of these,

there may be the linchpin work of someone leaning into something because they are enrolled in the journey, and because they seek to make a change in the world.

In big companies and in solo practices, we find ourselves doing all three, transitioning from one to the other, sometimes within a single project or shift.

Industrial work is often what we think of when we think of work. This is managers, assembly lines, tests, inspections, raises, bonuses, pink slips, avoiding the boss, quiet quitting, and layoffs. It's a recent invention, perhaps two hundred years old. It's not the only kind of work, and it's easy to get focused on this and only this.

In some settings, we inspect and measure everything we can, eliminating any need to trust employees—all so we can earn trust with customers, particularly high-stakes customers.

But the end of the industrial age and the rise of computers are changing the equation. Tools can create efficiency, but value can only come from change, from humanity, and from the rare form of connection that comes with significance.

It's the emotional labor of showing up because we care.

15. Which Kind of Work Do We Actually Value?

It's clear that industrial work drives our educational institutions, our hiring practices, and our management philosophies.

Managed, surveilled industrial work isn't what we actually dream of or care about. Training kids to do well on tests, to obey, and to consume has been the steady work of generations, but to what end?

And yet, when we look at stock market valuation or profitability, the answer is the same: growth and long-term profit no longer come from relentless industrialism. And organizations that achieve extraordinary customer service rankings find a way to embrace humanity as well.

For a century, consistent industrial work was a straightforward path to create value. Productivity was simply the measure of how much better we did today than yesterday, always faster and cheaper.

Computers and outsourcing changed this metric.

Now industrial work often becomes a race to the bottom. The first thing any scaling company does is outsource its industrial activities (including assembly-line manufacturing and frontline customer service) to cheaper options, automating them as much as possible. If it's all created to spec, with a stopwatch, why bother paying extra?

Outsourcing isn't inherently cheaper or less human, but industrialists often take advantage of international boundaries to make it so. And given the choice, exhausted workers are avoiding industrial work. They're refusing to expend effort simply because someone else decided they were a resource to be maximized. Industrial work is a last resort, not a first choice among people lucky enough to be able to make that choice.

Real value is no longer created by traditional measures of productivity. It's created by personal interactions, innovation, creative solutions, resilience, and the power of speed.

When we measure human satisfaction, shareholder value, or resilience, it's clear that what built the last century is not what we need now.

The opportunity for all of us lies in the emotional labor invested by enrolled and committed employees who seek to make a difference—that is the competitive advantage that extraordinary organizations produce.

16. Significant Organizations Create an Impact

They earn more money.

Attract better employees.

Change more lives.

Raise more donations.

Offer better work environments.

And the only thing you need to create that impact is to give up merely doing your job and start leading instead.

More isn't the point. Better is.

17. Toward Better

There's no need to be a victim of a system that has outlived its usefulness.

Instead, right here and right now, you have a chance to lead. To create the conditions for change. To enroll people in a journey that creates connections, dignity, and possibility.

Leadership is a skill and an art, and it can be learned.

We can lead together.

This manifesto isn't a step-by-step manual, or even a simple playbook. Instead, we need to take the first step by seeing and understanding what got us here and beginning to weave together the threads of where we can go next.

18. The Song of Safety (Chorus)

If people are drowning—or even if they *feel* like they're about to drown—they're unlikely to do a good job working on your project.

Indoctrination is what happens when powerful and dominant systems work to perpetuate the cultural and intellectual status quo by teaching us things that aren't actually true or universally useful. Expectations about work, or school, or our neighbors.

And indoctrination doesn't only work on kids, and it's not only about success. It's about race and class and sexual orientation and job roles and a hundred other norms.

Aggression is still aggression, even if we call it a “microaggression.”

So we begin with the seeing. What have we been trained to believe about the one hundred thousand hours we will spend at work that isn’t helpful? What do we assume about other people and their dreams and fears that simply isn’t true?

It’s been going on so long, we don’t even notice it.

Generations of societal injustice, entrenched systems of caste and privilege, the indoctrination of prevailing systems—they all amplify our need for stability and safety. Trauma and the increasing demands of industrial capitalism make it difficult for many of us to lean out of the boat, to lead, and to do the hard and vital work of making change happen.

It’s as though our chair has been pulled out from under us every time we’ve sat down in the lunchroom, and now you’re asking us to sit in that chair again. Trust is hard to earn.

Ironically, and sadly, the industrial manager often takes advantage of this mistrust by amplifying insecurity to create more compliance. “You can get fired at any time, so straighten up.”

But teams doing significant work can create a culture where clarity, professionalism, and enrollment open the door to possibility. Forward motion is the way to significance.

Significance requires trust, and trust comes from consistently keeping our promises.

19. Where Are the Leaders?

There are countless books and articles about listening to workers, giving them space to grow, and creating workplaces of fairness and inclusion.

Managers often try these ideas for a little while but then stop.

It doesn’t work, they say.

I asked for suggestions and didn't get any.

When left to their own devices, they simply hide or back off.

Why are we surprised? After indoctrinating, hazing, and punishing people for ten or fifteen years of schooling, and then at work for decades after that, why do we expect that people will trust that they simply won't get jerked around again?

We're complicit in a cycle of fear, manipulation, and coercion.

Creating the conditions for significance isn't easy. If it were, we would all be doing it already.

20. Blame All the Way Down

Hierarchical management involves the boss taking the whole project, splitting it into pieces, and giving each direct report a piece.

And then the reports take their piece, split it into smaller tasks, and hand the responsibility all the way down the chain.

When things don't work, the big boss blames whichever underling touched the part that seemed to not work.

And the blame flows downhill.

But since no one knows anything for sure, since problems are complicated, and since systems are more important than components, everyone who cares is nervous about their silo of responsibility.

Because we can't be sure.

So instead of measuring the right thing, we measure awkward proxies for caring. Time in seat. Response to emails. Charisma in meetings.

And we wait for the blame.

21. The Impartial Conversation

Joe Hudson is a well-respected business coach in Silicon Valley. His four-step approach to engagement and leadership is specifically about a state of mind, not a technique. There isn't a simple hack we can use to manipulate people, but there is a posture and belief system we can bring to interactions that allow others to connect and grow. This makes it more likely that we will sail together instead of forcing people to row for us.

By helping his clients ask “how” and “what” in their conversations, he helps teams find a way forward. These two words help us discover what other people are seeking and how we can accompany them in getting to where they seek to go.

“How do you feel about this client?” or “What led you to want to do it this way?” are great places to begin. Connection comes from the mutual understanding that these conversations can uncover.

Genuine inquiry needs to follow. Not the forensic argumentation of “let's figure out how you can see this my way,” but the impartial conversation that leads to discovery.

The origins of the word *impartial* are instructive. For seven hundred years, *partial* has meant “pertaining to a selfish interest rather than to a common or larger good.”

It's easy to see how a manager is *supposed* to be partial. The manager is supposed to tell people what to do, not ask about how and what. The manager is paid to be partial, to be focused on the goal and the procedures that the manager's boss gave them.

But if we're seeking a liminal state, the significance of getting from here to there, then we're in a mode of discovery, not driving a train on a single set of tracks. Process, not directives.

While it's tempting to be curious in search of the answer, asking questions simply to get to the pitch and the deliverable, this tactic often fails. It fails because we give ourselves away, and the person we're seeking to connect with will understand our goal and shut down, especially if that goal threatens their story of safety.

The alternative is to bring actual wonder to the conversation, to be with a person in their story and narrative. Wonder is the open-ended version of curiosity, without seeking an explanation to solve the problem.

Process and principles don't require a specific plan.

We can't plan a basketball game in advance. If we focus on culture and process, however, we can enable the players to achieve their goals regardless of how the game unfolds.

This impartial mindset is more likely to resonate with people whom our culture traditionally hasn't labeled as typical, powerful bosses. What you look like is far less important than the ability to involve others in your journey. This is essentially human work, not limited to a gender, race, or cultural background.

22. Questions Worth Asking

Engineers, surgeons, and race car drivers do easily measured work. They are able to focus on executing along proven paths. The rest of us, though, need to engage in useful discussions about what *might* be.

Here are some questions we can begin with, every time we set out to do our work together. And yes, they're worth asking out loud, worth answering in writing, and worth committing to the answers:

- What's the specific change this team is going to make?
- What's my personal role in making that change happen?
- What do I need to learn to support or lead this change?
- Who needs to help me? Who needs my help?
- What is the risk—for us, for me, for the people we serve?
- What's the timing of this project?

- What's the budget?
- What am I afraid of?
- What is the benefit to each party involved?

And another series of questions we can ask after we're done:

- Did we ship on time?
- Did we make big promises (to our customers, sure, but also to our coworkers) and keep them?
- Did we relentlessly make the work better?
- Did we seek discomfort in the process of stretching to innovate?
- Is our theory of change, process, and creation improving?
- Did we ask hard questions that led to new insights?
- Have we surfaced useful metrics for how to do better next time?
- Did we build a system that is resilient enough to help us produce even more value?
- How have we grown as an organization and as individuals?
What did we learn?

These are essential and easy to gloss over. These are unavoidable for significant organizations and easily avoided by everyone else. Organizations of any size can start down the path of having these conversations, or they can fight to avoid them.

If we can't talk about these things, I'm not sure we can call ourselves professionals.

23. Before We Begin

Create two documents with your team before your next project:

- The pre-mortem and
- The rave

Each unit of work we do can be considered a project—the next customer we serve, the product we launch, the call with investors . . .

Imagine that the project fails. Let's make a list, in advance, of all the things that went wrong. What didn't work? Who didn't understand what was being promised? What was risky?

And at the same time, before we begin, what does the best feedback we received say? That customer on Yelp, that VP talking to another in the hallway, the employee who was transformed—now that we've succeeded, what do they say? What resonated with them?

Intention gives us the power to describe and name possible futures. And possible futures help us claim the path we're willing to work for.

Intention requires enrollment, a chance to be on the hook and to choose to own what happens next.

24. Together toward Significance

The Inuit people have an ancient tradition of marking a significant path or location by piling up stones into an *inuksuk*. Literally, the term means “that which acts in the capacity of a human.” It is a collective act, a project of significance created by a community. We would miss it if it weren't there—we'd be (actually) lost without it.

It's not random, it's not universal. It's significant right here, in this territory. For a reason.

In various European traditions, a cairn conveys a similar message. Not only “we were here,” but also “this is worth noticing.”

A bystander should not take a stone out of a cairn or destroy an inuksuk. The people who came before us built something, and we can learn from it or add to it.

Each stone is significant. Without *that* stone, the entire structure cannot stand as it was constructed. And yet, from one vantage point, each individual stone is trivial. It’s only the collection of contributions that creates the whole, the inuksuk, the forward motion and signal in the form of a human.

25. A Compass before We Draw the Map

Revolutions bring change. The details are elusive at first, but the arc of the changes to come can be followed. The arc is consistent and helps us move forward long before the industry or the culture has enough details sketched in to specify a map of steps to follow.

In our lifetime, we’ve seen the revolutions caused by the dawn of computers, the rise of the internet, the degradation of the environment, and the end of industrialism.

The midcentury consumer revolution was easy: make it cheap and convenient and you’ll do fine.

When the internet was in its infancy, smart observers understood that useful decisions could be easily arrived at if we asked the question “What does the internet want?” Not the people who are using the internet, but the network itself. What does it thrive on?

If you offered more person-to-person connection, more bandwidth, or more selection—the things that the internet itself was good at—you were likely to succeed regardless of anything else you did. The network effect was a symptom of understanding how this new technology was revolutionizing whatever it touched. Kevin Kelly

helped us understand that asking what technology wants is a useful North Star, a compass for riding with the current instead of fighting it.

In the last few years, organizations have discovered that a useful way forward is to ask, “What does the earth want?” Building things that are resilient, light in impact, and more sustainable is a powerful way forward—the opposite of a posture of dominance and waste. The movement is gaining momentum and bringing change with it. The earth is your customer, and many people will be aligned with you as you serve it.

And the lesson of this manifesto is simple: An organization of any size can effectively move forward by asking, “*What do humans need?*” What will create significance for those who interact with us?

This certainly isn’t what industrialists have traditionally been asking. It isn’t even what internet entrepreneurs have been asking. Going forward, the questions we have to ask aren’t about feeding the stock market, the local retailer, or the cloud of internet servers. We’re not here to fill self-storage units or simply gain market share. Instead, we’re asking what our people need. What is the change we seek to make? Does it matter to the people we work with?

The answers will vary, and there isn’t a playbook yet. Simply a compass and a way of seeing what matters.

These revolutionary compass points are independent, and then they overlap and interact.

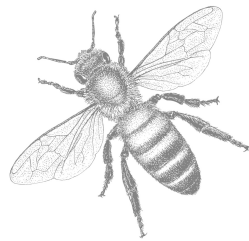
When the consumer internet arrived, it was neither cheap nor convenient (except for email, the killer app from 1980 to 1995). It took a decade or more before feeding the internet became part of business as usual. Organizations big and small eventually caught on.

When environmental concerns showed up on the radar of many organizations, they seemed antithetical to most corporate goals. Now electric cars are higher status, more reliable, and better performing than traditional ones, and solar power is cheaper and

more productive than gas or oil. Today, even large industrialists have chosen to serve the earth as a valuable constituent.

What each revolution has in common is that it is *inconvenient*. It was inconvenient for an industrialist to embrace the internet in 1998, for a nonprofit to shift gears and become sustainable, and for a successful corporation to embrace significance. It's rare that it happens quickly or easily, which is precisely why these changes are revolutionary.

The revolutions begin at the edges but ultimately end up changing whatever they interact with.



What Happened to Management?

“What do you do if the envelope is too big for the slot?”

“Well, if you fold ’em, they fire you. I usually throw ’em out.”

THE HUDSUCKER PROXY

26. The End of Industrialism and the Sputtering of Productivity

Amazon lost a quarter of its annual profits to turnover in 2021.

According to internal documents reported by *Engadget*, in 2021 Amazon lost more than eight billion dollars to attrition. Only one out of three new hires stayed more than three months.

The turnover problem is so urgent that the company is beginning to worry about running out of new people to hire. They might, according to documents published by Recode, be in danger of depleting all of the available labor supply in several major U.S. cities.

One of the reasons for the turnover is that the company works hard to avoid promoting the bulk of their workers to management. Employees without a college degree rarely get promoted to management, because the industrial mindset—“follow the instructions and we’re going to measure your output”—dominates the experience for almost all of their frontline workers.

By creating the most managed company in America, Amazon has built a system where almost no one is asked to use their best judgment. Creating significant change and connection is not only discouraged, but it’s nearly impossible for the bulk of their workers.

This systemic approach to industrial management builds a reliable machine, one that is regularly regarded as the most admired brand in America. Customers respond well to a generic, predictable, and convenient service. We like Big Macs and Prime shipping. Fast service and low prices come at a cost, though.

27. Where Did the Productivity Go?

In 2022, annual productivity dropped by the largest amount since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began measuring it seventy years ago.

Industrialists care a great deal about this metric, since it calculates the amount of output for every hour spent by employees. When it goes up, there's more money to pay people with but, as managers like to focus on, also more to keep and record as profits.

Google's Sundar Pichai and Meta's Mark Zuckerberg have responded to this erosion by promising to fire people, measure output more carefully, and create a posture of output. Raiders like Elon Musk have simply fired as many as 75 percent of their company's employees, trimming "deadwood" and attempting to scare the rest of the staff into compliance.

Microsoft chief executive Satya Nadella is having none of this. His team coined the term "productivity paranoia" to remind themselves that pushing creators for short-term metrics almost always backfires.

"Ultimately, for the business, these tools are about really helping their employees thrive," Nadella said. "The only way a business is successful and productive is if employees feel that sense of empowerment, that sense of energy and connection for the company's mission and are doing meaningful work."

That's because of the fork in the road.

The truth is simple: Widget production is fairly straightforward to measure and increase. But those metrics (and methods) don't work for human interactions, insight, or innovation.

The conductor of an orchestra doesn't make a sound. He depends, for his power, on his ability to make other people powerful.

BEN ZANDER, BOSTON PHILHARMONIC

28. Stakes and Trust

When we consider the four kinds of work, we can lay them out in a two-by-two grid with stakes and trust as the two axes.

High-stakes, low-trust work is the work assigned by the industrialist. This is meeting spec. Test and measure. Surveillance. Traditional management lives in this quadrant. This is how you successfully run a fast-food franchise. Every customer is important, and every output needs to be identical.

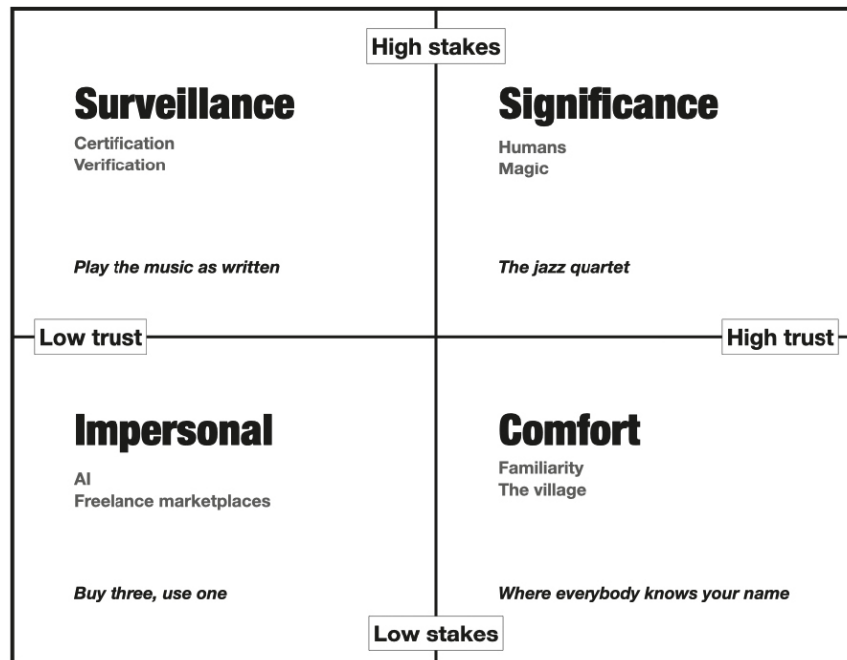
Low-stakes, low-trust work is similar, except it's easily outsourced. This isn't work your organization needs to take seriously or personally. When Amazon needed to label ten thousand images, they built the Mechanical Turk, a program that allows anyone in the world to make a few pennies doing piecework. Now work like this is done by AI and machine learning. Assign the same work to one hundred bots and, sooner or later, it'll get done.

The next quadrant is for work that is low stakes but high trust. This is the work of culture creation, of community, of people we care about showing up each day to contribute a bit to the whole. The work is consistent, but it's human, not industrial. The shifts caused by pandemic disruptions, outsourcing, work from home, and AI have disrupted this quadrant.

And the final quadrant, the most important one, is the work with high stakes and high trust. This is significant work, important work, work on the edge. This is the work that creates human value as we connect with and respect the individuals who create it.

It doesn't pay to industrialize this work or to create it under duress. Because then it becomes industrialized and once again joins the race to the bottom.

29. The Race to the Bottom



This is a race you don't want to run. Because you might win. Or worse, come in second.

This is the industrialist's race, the race of productivity. This is the challenge of more for less, of mass-market quality at scale.

The race to the bottom also offers low prices, average quality, and plenty of room for excuses about our lack of humanity and a focus on the short term. The race to the bottom is filled with shortcuts and with competitors who are willing to sacrifice integrity for a slight edge.

At first, heading to the bottom is thrilling, because a small head start feels like an extraordinary boon. The sales and profits quickly arrive.

But inevitably, when a competitor shows up, it becomes a race. And to win that race, all the elements that attracted you to the work quickly disappear.

The planet does not need more successful people, but it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers,

restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind.

DAVID ORR

30. Prizes for Standing on the Red Dot

If it's a race, then training is an obvious next step.

More than three hundred years ago, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle founded the Brothers of the Christian Schools, one of the first schools in France that educated children without regard to social status. He also founded one of the world's first teachers colleges.

To manage the classroom, he helped devise a system of penances and points, where children could behave well in exchange for the chance to avoid punishments.

In 1900, de La Salle was canonized as a saint, and there's even an asteroid named after him.

People respond to score-based systems, especially systems with rewards and even prizes. Fast-forward a century, though, and we can see the results of de La Salle's innovation. A friend's kid came home from first grade and proudly showed his mom the cheap plastic trinkets he had earned that day.

"I stood quietly on the dot and so I got some tickets. And if I stand on the dot quietly tomorrow, I can get some more prizes!"

First grade. Stand quietly and get a toy. That's one way to indoctrinate kids in both obedience and consumption.

This is precisely what industrialism seeks.

Corporations have discovered that there's a profit to be made in giving away points and turning behavior into a game. Frequent-flyer miles, Peloton standings, and Duolingo streaks all exist to make us feel as though we're doing something significant.

But that proven technique is now spreading in ways most of us didn't expect or hope for.

Is standing on a dot the thing we need to train kids to do? Hasn't each of us spent too much time standing on dots already?

ClassDojo is an app that the maker says is used in 95 percent of all elementary schools in the United States. While it provides useful communication tools for teachers and parents, its main function is to give out points in the spirit of de La Salle.

Gamification is simply a codification and amplification of the motivations that we each respond to once we are enrolled in a game. Training for the industrial regime of control and short-term productivity.

As Adrian Hon points out in *You've Been Played*, it's all gamification now. The real argument to be had is the difference between good and bad gamification, between useful and manipulative, between magical and banal.

He quotes one parent: "My daughter is a straight-A student, good behavior and the teachers have only great things to say about her. Just in two days, I have seen a negative impact on her, she came home worried about her points, asking what can she do to get points, and just this morning she asked if she could not go to school because she was afraid she would make a mistake and lose points. This is a six-year-old."

When a teacher uses the ClassDojo system to amplify emotional enrollment, decrease distractions, and virtually eliminate illicit cell-phone use in class, it's hard to argue that it's not helping the school with the mission its parents, teachers, and most students have for it.

On the other hand, when a school rewards a kid with a can of Sprite for earning one hundred points, then gives out even more points in exchange for quiet compliance and simple agreeableness, it's hard to see how that's in anyone's interest but the bureaucrats'.

ClassDojo, to amplify the impact, has upgraded its systems to add audio feedback as well. Now when a young student gets a demerit, the teacher can broadcast a *bong* to the entire class.

Sooner or later, all motivation is self-motivation. Either the points become part of who we are or we cease responding to them.

And when we cease responding, the external forces seeking more power will simply amp up the points.

We're now being manipulated by lazy point overlords. It's a shortcut for profits, for control, and, most of all, for avoiding actual human connection. Work and school and our leisure time are becoming an endless hamster wheel, with small treats doled out for behaviors that feed corporations, not our souls.

Plato argued that the State should be sure to indoctrinate children early, and never let them develop imagination. "Being different, they'll demand a different kind of life, and that will then make them want new institutions."

How many followers do you have online? How much can you fit in? Here's today's dot, go stand on it.

31. Searching for an Even Better Stopwatch

In 2022, Amazon introduced enhancements to its Contact Lens surveillance technologies. It's now available to the thousands of companies that use AWS (Amazon Web Services). Contact Lens is an artificially intelligent machine-learning algorithm that will listen in on every customer service call. It can not only understand the words the agent is using, but also detect stress levels in their voice and unusual pauses.

Engadget quotes AWS CEO Adam Selipsky: "These reduce the time the contact center managers spend identifying performance issues and helping to coach agents."

Another way to say this is that it's easier to implement surveillance than it is to hire and train caring people. It's certainly more convenient and feels safer.

Your call may be monitored. Except not the way we expected—now it's every call, all the time. I wonder what job (and life) satisfaction is like for the agents who are answering these calls. As AI gets smarter and machine learning collects more data, the system will come for each of us.

As soon as an industrial system can monitor your day, it will. Relentlessly.

32. The Half-Life of a Great Organization

A company like U.S. Steel or IBM could expect to be great for decades. They figured out an innovation, then industrialized it and optimized it for years.

As the world gets faster, though, the half-life from cutting-edge technology to fading commodity continues to get shorter.

What got us here isn't going to get us there.

And so, under Steve Ballmer, Microsoft failed to act on the opportunities available to it with search engines, smartphones, social networks, and cloud computing. They missed four of the biggest transitions during the biggest decade in tech.

The company went from first place to dishonorable mention, and it wasn't until a new generation of leaders rebuilt the company that Microsoft had a chance to rebound. Ballmer chose convenience over significance, every time.

The people you hire to follow instructions are rarely the people who will help you build something of innovation and substance.

33. Return on Assets

Return on real estate, then machines, then financial assets, then people . . .

The math is compelling and simple. If you have competitors, you have to squeeze the juice out of every asset you own, or they'll squeeze you right out of a job. Monetize your shelf space, your email list, your factory. It's a race for control, leverage, and amplification.

But when we start squeezing people, sometimes they speak up or walk away.

The world has changed. Employees have more information about alternatives, respect, and wages. You can't torture them in private as easily as you can push a machine to its breaking point.

That information also highlights opportunities for individuals who are able to contribute more human insight and possibility somewhere else. Remote work makes this even easier, since the number of places to contribute without leaving home is close to infinite.

And finally, as a result of scale and information exchange, nearly all the benefits of maximizing inputs from nonhumans have been exhausted. It's easy to find parity with your competitors when you're all outsourcing to the same producers.

The result is a real shift in how we need the people we work with to act: like humans, not like obedient machines.

34. The Free-Market Exchange of Labor

The goal of the industrial manager is to win the transaction. They pay us for our time, extract the maximum amount possible, and then walk away, even steven. This is what the market will bear.

No connection, no loyalty, no humanity. Simply extraction. Humans as resources.

Of course, people with a soul, people who have a choice, people who seek humanity bristle at this idea of a corporate transaction. If the question is "What do I owe you?," Margaret Atwood has it right: "The answer is never 'nothing.'"

We owe our employees a debt. We owe it to our coworkers. And we owe it to our bosses.

Work is the expression of our energy and our dreams. We owe those along for the journey the same dignity and connection we would like to receive in return.

35. Kinko and Sleepy

There's an alternative to the top-down regime of compliance.

When Paul Orfalea was building Kinko's (which he sold to FedEx for more than two billion dollars), he said that his best technique for growing the business was simple: he would walk into one of their stores and ask someone there to tell him about an innovation they'd implemented that was working (and then he'd tell all the other stores about it).

If you didn't have an innovation to share, Paul let you know you needed to do better.

When Harry Acker was building Sleepy's (which his son sold to Mattress Firm for nearly a billion dollars), his best technique for growing the business was to call every store every day and ask, "What's wrong?" and then fix the problem.

The store manager who told me this story made it clear that if you didn't have a problem to share, you were in trouble.

Two sides of the same coin. It's possible your team knows what's up.

This Time, with Meaning

*Those who say it cannot be done
should not interrupt those who are
doing it.*

KATHRIN JANSEN

36. When We Sing the Song Together

Significance is a choice, and organizations are already choosing it.

Revolutions destroy the perfect and enable the impossible. Newspapers, travel agencies, cab companies, in-person meetings . . . there's a long list of previously perfect industrialized products and interactions that have been replaced, almost overnight, by products and services that were once considered impossible.

The significance revolution is unmaking the commercial power of industrialism and pushing us to create organizations that were hard to visualize a decade or two ago.

Consider Automattic, a profitable private company that is part of the WordPress ecosystem. Automattic has more than two thousand full-time employees, but each of them can work from wherever they like, whenever they like. This distributed, semiautonomous workforce has created some of the most highly regarded and well-functioning software in the world, and they've done it without many of the trappings of typical industrial management.

It's clear that significant organizations aren't limited to websites, orchestras, and software companies.

Most successful political campaigns work this way, as do fast-growing nonprofits and even a beloved sandwich shop in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Management runs a race to the bottom; leadership offers a chance to run for the top.

The difference is stark, and the benefits to employees, customers, and companies are clear.

It's possible for a significant organization to sell food, build software, teach pottery making, or sew clothes. It's not about what we make, it's about how we choose to make it.

If we care enough to build the best job you ever had, the team notices. And if people who care build something that they're proud of, the market notices.

37. Loose/Tight Properties

Tom Peters and Bob Waterman first wrote about this thirty years ago. Some elements of a significant organization are tightly controlled, with surveillance and low trust, simply because the stakes are so high and we can easily measure quality. And others are loose, with humans expected to bring their best judgment to the work.

The Aravind Eye Care System hospitals in India have restored the eyesight of more humans than any other institution in the world. Millions of people can now see because of the dedicated work of their thousands of employees.

Patients have a choice—they can pay a few hundred dollars for cataract surgery or have it done for free. Enough patients choose to pay that Aravind is largely self-sufficient. Their culture celebrates two things:

1. The infection and failure rates of their surgeries are vanishingly low. You're more likely to get an infection from a similar surgery in London.
2. Patients are treated well, regardless of what (or whether) they pay.

Surgeons from all over the world train at Aravind because the system does so many surgeries. It's a great place to learn the craft, the discipline, and the technique. The operating room is rigorous, procedures-based, and leaves little room for innovation. That's a feature.

At the same time, the staff that works at the hospital is expected to innovate, to bring humanity to their interactions, and to do whatever they need to do to make the institution a place of healing and connection. Regardless of how you came to Aravind, you will be treated with respect and the dignity you deserve.

The key insight is that each of these paths is done with intent.

38. Carpets Are a Dirty Business

In 1973, against all odds, Ray Anderson started a carpet company. Making carpet involves latex, nylon, heat, and grinding factory work. It's also a commodity industry, a price-based business with cutthroat margins.

But Ray was driven. Over the course of twenty years, he built Interface into a leader in the U.S. carpet industry, selling carpet tiles to large office installations. No sale was too small to ignore, and no productivity improvement was overlooked—his CFO worked seventy-hour weeks, year after year.

In 1974, he heard that a prospect in California had declined to buy because of “environmental concerns.” That led him to a groundbreaking book by Paul Hawken, where he first came to understand how much damage his company (and so many others) were doing to the environment.

Ray sat down with his senior team, a group of no-nonsense industrial managers who understood how to optimize his business for cost and profit. He told them that they were going to stop pillaging the earth and instead set an example for other companies. They were going to rebuild the entire operation to climb the mountain of sustainability, and remain profitable as they did.

And then he told them he had no idea how to do that. He challenged his team: “We will achieve sustainability by the year _____. You must fill in the year.”

And then he gave them the power and the authority to address the problem, along with the responsibility to do something about it. He stood up and left the room.

Today, Interface sells carpet tiles that are not only carbon-neutral but carbon-negative: they sequester more carbon than they use. The company produces energy instead of burning it. But the climate impact isn't the point of this story.

In later interviews, the Interface team, from the front lines to the boardroom, all described how the journey of rebuilding their company changed each of them. It turned jobs into careers. They learned new skills and developed into leaders. Ray's challenge had transformed the profit-focused grind of factory work into a life filled with significance—one narrated by meaning, not only a paycheck.

Ray Anderson was brave. But it was his team who were the heroes.

If a carpet company can do this, what can the rest of us accomplish?

39. Compliance and Change

The manager seeks compliance. A manager makes a profit delivering industrial progress and productivity, which is done by doing what we did yesterday a little faster and a little cheaper.

The leader seeks to create the conditions for people to make a change happen. Leaders don't need authority, but they must coordinate the trust, focus, and connection of people who are enrolled in a journey to do work that matters.

It's tempting to want the easiest and best outputs of both. To promise people dignity and connection and excitement, and then use discipline to get them to do what you want.

But that's not working as well as it once did.

40. Trick or Treat

The deal industrialists made was simple: show up and do what you are told, and you'll be rewarded.

Like for the kid who walks down a dark driveway on Halloween, the promise is simple. Show up, say "Trick or treat," and there will be candy.

So far, we've seen a lot of effort, plenty of promises, but not nearly enough candy.

Workplace satisfaction is low. Upward mobility has stalled. The income gap is rising. Benefits don't keep up with hours, stress, and layoffs.

And so people aren't buying the promise anymore. And managers are discovering that they can't keep pretending that it's a fair deal.

41. The Problem with Human Resources

Land was the first resource. Get more corn per acre, and you make more money.

Then machines became a resource. Make them more efficient, and you make more money and can buy more machines.

And then financial assets became a resource. Push for great return, measure it in basis points (one in a thousand), and do what you can to get a little more.

Finally, all we were left with were the people we worked with. They weren't coworkers. They were resources.

Jerk them around if you have to. And you do have to because the system demands it. The race to the bottom is won by the manager with the best marionette skills and the lowest moral standards.

We've added a lot of veneer to the ugly truth of how industrial managers see their employees, but the reality hasn't changed much: if humans are a resource, then we're here to squeeze them.

This leads to bullying, to burnout, to harassment, and to systems based on injustice and unfairness instead of possibility. Management and industrialism have been done *to* workers, not *with* them.

It's time to change this. We can create value, cause change, and make a difference by leading with humans instead of treating them as cogs in a soulless machine.

42. Two Years That Changed the World

It would have changed anyway, but when Henry Ford encountered Frederick Taylor, the future was codified, amplified, and made profitable.

In 1909, a gusher in Texas ushered in a century of cheap oil, fuel that could be burned to create power and wealth.

In 1911, Frederick Taylor published *The Principles of Scientific Management*, a manifesto that envisioned humans as machines, compliant devices that could be made ever more efficient.

And in 1911, Taylor met Henry Ford as he was building the Model T plant in Highland Park, Michigan.

Human resources was born.

Cheap oil plus leveraged machines plus obedient humans created enormous profit and we got hooked.

43. Simplified into Jerks

Henry Ford received medals for productivity from both Stalin and Hitler. Taylor was never quite as famous, partly because he didn't name a company after himself, but mostly because he had simply clarified a system that seems obvious to everyone who is in it. Few people believe that management was *invented* by anyone; most think it simply exists. But it was invented, with intent, by industrialists who knew exactly what they were doing.

A visitor to the early Ford plant wrote, “Every employee seemed to be restricted to a well-defined jerk, twist, spasm or quiver. . . . I never thought it possible that human beings could be reduced to such perfect automats. I looked constantly for the wire or belt concealed about their bodies which kept them in motion with such marvelous clock-like precision. I failed to discover how the motive power is transmitted to these people and it don’t seem reasonable that human beings would willingly consent to being simplified into jerks, I assume that their wives wind them up while asleep.”

This isn’t ancient history, nor is it restricted to car manufacturing. Here’s what a visitor to a modern Levi Strauss jeans factory said less than thirty years ago: “In our tour of the plant, we were struck by the minute segmentation of operations. Six different sewing machine operators, each doing one simple task, were needed to sew a pocket onto the pants. And most operators did the same task, hour after hour, day after day, year after year.”

The same compartmentalization and management mindset has been applied to doctors, to sound engineers, and even to individuals on social media.

This is what happens when you race to the bottom. It requires that you see humans as resources, not as people, and that the factory (in whatever form) use that resource for maximum short-term efficiency.

44. How Do I Get People to Do What I Want?

Perhaps the better question is: How do I create the conditions for other people to do work that matters?

Management is the practice of using power and authority to get what we want. To get the burgers flipped, the packages delivered, the phones answered.

Leadership is the art of creating something significant.

Management had a good run. For more than a hundred years, good managers created consistent industrial outputs, useful products, and reliable profits.

Ford was well managed. So was IBM. The local pizza place could be counted on to deliver a hot pie at a fair price.

But management is reaching the end of its rope.

Humans are not a resource.

We are not a tool.

Humans are the point.

45. Opening the Door to Possibility

Heads up: The next section is the crux of this entire rant. This manifesto exists to highlight the opportunity and the trap, the unspoken fear that has informed our culture, organized our schooling, and undermined our ability to do the work that matters.

If you only have time to read one section, please make it this one:

46. The Generous Audacity of Significance

We live in fear. Ancient fears. The fear of isolation, rejection, and physical peril. We evolved and survived because of this fear, not in spite of it. The village offers safety; challenging the chief is a risk. The unknown, just outside the light of the fire, is to be avoided.

The irony of our modern world is that the ancient fears remain, and they work against us. Industrialists saw our weakness and maximized it. The fears will sabotage our work, undermining what we say that we want. They get in the way of being fully human.

Writer's block, more meetings, memos, fear of the boss, fear of the review, fear of the market, defense of the status quo—these are symptoms of Resistance, of our ancient fears returning to paralyze us.

And with plenty on the line, the industrial manager plays along, removing all independence and simply telling us what to do, amplifying our ancient fear with a stopwatch and a pink slip.

So we buckle down and watch our dreams of significance wither.

And the modern leader might see the fear as well, responding with plenty of snacks in the kitchen, stock options, flexible hours, and the freedom to do the work we say we want to do. They mean well, but it's insufficient.

Sooner or later, we blink. We stare at the opportunity and freeze in response. Partly because we've been indoctrinated by schools and by managers to wait for the instructions and the deadline. And partly because the ancient fears are powerful and persistent.

Without tension, we wait. Without a deadline, we meander. Without urgency, it's easier to stall.

There's plenty of blame to go around, but sooner or later, it comes down to how we will respond to our opportunity to create.

The leader understands that a commitment to significance is a generous act, but it also brings apparent risk and real fear to everyone involved. Fear that's wily and subtle, clever and persistent.

When we embrace the mutual commitments of significance, we create the conditions for a shared understanding that our work, our actual work, is to dance with the fear. And dancing with fear requires significance, tension, and the belief that we're doing something that matters.



47. Searching for Kokoro

Like most important words, translating a concept like the Japanese term *kokoro* is difficult. It means heart, spirit, mind, and self. It's the inner and outer expression of who we are and what we're capable of.

Even if you don't speak Japanese, the word is likely to resonate. It's an expression of our personhood, the dignity and connection we seek in the things we do and the way we're understood. To be able to find *kokoro* in the way we spend our days is magical, and to give someone the opportunity to bring their self to work is generous and powerful.

In this moment, *kokoro* isn't simply what we want. It's also what our organizations need.

48. Washing a Car Is Significant If You Do It Right

Thomas D'Eri is the leader of Rising Tide Car Wash. They wash 150,000 cars a year, and they recently opened a new location that turned a profit after only sixty days. Part of their secret is their reputation for extraordinary customer satisfaction.

In his book *The Power of Potential*, D'Eri chronicles how his car wash hires people with autism and creates a place of safety for all of their workers. It began as a place where his brother Andrew could find a useful job, but it turned into a mission that has affected the lives of thousands of people.

It's easy to imagine a car wash as a series of machines assisted by compliant humans. It's tempting to organize around the cars, around speed, and around cost.

But significance isn't about optimizing the mechanics. It's about choosing to make a difference.

The employees at Rising Tide have their lives changed and change the lives of others in return. And so do their customers. The business is built on four principles:

- Feeling of safety
- Culture of accountability
- Clear purpose
- Customer love

Rising Tide doesn't exist to wash cars. Washing cars is merely an opportunity to make a difference for their employees and their customers. Rising Tide spends far more time and energy on training, on customer service, and on their employees than any other car wash I know of. And as a result, the customers return and the business thrives. Their retention is *five times* the industry average, and each location washes more cars and makes more money than most of its (industrial) competitors.

If all a car wash does is wash your car, you'll pick the closest, cheapest, easiest one. That's a race to the bottom.

It's almost impossible to invest too much time and energy in your frontline workers. They are your marketing team and your R&D experts. Giving them freedom, authority, and flexibility creates exactly what your customers want from you, and the loyalty of those customers pays for the commitment to your employees many times over.

The people on the front lines are people. They are your brand. And they are the point.

The song of safety comes first. It's not a compromise; it's a foundation for the rest of it. Before we can trust, iterate, or innovate, we need to know that we're going to be okay, regardless.

And then we can raise the bar and grow. Love and significance go together.

Service, for me, for us, is not a transactional act. It's not a trick we undertake to get people to give us their money. Yes, of course, great service has strategic value. Every day we go out with the belief that we need to re-earn our customer's trust and make it worthwhile for people to want to spend time and money with us. But really, service is a way of being in the world.

ARI WEINZWEIG, COFOUNDER, ZINGERMANS

49. Focusing on the Extreme User

Every organization has extremists: the employees, customers, or investors who demand more, pay more, use more, talk more, and share more. These extreme users have great needs and offer greater benefits. They are the heavy users, people with disabilities, the sneezers, and the professionals. They're the committed.

The Stanford d.school has argued that focusing on these users teaches the organization lessons that will work for all users. This is contrary to the typical industrial organization, which is happy to lose the extremists if it helps them serve the masses more easily.

Find the nerds, the motivated, and the overlooked, and figure out what they need to thrive. That exploration will reveal what others have needed as well but didn't care enough to speak up about.

When Rising Tide optimizes the workflow for autistic employees, they help their neurotypical employees thrive as well. When d.light builds a product for some of the poorest families in the world, they get better at serving people who are more privileged. When By the Way Bakery focuses on people who don't eat wheat or dairy, they end up building a kitchen and production operation that is more accessible and appealing to all of their customers.

50. Beware False Proxies

Human work is difficult to accurately measure in the short run. And so, we look for things we *can* measure and rely on those instead.

Who is loud in meetings. Who gets in early or leaves late. Who made the fewest mistakes with their code or submitted a commit to GitHub first.

These proxies, along with the usual human discrimination based on caste or gender, all lead to an ongoing and compounded series of errors.

Just because something is easy to measure doesn't mean it's accurate. Or that it matters.

Part of the challenge of leading a significant organization is getting clear about the right proxies.

Industrial management has claimed all the easy measurements, because scale and profit are all that they focus on. As technology and culture have transformed work, we can choose to look more deeply and discover what's really worth measuring, not simply convenient.

51. Becoming Resilient

Steven Pressfield taught us about Resistance—our natural, personal aversion to doing important or creative work. We'll work overtime to find an effective way to avoid being on the hook.

Significant work requires us to make commitments and to keep them. To create change. To explore the liminal space on our way from here to there. This is difficult, and when the song of safety is hard to hear, it can be challenging to move forward.

In 2022, Maurice Mitchell published a brilliant essay on building resilient organizations. Some of the traps he describes are widely applicable to any team that seeks to move forward.

There are legitimate reasons that organizations hit roadblocks. The fatigue of generations-long societal and racial injustice, combined with the indoctrination of industrialism and the unfairness of claiming a meritocracy that doesn't exist, make it challenging to trust that we'll ever have a chance to make a difference. Tokenism and lip service aren't a solution, and sometimes it's easy to abandon our efforts to make things better. In the face of a threat to our safety, it's easy to focus on reinforcing that safety.

But what choice do we have? The controlling forces of industrial capitalism and the status quo don't care much about our personal need for agency and significance, and they'll happily cheer us on if we get stuck focusing on short-term issues.

Here are some of the traps Mitchell identifies. Our teams need to be aware of them as we seek to make an impact:

MAXIMALISM

The trap: "If it's not a perfect solution to the problem, it's a betrayal of everything we stand for."

ANTI-LEADERSHIP ATTITUDES

"Because industrial managers have harmed workers in the past, we need to avoid all leadership, all management, and the constraints they bring."

ANTI-INSTITUTIONAL SENTIMENT

"Because some institutions seek to marginalize others and have surveilled their workers, all institutions are to be avoided and undermined. Don't believe any of their promises."

GLASS HOUSES

"If our organization does anything that doesn't completely fit the humanist model of creation and problem-solving, then we have no business doing anything."

THE SMALL WAR

“We can’t possibly take on big issues in the outside world because right here there are arguments to be settled.”

UNANCHORED CARE

“I came for significance and the feelings of possibility, joy, and connection it brings, and that means the organization has to take care of all of my needs.”

DISPROPORTIONALITY

“The minor discomfort the team feels right now is the most important issue to be addressed.”

SHINY OBJECTS

“Getting distracted by individual and personal inclinations is more exciting and ultimately more satisfying than the more arduous journey we signed up for in the first place.”

Simply naming the traps out loud is often enough. When we bring our humanity to work, when we move beyond being a cog, we are in danger of losing the shared focus on the change we seek to make. That’s why money-focused organizations seem so much easier to manage.

The difficult work of leadership can begin with understanding what we each bring to the challenges we’re working on. These traps lurk beneath the surface, and when they do appear we can name them, acknowledge them, and move forward. We can get back to the work we came to do.

Courage isn’t the absence of fear; it’s a willingness to do things that are so important they’re worth doing even (especially) when we’re feeling the fear. Vulnerability in conversation is the power of speaking about what you see and believe, even when you’re afraid. This is the opposite of weakness.

52. Fear Is Easy

Fear is an easy tool, but it rarely builds a resilient organization. That's because fear is most useful as a tool for compliance: "The best way to avoid being fired is to do what I say." All the boss needs to do is fire a few people to make that really clear.

The problem is that doing what the boss says doesn't scale very well, and it doesn't work in a complex, fast-changing world. All of us are smarter than any of us.

In any field where skills are valuable and switching jobs is possible, the employees you need the most have options. That's why creating a culture of fear and compliance is a dead end.

Great work creates more value than compliant work.

53. Impacts on the Future

Tom Peters shares the story of an executive who was trying to decide which of two managers to promote. He said that his method was simple: Look at the careers of all the people who used to work for each of the two managers. And then look at the careers of the people who used to work for those people . . .

The decision becomes much easier when we realize that leaders aren't managers with a fancy title. Leaders are planting the seeds for generations of impact to come, regardless of whether those people work for your organization or another one.

What happens in that conference room today will change the people who were there. Or it won't. It depends on who called the meeting.

54. Labor, Work, and Action

The philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that humans have three ways to spend their time. The labor required to feed ourselves and

survive. The work of doing a craft that we are proud of. And the action of organization and possibility.

For a century, the masses have been pushed to only do labor. But what happens to a world of laborers when the need for labor is sliced so thin, is so measured and so automated that it is no longer needed, no longer satisfying, and no longer useful?

Before it's too late, we need to refocus our efforts on work and action instead.

55. Relocating the Center

Copernicus helped us see that Earth wasn't the center of creation, the sun was. Moving to a heliocentric view of the universe changed our culture.

What's the center of your organization?

Milton Friedman argued that every organization must be profit-centric. That its only job is to maximize shareholder value.

Others have argued that it's possible to be customer-centric, using customer service as a proxy for profits. By delighting customers, they contend, we make it more likely that we'll increase profits. The hustle behind this is revealed when some companies trade customer delight for short-term profit as soon as they hit a certain size.

Significant organizations are team-centric. Their goal is to make a change happen, and to do that with and for a group of people who care about making an impact. That's why the smallest viable audience is the engine of marketing in our modern world, and why enrollment from the team is so much more valuable than being a convenient place to work.

The purpose of a beehive isn't to make honey: honey is a by-product of a healthy hive. A significant organization can please its customers and make a profit as well. But it begins by earning enrollment and then doing the work to make change happen.



56. Go Back and Get It

Sankofa is a term in Twi, a dialect of the Akan language in Ghana. It means “go back and get it.”

In this moment of upheaval, when the song of increase pushes us to find significance, we can go back to what worked long ago, to the way things were before cheap oil and industrialism changed our expectations of how we should spend our days.

We can reclaim our nature, human nature, and seek to reconnect and to make things better.

We can find and live with significance if we choose to go back and get it.

It's not convenient, obvious, or easy. But it's essential and it's already happening all around us.

57. Creating the Conditions

Dignity isn't created or awarded, but it can be recognized and amplified.

Bill Strickland, founder of the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, said, “We even have flowers in the hallway, and they're not plastic. Those are real and they're in my building every day. And now that I've given lots of speeches, we had a bunch of high school principals come and see me, and they said, ‘Mr. Strickland, what an extraordinary story and what a great school. And we were particularly touched by the

flowers and we were curious as to how the flowers got there.’ I said, ‘Well, I got in my car and I went out to the greenhouse and I bought them and I brought them back and I put them there.’ You don’t need a task force or a study group to buy flowers for your kids. What you need to know is that the children and the adults deserve flowers in their life. The cost is incidental but the gesture is huge. And so in my building, which is full of sunlight and full of flowers, we believe in hope and human possibilities.”

The school that Strickland founded in 1968 continues to make an impact, serving nearly four thousand students a year in Pittsburgh. Nearly two hundred thousand graduates have gone on to walk a more significant path because someone cared enough to let them grow.

Enrollment, mutual connection, federation, recognized dignity, and the journey of increase: together these create the conditions for a powerful, resilient way forward.

And yet we fail to see that creating these conditions is up to us, and that if we fall short in prioritizing this work, we will ultimately revert to top-down management and the cynical low expectations it brings with it.

58. The Opportunity to Contribute

The surprising thing about the bestselling *Carbon Almanac* isn’t that three hundred volunteers created it in five months.

The surprising thing is that this is surprising.

I spent a year as a volunteer coordinating this project. I didn’t write it or design it or edit it. Instead, we created a place where hundreds of people from around the world could choose to contribute. The end result is an award-winning worldwide-bestselling book, built in record time, with no important errors.

Many of the people on the team say it was the most important work experience of their careers. We created a book, but we also made a difference.

We've reached a point where we're shifting from

How do I get my employees to do what I want?

to

How do I create the conditions where the team can make the impact it desires?

This is Hannah Arendt's "inter-est." The desire of humans to have a seat at the table, a place where they can intersect, create, and produce meaning.

This is N. F. S. Grundtvig's "living word." Our desire to connect and to speak and be heard, not to simply be told what to do by some authority at a distance.

59. What People Want

Safety is first. It's impossible to grow, to connect, or to lead if we are under threat or feel the ground shifting beneath us.

Next come affiliation and status, an alternating dance of vaguely related emotions. Affiliation is being part of something, fitting in, being connected. And status is simply who eats lunch first. Our place in the order of things.

But the real desire is significance. To do something that matters. To be missed if we're gone. The universal desire to achieve dignity and be seen.

Becoming significant means making a change happen: impacting people or the world around us so they're different than if we had never been here. But to create change involves risk, the risk of living in possibility, and of the threat of failure (or success).

When confronting the possibility of change, tension arises. Tension is the feeling of wanting to be in two places at once. Often that's the

place of safety, where we know everything will be as it was, versus the place of significance, where we can increase our affiliation and increase or maintain our status.

Tension is not something to avoid. You can't walk outside on a sunny day without casting a shadow, and you cannot create significance without encountering tension.

The partner of tension is enrollment. The desire to be right here, right now. Voluntary enlistment in the cause, not for money but for emotional and cultural benefit.

Our job as leaders (as opposed to industrial managers) thus becomes clear. Instead of threats and scarcity, and instead of compliance and control, we have the opportunity to help people become significant. We can establish a foundation of safety and then build a culture of affiliation and status, where forward motion is a benefit in itself—even more than the pay that's on offer.

Money doesn't motivate us enough to create the magic a team needs. That sort of work comes from intrinsic, not extrinsic forces.

60. Innovation Is a Form of Resilience

The Canadian Museum of History has a traditional bark canoe in its collection. At about thirty feet long, it could carry more than six thousand pounds of people and gear and could cover more than thirty miles in a day.

It's difficult to tell a fairly new bark canoe from an ancient one, but each is unique. Built from many natural materials, there's no standard length, width, weight, or shape, because the wood and the maker determine the outcome, not a set of plans.

This is precisely how we dance with a customer, with a new technology, or with new resource constraints. Cookie cutters are great for cookies, not for people.

The canoe was rarely made by a single person. Instead, it was the work of a clan, a family, or a village. Each contributor actually contributed—the job they did was theirs to do, the result of their interactions with their teammates and the materials themselves.

It was clear to each participant that their part must engage with the work of everyone else, but no one told anyone precisely what to do. They didn't have to: their mutual engagement created a boat with more resilience, one that represented the materials and the people involved in its creation.

It's our boat, not my boat.

*If we come together and hold hands and support each other,
we'll be much stronger.*

TODD LABRADOR, MASTER CANOE BUILDER

61. The Places In Between

Industrial managers tell us to be **HERE**, precisely where they say and when they say it. Here doing this work, this predictable, measurable, specific work.

But leaders seek to help us get over *there*. It might not work, it might not be precisely what we expected, but that's where we're going.

The limen is the stone on the threshold of a doorway. Susan Beaumont calls the in-between places the journey of liminal leadership. It's exciting, but it's filled with shadows and light, with bumps and with bridges.

62. And We Linger

Ed Catmull, cofounder of Pixar, reminds us, “There is a sweet spot between the known and the unknown where originality happens; the key is to be able to linger there without panicking.”

If anything but HERE is seen as incorrect, dangerous, or momentary, it’s difficult to build an organization set on significance. Because significant organizations spend most of their time and energy not being where they were yesterday. In fact, the uncertainty and dislocation are the point, not a temporary inconvenience.

A significant job requires us to be in two places at once. Our work is to acknowledge the present situation while working hard to change the circumstances and status of those we serve.

63. Golf or Surfing?

“Everything will be okay once we get through this” is a common enough sentiment. But perhaps it’s more useful to remind ourselves “everything is okay now.” If we define that liminal state as normal, and normal as okay, well, here we are.

Every golf scorecard has a map of the course on the back. Moving the hole placement is a big deal, accompanied by meetings and oversight. A big factor in planning play is whether or not it rained last week.

On the other hand, every wave a surfer sees is the first and last of its kind. It has never happened before and will never happen again.

Golf is an endless, asymptotic journey toward elusive perfection.

Surfing, on the other hand, is about wayfinding. A surf park with a repeated wave might be useful for training, but it’s not surfing. Surfing is the liminal work of transition.

It’s hard to surf with a putter.

64. Beware the Trickster

The liminal contains more than change and uncertainty. It is also filled with shadows and dead ends. For this reason, it can attract people who aren't looking for significance, but precisely the opposite. Susan Beaumont warns us to look out for the tricksters:

"Dangerous figures who look like charismatic leaders but are incapable of living well in community. Tricksters promote confusion and chaos by sowing discord. The trickster is masterful at pitting people against one another. People confuse the energy of the trickster with leadership direction. Tricksters cannot trust or be trusted. They are incapable of giving and sharing or participating well in a democratic process. Their behaviors are almost always self-serving, and they lack deep commitments to the welfare of the organization."

Enrollment in the journey, together with an embrace of the culture and structures of the organization, becomes ever more critical as the scale and impact of the work increase.

65. The Lintel and the Limen

While the limen is the stone on the threshold, the one we are lingering on, the lintel goes across the top of the doorway, supporting the roof overhead.

Sometimes, we fear that we'll bump our heads as we go through.

While the trickster is there for the head bumping, the rest of us are often unsure, afraid to leap too high, try too hard, or seek out a wave we can't handle.

The significant leader knows this, and works to make the journey not only possible, but attractive enough for people to eagerly embrace.

What are we asking folks to do? At Netflix, Reed Hastings didn't ask each employee to reinvent how the entire film industry would work. Instead, he and his team broke the problem into many smaller

components, and then different groups claimed responsibility for each piece.

Each element of the project was insanely difficult, challenging the structure of a sclerotic industry, happily stuck in its ways, and also the laws of physics, the structure of the internet, and the giants of telecom.

No one could have built the Netflix streaming system alone. But together, as you can see any night of the week, it was a doable project.

The leader doesn't have to be able to do every element of the project; they simply need to figure out how to assemble a team that does.

66. Significant Work Is Project Work

A job that is repetitive, easily measured, and consistent lends itself to industrialization. The pressure is on to make it cheap.

But when we think of the important moments in our work life, we think of projects.

A beginning, filled with possibility. A middle, with challenges and insights. And an ending, bittersweet, with thoughts of what we did and who we did it with, along with ideas on how to do it better next time.

This can be treating a patient, putting a new dish on the menu, or launching a new company. The scale isn't as important as the rhythm.

We need the stability that day-to-day consistency can bring. But we find significance in the projects, large and small.

67. The Work to Be Done

If the work can be queued up, processed in a cookie-cutter fashion, and inspected for defects, then it benefits from industrial management.

But if the work involves novelty, innovation, discernment, judgment, or care, then industrial management is a poor substitute for enrollment, skill, and leadership.

What sort of work do you need done?

What we make isn't widgets: we make decisions.

And the rate of decision-making continues to increase. It increases because our response time has gone down, as has the cycle rate of our competitors. Everyone is in a sprint, exponentially increasing the rate we run at.

Instead of a weekly meeting, we have a Slack post that sits for a whole three minutes before someone grabs it and responds. And once we respond, our customer or competitor responds in turn, creating demand for another decision.

A creative studio might produce thousands of different designs, sold to billions of people, competing with thousands of other design companies. Each node in the network, each tick of the clock, each person on the thread leads to a new decision.

An autocratic, centralized organization cannot possibly keep up.

Open systems that turn into networks of enrolled leaders will always outperform the FIFO inbox.

68. Kathrin Jansen Saved the World

Virologist Paul Offit once said, "People who think pharmaceutical companies are evil should spend time with people like Kathrin Jansen."

Perhaps a billion humans survived the pandemic because of the work that Jansen led. Her team of 650 researchers, together with teams in Europe, South America, Asia, and Africa, worked together

to create a vaccine for Covid in a matter of months. This is years faster than any other vaccine has ever been created.

“She is fearless at taking on any project that she thinks is important, and is not afraid to plunge in and figure out what needs to be done,” Edward Scolnick, former head of research at Merck, said. “In industry, that is not always the case, because many projects fail and people in that setting worry about their job. Whether they’ll be demoted, fired, passed over. She just doesn’t think about that.”

Jansen previously helped create the bestselling vaccine in the world, Prevnar 13, which prevents respiratory illness in children and the elderly. She also persisted (in the face of much skepticism) to lead the team that developed the Gardasil HPV vaccine, which will end up saving millions from cancer.

This isn’t the work of a lone scientist, an isolated genius in her lab. Instead, Jansen succeeds where others have failed by connecting her team, protecting them from politics, demanding rigorous, high-quality data, and establishing commitments and enrollment.

Every vaccine she has worked on has faced cancellation when the results didn’t seem promising. Many of them ultimately failed.

“When you’re really convinced about something and you have the intuition that you may be on the right track,” she wrote, “I think it’s really important to stick to your guns.”

Take responsibility and give away credit. Özlem Türeci and Ugur Sahin are mRNA pioneers, working at a company that wasn’t part of Pfizer. They knew when they reached out to Jansen that credit wasn’t going to be an issue, that collaboration was possible.

A few weeks later, when the early variations of the vaccine were ready for testing, Dr. Mark Mulligan at NYU volunteered his facility to help bring the work to public testing. He said, “I’ve worked on HIV/AIDS vaccines, Zika, Ebola—flu pandemic vaccines. So this is really the moment for us to jump in and say, ‘Okay, let’s do it. Let’s try to be part of the solution.’ ”

In the words of Jansen, “We can call it a miracle. But a miracle always has a sense of it just happened. It didn’t just happen. Right? It was something that was deliberate.”

69. “My Stomach Doesn’t Know That My Pocket Is Empty”

Sathya Raghu Mokkapati grew up in South India. One day, he passed a man sitting by the bank of a river, eating mud. Alarmed, he asked the man why he was doing that.

The farmer’s crops had failed. As a smallholder farmer (most farmers on Earth have only enough land to feed themselves—about three football fields’ worth of acreage), that meant he and his family would go hungry.

That encounter led Mokkapati on a journey to do something about it. It took the cooperation of researchers in six countries, along with the inputs and innovations of dozens of farmers in India, together with funders in New York, San Francisco, and around the world.

Together, they created Kheyti, a simple, efficient greenhouse. The results are astonishing. Plants in their greenhouse require 98 percent less water. The yield is seven times higher. Farmers’ incomes double, and the cost is surprisingly low. A proven new technology, easy to scale.

We give too much credit to the solo genius inventor when what actually changes the world are groups of people connected around significant projects.

Kheyti doesn’t involve a technical breakthrough. It’s a systems breakthrough—the way inputs and outputs, farmers and crops, providers and customers choose to work together.

The hard work was establishing the right network, coordinating their goals, and figuring out when to say “Yes” or “Let’s try again.”

Systems work is people work.

70. James Daunt Saved the Bookstore

Except he didn't. Not alone.

First he saved Waterstones, one of the biggest chains in the UK. And now he's saving Barnes & Noble. In 2022, for the first time in years, the chain is opening new stores, and sales of books are up.

The secret?

"Staff are now in control of their own shops," he said. "Hopefully they're enjoying their work more. They're creating something very different in each store."

He created the conditions for people who care to do work that they're proud of. He turned down publisher bribes and co-op money and challenged employees who loved books to choose and promote books they loved.

This is an example of *stigmergy*. Not self-organization, but an organization that hears itself, leads together, and creates resilience by embracing the edges, not simply the center.

Bees aren't self-organizing. They're simply organized, aware of what the other bees are doing and each bee's role in the journey of the hive. They have a culture of peer-to-peer awareness, not top-down authority. The same is true of all resilient, decentralized human organizations.

It sounds obvious, but it's rare, because it means giving up the feeling of control. Of course, controlling a chain of stores that are failing isn't that fun anyway.

71. Where Does the Water Go?

When paddling a canoe, you'll see little whirlpools as the paddle moves backward and the canoe advances.

So when you push the water back, where does it go?

The answer is not as simple as it seems. The water can't go backward. It can't go backward because that would mean that your

paddle pushes this water, which pushes that water, which pushes the other water all the way to the shore. Each stroke would have to move fifty thousand pounds of water.

In fact, the water doesn't go much of anywhere at all.

We move.

The water is a heavy substance, practically a solid mass. We use the water to leverage ourselves and our boat forward.

We don't change the lake that much. The lake responds to our effort by changing us.

72. Filling In the Blanks

When Joni Mitchell was recording her breakthrough *Mingus* album, she worked with Jaco Pastorius and Herbie Hancock. Herbie asked Jaco if they were supposed to play the music as written.

"She wants you to paint. That's something you can do, Herbie. *Paint.*"

Jaco and Herbie brought genius to that record. And Joni brought the guts to provide large blanks for them to paint.

The job of a bandleader is to find great musicians. And if you want to be a great musician, it pays to find a bandleader who will let you paint.

The Commitments

It is the secret fear that we are unlovable that isolates us, but it is only because we are isolated that we think we are unlovable.

GABRIELLE ZEVIN

73. The New Way of Work Is Mutual

A significant organization needs employees who are enrolled in the journey and willing to do this sort of work. In turn, employees who are willing to do this sort of work need an organization that won't revert to an industrial management mindset, one without regard for the people who built it.

The Catch-22 is obvious. You can't have one without the other, but everyone hesitates to go first.

Given that the number of people seeking to make a commitment is far greater than the number of organizations willing to enable those commitments, it seems to me that the organization needs to go first. To not only state the commitments, but to honor them when it's difficult to do so. Especially then.

At the same time, the employees of the organization need to embrace the journey. A thousand little compromises don't feel like much one at a time, but they are a one-way trip to the other way of doing things. Agency always comes with responsibility.

A great restaurant kitchen doesn't need a chef inspecting every dish and every ingredient. The team is enrolled in owning the quality of what is served. A kitchen run by a control freak might burn brighter for a bit, but it will inevitably burn out. Either the committed and skilled staff will find a kitchen that respects them, or they will succumb to micromanagement and eventually stop caring.

Work dissatisfaction is based on a lie. Workers are promised something that used to be delivered—a sense of purpose—but that no longer exists in most organizations.

When we rebuild work around significance, we change the promise. We require bosses to produce a different set of rules, and

we invite workers to bring different expectations, energy, and commitment to their jobs.

Some jobs, many of them, will remain industrial. There will always be jobs (and organizations) that do work that can only be accomplished via management and top-down compliance. They're not going to go away.

But we shouldn't pretend that all jobs need to be this way, nor should we encourage people to take an industrial job believing that it will serve their soul.

Let's get real or let's not play.

74. The Significance Commitments

- We're here to make change happen
- We are acting with intention
- Dignity is worth investing in
- Tension is not the same as stress
- Mistakes are the way forward
- Take responsibility, give credit
- Criticize the work, not the worker
- Turnover is okay
- Mutual respect is expected
- Do the reading
- Get to vs. have to
- Standards instead of obedience
- Show your work

- Make it better
- Celebrate real skills

75. We're Here to Make Change Happen

If there's to be a new product, an announcement, or even a meeting, we must be clear about why.

Our job is to create a change, to make things better, to show up with something that was worth the effort it took to create. Profit may be a by-product of our work, but it's not the only way we measure it.

Name the change. Be clear about who and why and how.

Because change is the metric, we need to acknowledge the "who." We cannot (and don't even want to) change everyone, so "Who is it for?" is a question we're comfortable asking.

If we keep measuring the wrong things, we'll keep getting the things we don't want.

76. We Are Acting with Intention

Instead of "I'm just doing my job" or "Is this what the boss wants?," we are committed to being intentional about our decisions, our metrics, and our interactions.

Each meeting should last exactly as long as it takes to deliver on the intention of the meeting. And if a meeting doesn't have an intention, it should be canceled.

Behavior that harms the mission of the organization is likely to disappear if we're required to announce our intentions.

77. Dignity Is Worth Investing In

More than a raise, people seek a place to belong. A place to see and be seen, to do their work in a way they're proud of.

When a CEO exercises power for kicks, when an office bully reinforces status roles for selfish reasons, when the work is depersonalized, we strip people of their dignity.

And then significance shrivels and dies.

Free-market, profit-seeking, neoliberal industrialists embrace brutality in service of a simple metric. They argue that the marketplace ends up serving more people when those who stand in the way of market forces are ignored or replaced. But this analysis misses the fundamental value of human commitment and contribution.

When people feel seen and are given the chance to make a difference, they often do.

Supporting human dignity is more than a moral obligation. It's also a competitive advantage.

78. Tension Is Not the Same as Stress

Stress is the unhappy feeling of wanting two things at the same time. To stay and to go. To speak up and to shrink back. To get *this* done and to get *that* done. When we're stressed, our brains undermine our well-being and we're unlikely to find flow, joy, or significance.

But tension? Tension is the feeling that leads to forward motion. Tension is a symptom of Pressfield's Resistance. Tension is a countdown, a deadline, or a budget. Tension is the process of finding an answer to a riddle or the question that opens up a possibility.

We know how to relieve tension. We can do it with reassurance, time, and insulation. We can pamper our guests, ease up on our requirements, or settle for average.

But tension always accompanies change, and change is the hallmark of significance.

The tension is good. It's a sign we're onto something.
And tension is a tool. We can use it to make change happen.

79. Mistakes Are the Way Forward

We make decisions. We find problems and solve them. We ship the work and make change happen.

None of this is preordained, none of it is in the manual, and none of it has been done before.

That's precisely why it's valuable.

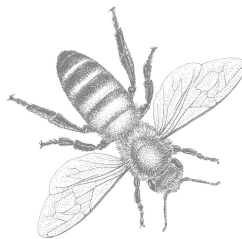
Pathfinding is at the core of creating with significance, and finding the path is largely the work of finding non-paths until the path is evident.

That doesn't mean that we're sloppy. In fact, it's precisely the opposite. There's a rigor to this exploration, a nonrandom way to explore the possible.

And that doesn't mean we ship junk. We can make mistakes together, in private often, testing and measuring and improving.

And then we can ship the work. Work we're proud of. Deliver it to people who care and begin again.

If you're not doing things that don't work, you're not trying hard enough.



AN ASIDE ABOUT THE SCOUT BEES

When a hive swarms, more than ten thousand bees will gather in a tight ball in a tree. They now have about three days (depending on the weather) to find a hollow tree or other suitable dwelling to house a new hive.

As soon as the swarm lands, hundreds of the bees are sent to scout. They can cover about thirty square miles of territory in an afternoon.

Each scout bee visits just a few locations until they find one worth bringing back to the colony. The scout bee will return and dance for the other bees, indicating by wagging how excited she is about the particular site, along with precise instructions as to where it's located.

Within minutes, several other bees will visit the site and come back with their opinions.

After a day or two, the scouts will have visited hundreds of sites. But no scout will have visited all of them. And then the hive, in unison, will unanimously select a site, leave the tree in a fast-moving swarm, and close in.

Almost all the scouts visited sites that weren't ideal and weren't chosen. But none of them made an unforgivable mistake. In fact, it was all of their apparently wasted visits that led to the hive's survival.

And the hive's decision, while unanimous, might not have been perfect. But perfect isn't the goal. The goal is to find a good hive in the time that's available.

80. Take Responsibility, Give Credit

The forces behind the coercion and control of industrial work revel in the org chart and formal authority.

You manage people by telling them what to do, and you can tell them what to do because your boss gave you the authority to do so.

But the org chart is brittle. And it can create three problems:

1. People who are just doing their job might end up doing horrible things. When we ask employees to suspend their own judgment

and simply do what the boss says, then we're relying on one person with power to have control over others.

2. The deniability of "just following orders" isn't always about committing a crime, though. It can be an airplane stranded on the runway for hours, with little attention paid to passengers, or a company that simply waits, quietly, for the manager to tell them what to do.
3. Centralized decision-making is usually slow and ineffective when it's time to offer action and solutions to local, decentralized customer needs, particularly in fast-moving environments. If employees are unable to act without direction, they won't act without direction.

The alternative is to create a culture built around taking responsibility instead. Most organizations are happy to offer responsibility to anyone willing to take it, but we all need to learn to do a better job of encouraging leadership and positive action, regardless of title or org chart tier.

And the companion to taking responsibility is relentlessly giving away credit. When we offer others a chance to shine, they're more likely to connect, to enroll in the journey, and to join in the next chance they have to do so.

81. Criticize the Work, Not the Worker

It's easy to say, and surprisingly difficult to do.

From the time we are toddlers, criticism is personalized. It takes patience and wisdom to separate the project in front of us from the person who created it, and the shortcut of personal attacks is far too common. As a result, we hesitate to ship the work, to respond to the

work of others, and most of all, to seek out more feedback. Feedback feels like criticism, and criticism feels fatal.

The thing is, feedback is a gift. Feedback transformed into generous and useful criticism is priceless.

Organizations that understand how to improve the work without undermining the worker create more value.

In a traditional work setting, feedback and criticism are a threat. No wonder we fear the boss, the weekly check-in, and the reaction in the meeting! If criticism is one step short of getting fired (or simply feeling as though we might), then avoiding criticism is a natural instinct.

We're indoctrinated early and often to actively avoid feedback. Keep your head down and you'll be fine.

But the feedback that actually matters is in the marketplace. If we make something that works for our customers, we get the chance to do it again.

Driving a car without feedback is impossible. You need to feel the road, see the curb, realize that you've crossed the double yellow line.

And the same is true for the work of making change on behalf of others. Feedback—from the marketplace and from our coworkers—is the only way to get better.

But useful feedback is not the same as personal criticism. We care about the change that's produced, not who made the work.

82. Turnover Is Okay

Industrialists have long worked to fight turnover. They don't want employees to seek a better job, to move on to other projects, or even to believe they have the ability to ask for more. They're okay with layoffs when it's up to them. But if someone, a rising star especially, leaves on their own accord, this threatens their power.

In addition to a loss of control, when someone leaves, the boss sees all the training and expertise walk out the door.

A moral injunction against turnover increases the power of the industrial manager, giving them more leverage and influence when they seek compliance.

So we end up creating a culture where a worker has to explain why they have too many jobs on their resume. Where the imperious boss can criticize employees at will, but no employee is expected to speak up in their colleagues' (or their own) defense.

But the gig economy has changed this. When the industrial behemoths broke the social contract and stopped offering long-term employment, employees responded by taking matters into their own hands. Freelancers, gig workers, and temps have discovered that they can weave together a career that isn't tethered to the whims of one boss.

If significance requires mutual enrollment in the journey, if both workers and bosses need to be actively engaged in producing value, then turnover is actually essential.

If this bus isn't going where you want to go, today is a great time to get off.

The alternative is either disgruntled employees or a culture of make-work, turf protection, and sticking around.

A worldwide pandemic reminded all of us that it's all a project, every day is precious, and we only get tomorrow one time.

If we're already living in a gig culture, it's productive to embrace it. We can say to our team, "Join us if it works for you, leave us when it doesn't. And if you leave with more knowledge than when you came, it's a symptom that we did well together."

Encouraging employees to keep their LinkedIn profiles and resumes up to date ensures that they are part of the team voluntarily, not because they believe they have no options.

83. Mutual Respect Is Expected

Respect is not the exception. It's not reserved for high performers. It doesn't get suspended when there's a tough quarter or a shipping emergency.

Bullies aren't welcome because bullying is the killer of connection.

Everyone on the team, every stakeholder, every customer, even every difficult customer gets the benefit of the doubt. Every human we interact with begins with the expectation that they are worthy of our respect. And the inverse is true as well: every member of the team is entitled to be respected by those we choose to work with.

When a customer or an investor or a boss chooses to ignore this principle, they've chosen to exclude themselves from our song of significance.

An institution can't serve or collaborate with those who refuse to offer respect in reciprocity.

Significance is a choice. And it's built on respect.

84. Get to vs. Have to

In 2022, after a year of planning, Justin Fornal did something extraordinary.

He threw himself into water that was barely 33 degrees Fahrenheit and swam more than seven miles across the Nares Strait, between Canada and Greenland.

His food had rotted on the trip there. His only lifeguard, paddling a folding kayak, nearly capsized due to the proximity of large ice caps. His wet suit was frozen and the ice floes were interfering with every stroke.

And yet he swam.

Not because it was his job, but because it was his choice.

The opportunity of significant work is to set out because we can, not because we're ordered to. To enroll in the journey and to eagerly

take responsibility for what happens next.

When a regime of obedience, compliance, and “have to” steps in, our reasons for caring evaporate. Instead, we’re defensively trying to do the minimum to avoid rebuke, not leaning into what might be possible.

85. Standards Instead of Obedience

It’s unlikely that we can consistently create significant work without standards. We need consistent, measurable, external benchmarks of quality. We can establish expectations for our work and meet them.

But that’s not the same as obedience. Obedience is personal, status-driven, and inconsistent. Obedience is an end unto itself, a way for the boss to ensure that the employees are doing everything they are told, regardless of whether it matters.

When we do the work when the boss isn’t looking, we’re adhering to standards. But if our behavior changes when we’re under surveillance, that’s simply because we’ve been harassed into tolerating the performance of obedience.

Obedience is about the passion or power of the manager. Standards revolve around the values of the institution.

Following your passion is a luxury. Following your values is a necessity.

Passion is a fickle magnet: it pulls you toward your current interests. Values are a steady compass: they point you toward a future purpose.

Passion brings immediate joy. Values provide lasting meaning.

86. Do the Reading

If you're not making decisions, there's little point in understanding the systems, inputs, and leverage points involved in your job. You can simply do what you're told.

Naive ignorance can be a badge of honor for the compliant employee. "They don't pay me to think."

There are benefits to careful ignorance. After all, if you're not thinking, then you have no real responsibility for your actions.

In a significant organization, though, each person is a vital component, adding human insight, care, and commitment to the work at hand. In this environment, there's no room for someone who is simply compliant.

As we make change, the rules are altered and the changes compound. A key part of the work is to do the reading and to understand the forces involved. Not simply reading a book, but understanding what others are concerned about. It's all been documented, shared, and analyzed.

At Automattic, the home of WordPress, founder Matt Mullenweg says that they have a "reading and writing" culture. A completely distributed workforce, very few meetings, and very little private 1:1 email.

Instead, you're expected to understand what has come before, to read the thread, to contribute to the written conversations, and to make decisions.

In return, you get agency, respect, and significance.

87. Show Your Work

The step after doing the reading is showing your work. Work for others to read and learn from.

During the legendary two decades when Hewlett-Packard went from two men in a garage to a tech leader, the standard protocol was: leave your work and your notebooks open on your desk when you depart for the evening.

Your opinion isn't nearly as important as how you came to your decision. Your status in the hierarchy doesn't matter if you can't show us your work.

By clearly stating our intentions, methods, and measurements, it may seem like we open ourselves up to criticism. Actually, we're holding our work up for improvement, which couldn't be more different. When your work improves, so does your reputation—and with it, your options and your status.

We don't get on an airplane or drive over a bridge simply because someone in power assured us it was safe. We happily do it because the culture of engineering requires that engineers share their work and the way they did it.

If you're building something, why avoid the chance to build it better?

88. Make It Better

Studies show that when we ask people, anywhere in the world, "How could this be different?" more than 90 percent of respondents will suggest something to make it better.

It's in our nature to improve things. Regardless of whether we designed them ourselves, or perhaps precisely because we didn't design them ourselves.

There are three simple steps:

- Do the reading

- Ship the improvement
- Show your work

Once we're clear about what the design is for, we have a chance to make it better. Not by sharing our opinion, not by exercising our status in the hierarchy, but by showing ways to objectively improve existing work.

That's how incremental chains of improvement begin and continue. If you find a piece of litter, pick it up. Because you can.

89. Celebrate Real Skills

We persist in hiring and training as if we're running a bowling squad, as if easily measured skills are all that matter.

What causes successful organizations to fail? What makes stocks fade, innovations slow, customers jump ship?

We can agree that certain skills are essential. That hiring coders who can't code, salespeople who can't sell, or architects who can't design is a waste. But these skills—let's call them vocational skills—have become the backbone of the recruitment process.

But how do you explain that similar organizations, with similarly vocationally skilled people, find themselves with very different outcomes?

Most of the textbooks that students experience and the tests they take are about vocational skills, the checkboxes that have to be checked to get a job. By misdefining "vocational" and focusing on these allegedly essential skills, we've diminished the value of the other skills that matter.

We give too little respect to the other skills when we call them "soft" and imply that they're optional.

What actually separates thriving organizations from struggling ones are the difficult-to-measure attitudes, processes, and

perceptions of the people who do the work.

Culture defeats strategy, every time. Measurable skills without productive attitudes aren't worth much.

And yet . . .

Organizations spend a ton of time measuring the vocational skills because they can. Because there's a hundred years of history. And mostly because it's safe. It's not personal, it's business.

We know how to measure typing speed. We have a lot more trouble measuring passion or commitment.

Organizations give feedback on vocational skill output daily and save the other stuff for the annual review, if they measure it at all.

And organizations hire and fire based on vocational skill output all the time, but they practically need an act of the board to get rid of a negative thinker, a bully, or a sloth (if he's good at something measurable).

If you're wondering why the opportunities you seek aren't materializing, it might be worth looking hard not at the skills that are easy to measure, but at the ones that are important to have.

Let's Get Real

New Skills for a New Way of Work

You got the gift, but it looks like you're waiting for something.

THE ORACLE

90. Real Skills Are a Way Forward

If an employee at your organization took home a brand-new laptop every day, you'd have them arrested or at least fired. If your bookkeeper were embezzling money every month, you'd do the same thing.

But when an employee demoralizes the entire team by undermining a project, or when a team member checks out and doesn't pull his weight, or when a bully causes future stars to quit the organization—too often we shrug and point out that this person has tenure, or key vocational skills, or really isn't so bad.

But they're stealing from us.

The "us" is the key word.

Not from the boss, not from the company. From us, together.

Once we agree to get real, then the work changes. It begins by celebrating, amplifying, and rewarding real skills as a standard for all.

91. What Can We Teach?

James Clear writes about László Polgár, who taught all three of his daughters to play chess at the highest level. Clearly, chess is a skill, not simply a talent that someone is born with.

Vocational skills *can* be taught: you're not born knowing engineering or copywriting or even graphic design, therefore they must be something we can teach. But we let ourselves off the hook when it comes to decision-making, eager participation, dancing with fear, speaking with authority, working in teams, seeing the truth,

speaking the truth, inspiring others, doing more than we're asked, caring, and being willing to change things.

We underinvest in this training, fearful that these things are innate and can't be taught. Perhaps they're talents. And so we downplay them, calling them *soft skills*, making it easy for us to move on to something seemingly more urgent.

At scale, organizations pay less attention to soft skills when hiring because we've persuaded ourselves that vocational skills are impersonal and easier to measure. If it's easier to test for, it seems more important when selecting our team.

And we fire slowly (and retrain rarely) when these skills are missing, because we're worried about stepping on toes, being called out for getting personal, or possibly wasting time on a lost cause.

But these skills can all be learned, as obvious skills like chess or typing can be learned. We learn them accidentally, by osmosis, by the collisions we have with teachers, parents, bosses, and the world. Even though they're more difficult to measure, that doesn't mean we can't improve them, can't practice them, or can't change the way we do our work.

Of course we can. Let's stop calling them soft.

They're interpersonal skills. Leadership skills. The skills of charisma and diligence and contribution. But these modifiers, while accurate, somehow edge them away from the vocational skills, the skills that we actually hire for, the skills we measure a graduate degree on.

So let's uncomfortably call them *real skills* instead.

Real because they work, because they're at the heart of what we need today.

Real because even if you've got the vocational skills, you're no help to us without these human skills, the things that we can't write down or program a computer to do.

Real skills can't replace vocational skills, of course. What they can do is amplify the things you've already been measuring.

Imagine a team member with all the traditional vocational skills: productive, skilled, experienced. A resume that can prove it.

That's a fine baseline.

Now add to it. Perceptive, charismatic, driven, focused, goal-setting, inspiring, and motivated. Generous, empathic, and consistent. A deep listener, with patience.

What happens to your organization when someone like that joins your team?

92. Work to Be Done

Writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, Lou Solomon reports that 69 percent of managers are uncomfortable communicating with their employees. I'd guess that many of the other 31 percent are lying.

Communicating with employees is uncomfortable because we've built systems of compliance and dominance that make it difficult. We ask people to leave their humanity at the door, then use authority to change behavior. We overlay corporate greed and short-term thinking on a human desire to create work that matters.

How do we build people-centric organizations while also accepting the fact that two thirds of our managers (presumably well paid, well trained, and integral to our success) are so uncomfortable doing an essential part of their job that they admitted it to a stranger?

In a recent survey, the Graduate Management Admission Council reported that although MBAs were strong in analytical aptitude, quantitative expertise, and information-gathering ability, they were sorely lacking in other critical areas that employers find equally attractive: strategic thinking, written and oral communication, leadership, and adaptability.

Are these mutually exclusive? Must we trade one for the other?

The foundation of all real skills is this one: the confidence and permission to talk to one another. Not to manage, belittle, intimidate,

or control. Simply to seek to be understood, and to do the work to understand.

Once people understand, they can join the journey or not. They can enroll or walk away.

But first we should be clear about the work to be done, and how we will interact around it.

93. The Power of a Confident Coach

The coaching mindset, as author Michael Bungay Stanier points out, is one of mutual trust and direct communication.

A confident coach doesn't worry about losing a client, athlete, or student. They focus on serving them with clarity and encouragement. They create moments of discomfort in service of a lifetime of empowerment and possibility.

An effective career coach has a tremendous advantage over most managers. That's because their client's engagement is voluntary. The client signed up for coaching, is paying for coaching, and is showing up because they want to accomplish something.

This receptive posture is available to anyone who chooses to lead. The coach isn't doing the work, the client is. It isn't easy, but it's simple. Enrollment in the process of development opens the door for change to happen.

Companies like Shopify and Automattic have normalized coaching by making it part of the job. As long as the emotional enrollment is there, the trust will follow.

We don't need a coach as much as we need to want to be coached.

94. Harry Brighthouse Is Calling on You

He's a professor of philosophy, and his classes are transformative.

Decades ago, a student told him that she was enrolling in law school. The reason? Because, as we see in the first scene of the movie *The Paper Chase*, the professors cold call on the students. Without warning, at any time, any student can be called upon to speak.

His student was attracted to this because it meant that in every class, everyone was prepared, everyone was listening, and everyone was actually part of the classroom experience. As a result, she'd learn more. She wanted to be in a room with people who wanted to be in the room.

From that inspiration, Brighthouse decided to incorporate cold calling (which he calls "warm calling") into his small-group undergraduate classes.

His cold calling is not a surprise or a threat or a hack.

It's a feature. It's part of the reason to take the class. Because you have a chance to be surrounded by people who are as motivated and connected as you seek to be.

95. Autocratic Bullying Is Not Enrollment

Al Dunlap got great stock results by cutting staff and driving people relentlessly. Until he didn't.

Jack Welch was a darling of Wall Street, famously firing 10 percent of every executive group every year while manipulating the stock price decade after decade. He claimed he was always firing the "worst performers," but he was actually creating a culture of fear. After he left GE, the company was a husk of its former self, and it soon began to fade away.

Survivor's relief rarely leads to powerful innovation and resilience. It's simply a shortcut that only works when the world stays the same. "The beatings will continue until morale improves" has never been a useful slogan.

Telling people what to do is not the same as communicating together to build resilient, powerful systems.

96. Leadership and Dissent

How many people yelling “Fire!” will ruin your experience at the movies?

There’s no requirement to issue a bullhorn to every person who shows up in your community. Trolls don’t need to be amplified.

That doesn’t mean that feedback can’t exist. In fact, significance requires that leaders and the entire community create the conditions for better, and better comes from feedback.

The opportunity is to be really clear about the goal. If you say “This bus is headed for Oxford,” then the discussion is open for people to suggest that you missed the exit, that you’re driving on the wrong side of the road, or that you’re running behind.

There isn’t, however, any time or room for someone to whine and complain about the fact that we’re going to Oxford. The sign is clear, the promise is specific. Get real or don’t play.

In direct contrast to this, an autocratic leader isn’t open to thoughts on how to get to the destination; they’re simply looking for compliance and obedience.

A significant organization is aligned in culture and in goals, and the result is that all of us end up getting further and faster than any of us could on our own.

97. Professionals Say No

Task-oriented labor is indoctrinated to simply ask for details. Get it done, fast and cheap.

A professional, though, brings insight and reputation to the work. If they’re not speaking up, then they’ve sacrificed the very expertise

and authority they worked so hard to earn. When a professional disagrees, alters the plan, or refuses to go along, they are doing the truly hard work of being a professional.

If we're asking our leaders to speak clearly and to describe the road ahead, we have to repay their candor by enrolling in the journey or choosing to stand aside.

98. The Risk of Listening

Our goal in making change with our work is to help our customers and coworkers become what they seek. This requires empathy.

The empathy to realize that others don't know what we know, want what we want, or see what we see.

And the empathy to understand that the work we do isn't for us, it's for someone else.

It's possible for a middle-aged man to work at a pantyhose company, for an adult to design toys for toddlers, and for an oncologist in perfect health to help a cancer patient.

We can speak and listen to one another. We can learn about the impacts we make and the changes we produce. Of course, this feels risky. It puts us on the hook, makes the work real, and highlights the gap between what we expected and what we've actually done.

Our relationships are a result of our ability to listen. And when we listen, we earn trust and create connection. But only if we care enough to dance with our fear.

When we listen, we enter into a relationship—an agreement that we bind ourselves to. In this relationship, we learn how to live in reciprocal respect with all that surrounds us, both the seen and the unseen. We must live in a state of active relationship, not only taking but also giving back. This giving

back may take literal form or manifest itself in observing, learning, and gently interacting. If we listen, those stories are always available to us. All those around us—the plants, animals, trees, water, air—are our patient and willing teachers. We must remain open to this knowledge that is so willingly shared with us so long as we listen.

CHRISTINE LUCKASAVITCH, ALGONQUIN AND MIXED SETTLER EDUCATOR

99. Clarity and the Words Unsaid

Sonder is the name for a realization that eventually hits each of us: other people have noise in their heads like we have noise in our heads.

And one way we deal with *our* noise is in the words we choose to say (or don't say). And one way that people deal with *their* noise is by how they choose to hear the words we say.

We think we're communicating, but we're really not.

Often, significant work requires us to develop more empathy than we might be comfortable with. Our understanding might not be their understanding.

We can acknowledge that others didn't hear what we said the way we said it. Or realize that perhaps the person we're engaging with said something other than the words we're sure were uttered.

Part of the work of getting real is to acknowledge that we're dancing with humans, not writing computer code. If we can agree to be clear, specific, and kind in our language, we're off to a good start. If we can go a step further and agree to give each person on our team the benefit of the doubt—and to ask for clarification when we're confused—we're much less likely to cause pain, confusion, or simply a disruption in our journey.

Pilots developed very specific language to be used when talking to the control tower. It works at any airport, in any country, anywhere in

the world.

Agreeing to be clear is a fine place to start.

100. Aunt Helen Was Tough

Baird Brothers is a successful hardwood lumberyard in the central part of the United States. They are a family business with more than a hundred employees.

The name is a bit of a misnomer, though. In fact, the first generation of the business was run by a sister, not a brother.

Aunt Helen created the conditions for the business to grow and thrive for more than fifty years. She hired many of the workers that are there to this day. She established a culture of participation, expectations, and significance that has persisted long after she left the building.

Her niece, Lori Baird, a second-generation company leader, points out that Helen was tough. “Every piece of this is important, and everyone’s job here is important,” she said.

What’s tough about that?

Helen wasn’t tough. She was *reasonable*. She made it clear to every single employee that they had an important job, and that the standards mattered. She explained her reasons and then persisted until the promise the organization was making was kept by every single person who worked there. Clarity, honesty, and direct feedback.

If you couldn’t do that, or if you didn’t choose to do that, then you weren’t in the right place.

Significant doesn’t have to mean soft or smiley. It’s work worth doing, clearly described.

If we’re not reliable, what are we?

What We Make and How We Talk About It

*Nearly all men can stand adversity, but
if you want to test a man's character,
give him power.*

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

101. What We Produce Is Change

And the way we produce it is by making decisions.

But decisions are difficult, because decisions are always about the future, and they always involve other people.

There's a huge difference between the backward-looking work of quality improvement and the forward-looking dance of making decisions about what happens next.

If you're not willing to produce change, then you really have no options. Cost-reduction through industrial management is your only path forward.

We've built world-class systems of gradual systems improvement. The measured quality of cars, computer chips, and even overnight package delivery is stunning.

But our organizations continue to struggle with the leaps and insights we need to figure out the next thing. And one reason we struggle is that we fail to talk about it.

102. You Can't Make Me Stop Caring

What kind of person becomes a doctor?

When the earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, Jodi Sagorin raised money from friends and flew to Port-au-Prince to help.

She had recently graduated from high school. Once she arrived, she connected with local talent and helped them start a mobile hypertension treatment center, and that van is still operating today. What's more, the nursing scholarships she endowed using the rest of her fundraising have enabled caring local professionals to learn the skills to devote a lifetime to caring for people in the community.

After years of medical school and training, Jodi Sagorin is now the best doctor I know.

And yet, her passion for service and connection has been severely tried by the healthcare industry in the United States, as it works to turn each doctor into part of a predictable, productivity-seeking industry. The industry, like so many industries, has come to the conclusion that it's unreliable and difficult to depend on having dedicated, caring people doing significant work. So they institutionalize, measure, and most of all compartmentalize the work so that the least involved worker still can't mess it up. They don't want doctors to make change, they simply seek to meet spec.

To outsiders, the caring, committed doctor seems like a breath of fresh air, but the industry itself can't thrive with only a few of these, so instead it pushes for more patients seen per hour and more hours worked per week. The math is easier that way. It's more reliable to go for volume than it is to seek people who care.

I'm pretty sure that Jodi's patients have a different point of view.

103. The Federation

Federated systems turn complicated problems into viable systems. A system is a set of rules and communication tools that enable us to work in parallel, to create value and solve a shared problem.

The three hurdles that a federated system can overcome are:

- Once an innovation involves more than a few elements, it gets complex.
- Complex problems seem intractable.
- Once a team has more than a few people on it, communication becomes difficult.

The obvious short-term solution for complex, difficult problems is for a powerful manager to take charge and simply tell everyone what to do. And in fact, this worked for Robert Moses (who built more structures visible from outer space than anyone in history) or for any number of now-deceased dictators.

But it doesn't last and it doesn't scale. Eventually, the complexity of the problem, the brittleness of the method, and the needs of the unseen are simply too much for a single manager—no matter how motivated or how brutal—to push through.

The modern alternative is to build multiple systems that interact with one another, since systems advance regardless of the actions of any single node in the network.

An API is a programming method that allows software engineers to write code that interacts with larger systems, without permission or special authority from the larger system. At Automattic they say that API stands for “assume positive intent.”

You can send email, or mail a letter to someone, or use a credit card without everyone who built the underlying systems becoming aware of your existence. You simply follow the rules (have the right kind of header on your software, use the right kind of stamp) and you are now working inside of the system. Or perhaps, the system is working for you.

For example, there's a metaphorical API at work in bringing this book to you. Printers, editors, wholesalers, stockers, recording engineers, inventory managers—they're all part of a semi-open system that can come together using certain rules to produce something and bring it to a customer. There's no centralized control, no singular authority to say yes.

The open API lets us create a federation, an intentional system of mutual benefit that is far more resilient than a centrally controlled authority ever can be.

Traditionally, we've viewed these sorts of open systems as happening outside the organization, with the theory of the firm being

organized around buildings and the people who manage them. But recent shifts in technology and communication have changed this, meaning that even a private firm or a public bureaucracy can now be seen as an open system.

There are more Chinese restaurants than McDonald's in the United States. The reason is simple: Chinese restaurants are a federation, an open API instead of a centrally controlled institution. If you sign up for the culture and mission of a Chinese restaurant, you can start one, and no one can stop you.

I will not be pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed, or numbered! My life is my own!

NUMBER SIX

104. The Challenges of the Journey (Starting and Stopping)

Significance means change, but change can feel risky.

If we've been indoctrinated to fear it, if it feels like a gamble, the song of safety can become seductive.

And change doesn't last. So part of people's fear might be that once the music stops, there won't be a chair for them . . . or perhaps, there will be. Each outcome brings its own challenges.

The indoctrination of a "career" is about the seduction of stability. It is a stepwise progression, with a chair always at the ready.

And it works—as long as large corporations continue to grow, as long as the work remains stable, as long as doing slightly better than yesterday is enough.

A few decades ago, organizations stopped keeping the career promise. They stopped honoring the commitment and obedience of

their employees, looted their pensions, and “downsized” people by the thousands.

As a result, the illusion of a career has been revealed as a fraud.

We might not like the endless job carousel that starts and stops, but it’s what we’ve got.

Perhaps we can learn to love it.

105. Hurt People Hurt People

Connection is easy to break. As we assemble networks and come together to build projects, the people who join us are all coming from somewhere else, having done something else.

And we all carry the muscles and the scar tissue that develop from living for more than a few minutes.

Significant work involves tension, change, and the transitions of starting and finishing. What we’ve done will change what we do. What we do will change who we are. And the cycle continues.

The challenge of leadership is helping people put that history to work in a positive way.

There’s an old joke about a woman who goes to see a doctor. “You’ve got to help us, Doc. My husband thinks he’s a chicken.” The doctor asks how long it’s been going on. She says, “Three months.”

“Why didn’t you come see me sooner?”

“Because we needed the eggs.”

Organizations have used surveillance to depersonalize and scale their organizations, claiming they need the eggs. And now they’re discovering it’s a dead end.

If the cost is a lack of connection, not to mention the drama and tension that comes from a lack of cohesion, the eggs are rarely worth it.

We’ve hurt people, and we can’t be surprised when they hurt others too.

All the people we work with have histories, lives, and stories. It's so easy to avoid all of that and simply build barriers. So easy to refuse to acknowledge who is sitting right next to us.

When we show up to do significant work, that human-borne hurt will inevitably show up as well. The challenge is to establish boundaries and standards so that caring people are able to do the work they came to do.

We came here to do something, together.

106. How Am I Doing?

At the state finals, the participants in the 100-meter hurdles know exactly how they're doing. There's a digital stopwatch and it never lies.

But when we're seeking change, when we're inventing the future, we don't have something easy to measure, so we naturally seek reassurance.

The only desired answer to the rhetorical "How am I doing?" is GREAT!

Which isn't much help if you seek to do better.

Not false proxies.

Not personal attacks.

Not a remedy for what ails you, or a chance to vent your feelings.

Simply feedback that helps us move forward, please.

107. Thin-Slicing

The conflict over labor has been going on since the first manager hired the first worker.

The boss wants more effort and time for less money.

The worker wants more money for their hard work.

The industrialist wants to take power away from the worker. And over the last century, the industrialist has kept winning. Unions have lost power, individuals are treated as cogs, surveillance has increased.

And of course, since Frederick Taylor and the assembly line, one of the most effective strategies has been thin-slicing a job.

One way to remove power is to turn each job into twenty jobs, and then distribute each microjob to a noncommitted, cheap, nonhuman function. It doesn't matter much whether it's a "make a buttonhole" button on a specialized sewing machine or an outsourced call center rep answering the phone in a faraway place.

This works fine until it doesn't.

Yes, it's more efficient for forty people on the line to repetitively do a single task than it is for one person to take forty steps to build each part of a car.

But if you make the slices thin enough, job satisfaction, insight, innovation, and yes, even customer satisfaction decrease.

Patients get better when one caregiver is fully present. Customers are happier when one salesperson understands the big picture. Donors are happier when a single human engages with them.

We've now built multipurpose AI systems that can take over many of the thin slices we've created. Value remains for humans when we make the slices thicker, more complete, and more remarkable.

108. What Time Does the Gym Open?

It's five in the morning. I'm not sure what city I'm in, but I'm awake and I'd like to work out before my speech. So I dial 0 on the hotel room's phone and ask the front desk what time I can go work out.

The person who answers, it turns out, isn't at the front desk.

They're not even in the same city.

Instead, a script pops onto their screen and they read me the answer.

This is one way for a hotel chain like Marriott to save money, certainly. But it can't be a particularly fulfilling job, and I'm guessing that the person who answered the phone knows that any minute, a computer/phone tree is going to take over their job.

It also gives me one more reason to stay in a cheaper hotel next time.

The race to the bottom is hard to win. And winning it rarely leads to positive outcomes.

I'd say, in a given week, I probably only do about fifteen minutes of real, actual work. . . . My only real motivation is not to be hassled, that and the fear of losing my job.

But you know, Bob, that will only make someone work just hard enough not to get fired.

PETER GIBBONS

109. Work Worth Doing

What do we say to the professional who wants to work from home? Or the insightful programmer who only wants to work on the juicy problems? Or the frontline worker who merely makes minimum wage but still wants to feel like they count?

Can we manage people to produce gains in productivity by measuring keystrokes and other proxies?

Consider that MBA applications are down as much as 25 percent at the most famous business schools. Where are these folks going instead? Why is a business degree so unattractive now?

We need to offer people work worth doing. We need to find ways to create significance.

What is the change we seek to make?

Who would miss you if you were gone?

What are you doing that is special?

How do your unique skills and passions help this work go better?

Does this work matter?

Are you making choices that create an impact?

Significance is where high trust meets high stakes. Significant work leads to impact and change.

There is, as in most things, a sweet spot. When the trust offered or the stakes involved are too low, it's simply trivial. But if we're way out on a limb, feeling insufficient, unsupported, and ready to fail, the trust and stakes might feel too high.

On the hook, but not too much.

110. A Word List

How many times a day are we using these words? How often do they help us prioritize our work, choose a new gig, connect to a new employee?

We've been seduced by the false promises of industrial capitalism to focus on convenience, productivity, profit, and compliance. Perhaps it's worth changing our vocabulary as we try to rewire our culture for a new way forward:

Affiliation

Connection

Creation

Dignity

Discovery

Enrollment

Fear

Generosity

Honesty

Joy

Leadership

Learning

Long-term

Personal

Possibility

Resilience

Resistance

Safety

Significant

Status

Tension

Trust

Volunteer

Pathfinding

*If we walk far enough, we shall
sometime come to someplace.*

DOROTHY GALE

111. Don't Bring a Stopwatch to a Poetry Slam

How long did it take Sarah Kay to write “B,” her groundbreaking spoken-word poem?

Frederick Taylor, the father of modern management, carried a stopwatch everywhere he went, because the stopwatch was all that mattered. If you can study time and study motion, you can improve the productivity of every step of production.

Significant work can be timed, and of course, the time matters.

But the stopwatch isn't the point. We're here to make a change happen.

112. Who Decides What's Next?

On the assembly line, the choice is easy. The next item to arrive is the task the worker must take on. At the call center, the same is true. Your call is very important to us, and the next available operator will answer it.

But what happens at the restaurant? Is the only job of the server to bring the food from the kitchen to the table? Or are they present to create something more than robotic food delivery on two feet?

When this professional (it's sad to call them “waiters”—is that all they do, wait on us?) approaches the table, who will they address first? What tension will be created or relieved? Are expectations or memories being created?

The difference between a good restaurant experience and a great one has very little to do with the food. Hospitality finds problems and turns them into opportunities—for connection, for joy, and for creating memories.

113. If We Make Decisions . . .

Then let's acknowledge that decisions are far more important than tasks.

Show me your agenda for today, and I'll show you what you value. If your team spends almost all of its time on chores with known solutions, then you're probably in the stopwatch business. Find the cheapest, fastest, most reliable people (or computers) available, then put them on your assembly line.

But if we're seeking to make change happen, then our job is to get from here to there. To find a path. To identify the next best thing to work on, describe an opportunity, and then make it real.

If you're a pathfinder, call it that, organize for it, and measure it.

114. Pivots and New Paths

Starbucks didn't used to sell beverages, only beans. Nintendo made playing cards.

But why call this a pivot? It's the point.

All the great stories involve pivots. All the organizations we admire are doing something they didn't plan to do when they began. They are pathfinders, not excuse-makers.

Meetings Are a Symptom

Actions speak louder than meetings.

LEE CLOW

115. Meetings Are a Problem and a Symptom

By this point in our rant, many managers are saying, “We’re doing pretty well at building a significant organization, under the circumstances.”

But you’re not under the circumstances. You *are* the circumstances.

It’s pretty easy to invoke managerial exceptionalism. That something about your organization, your product, your competitors, or your corporate structure requires you to run in an industrial way. That you’re doing your best to remember the human, but there are simply too many external forces at work.

Which is why we need to consider your meetings.

116. Before the Digital Age, We Came Together In Person

It’s straightforward and evolutionarily obvious. No tech involved. An in-person meeting was the only efficient way to deliver information, and even after the invention of writing, the only way to have an interaction in real time.

In-person meetings are now like caviar, rare and precious. And yet we waste them.

Asynchronous communication often alternates with real-time conversation. Letters and telegrams are one-way missiles, but phone calls are conversations. Faxes and texts are faster versions of letters, and a Zoom call can be a higher-resolution version of a phone call. Conversations and connections are everywhere.

And yet . . .

Industrial management doesn't particularly embrace conversations. Conversations are hard to control and plan for. And to work well, they need a level of parity and connection that undermines the hierarchy of bosses giving instructions.

That's why industrial organizations prefer meetings. They're more efficient at what they set out to do. Because industrial meetings don't involve much meeting. They're actually group lectures with a few moments for Q&A.

Before the digital age, these sorts of "meetings" that were actually announcements were easy to justify. It was a fast and simple way to get people in sync. More to the point, they were culturally valuable role-playing exercises.

The boss played the role of the king, telling people how it was, asserting authority, and establishing status.

And the employees played their role as well, hiding, keeping their heads down, and doing what they were told. It's first grade all over again.

117. Zoom, Wasted

We no longer need to disrupt our schedule or our location to have a meeting. Zoom is a miraculous technology that allows us to ignore space if we choose. If you want to have a conversation with anyone on your team, if it's worth syncing your calendars, here they are. While we're at it, prerecorded video memos can effectively replace lectures.

They can be rewatched, sped up, and transcribed as well. Free, fast, and easy. Meet with anyone, instantly, for three minutes or ten. Or send them your half of a video conversation, wherever they are.

And yet . . .

Instead of putting time and space to work to further our mutual goals, the traditional industrial management structure has taken the

worst of both worlds. Ask your employees (I would say “team” but that ignores the real meaning of the word).

Zoom meetings are often only meetings in the worst sense. Attendance is taken, someone lectures, a few people ask questions. Exactly thirty or sixty minutes later, people are excused.

In most surveys, employees rank endless meetings as the worst part of working from home, and they don’t like them much more when they’re in the office.

The reason is simple: no one likes being lectured, and they like it less when it’s in real time and masquerading as a conversation.

The social dynamics of your meetings tell us an enormous amount about how your organization works.

118. Honeybee Democracy

The ten thousand bees in the hive have only been together for a few weeks . . . and now they have less than seventy-two hours to choose a new place to live. How can they possibly organize around a decision this important—with so many choices, hundreds of opinions, and no way to exert managerial authority?

They may call her a queen, but she’s not really in charge.

Thomas Seeley describes how this process works. It’s not meetings, it’s culture. We can learn three lessons that apply to our human, non-bee organizations:

1. The bees have clear intent and standards. Seeley’s research has shown that individual bees are likely to have very similar reactions to possible hive sites—one bee doesn’t need to visit every one of the hundreds of options for a consistent point of view to evolve.
2. One reason for discomfort and politics at work is that we often fail to be clear with one another about exactly what we’re

seeking to accomplish because we're afraid that our goals aren't aligned.

3. For obvious logistical reasons, the bees have evolved to rely on peer-to-peer communication. Instead of one bee sending a memo to all the other bees, the word spreads horizontally.

The fallacy of the MBA is that a brilliant memo presented via a PowerPoint is enough to make change happen. But culture beats strategy every time. In resilient organizations, culture drives transformation. In rigid ones, it inhibits it.

If we care about the work, we'll need to focus on the culture.

119. A Week without Meetings

Why is the idea of a whole week without meetings even noteworthy?

Zapier is a successful web software company with a distributed team. As an experiment, they suspended all regular meetings for a week. Instead of real-time 1:1 weekly check-ins or group meetings, they shifted to asynchronous reports, updates, and questions, giving each employee the time and freedom to get actual work done.

And actual work got done.

More than 80 percent of the team's established written goals for that week were achieved. Here's a quick summary from one of their leaders:

- Instead of my weekly 1:1, I consolidated questions for my manager and sent them to her in a direct message on Slack.
- Instead of a project check-in, all team members shared their updates in the relevant Asana task list.
- Instead of a one-off strategy call, stakeholders shared their thoughts (and comments) in a Coda doc.

- Instead of a project kickoff call, our project manager sent a Slack message that shared the project charter, timeline, and next steps.

Beyond that, though, was the shift in culture. Instead of taking attendance (you need to be in front of your computer, at the appointed time, to be in a real-time meeting), they paid attention to *contributions*. Instead of rewarding a combination of obedience and sparkle, they amplified individuals who were able to pay attention to what needed to be done and then do it.

If you were one of the many people who completed that week without meetings with a schedule you controlled and output you were proud of, would that be something you'd want to repeat? Would you want to be part of that culture of trust and connection?

The truth is simple: The meeting culture was designed to exert control and to simulate a shortcut on the difficult path to actual connection. But most meetings aren't very good, because no one ever put in the emotional labor to construct real-time meetings that produced the outcome that was needed.

There's nothing wrong with meetings. There's a lot wrong with meetings that are lazy, ineffective, or manipulative.

120. What Are Meetings For?

When we instruct people to book a time in their calendar and come together in real time for a meeting, what are we seeking to do?

Perhaps meetings are a way to reinforce status roles. To remind people that the boss is the boss. That the boss's time is precious, so you will all sit still and listen, in real time, as the boss outlines whatever the boss is thinking about.

Meetings might be a way to clarify the pecking order as well. Who sits where, who gets to ask questions, who is silent. Who represents

the dominant caste or the cultural favorite.

And perhaps they're a real-time performance, rewarding the bon mot and sharp retort, and leaving others with nothing but esprit d'escalier.

It could be that meetings are a way to deny responsibility later. And that having a well-polished deck to leave behind might be a good way to be let off the hook.

If we're taking attendance to make sure that people at home are actually working, and we're filling our days with face time (what an appropriate name) to confirm our fealty, then meetings might be doing exactly what we ask of them.

121. A Significant Meeting Is Different

It happens in real time because it can only work in real time.

It's a conversation in which everyone listens and speaks. Only the people who need to be there are there.

It leads to a decision, not the delivery of information.

It creates energy, it doesn't destroy it.

122. Toward a Zoom Agreement

If you promise not to check your email while we're talking, we promise to not waste your time.

If you agree to look me in the eye and try to absorb the gist of what I'm saying, I agree to be crisp, cogent, and on point.

If you are clear about which meetings are a waste of time for you to attend, we can be sure to have them without you.

If you can egg me on and bring enthusiasm to the interaction, I can lean into the work and reflect back even more energy than you're contributing.

The purpose of a meeting is not to fill the allocated slot on the Google Calendar invite. The purpose is to communicate an idea and the emotions that go with it, and to find out what's missing via engaged conversation.

If we can't do that, let's not meet.

Multitasking (especially during meetings) isn't productive, respectful, or healthy. Being present in real time is a waste unless we interact.

Reaffirming your status and control isn't worth an hour of my day.

123. The Modern Meetings Challenge

Long before the pandemic, my colleague and friend Al Pittampalli wrote a bestseller called *Read This before Our Next Meeting*. It was a short manual on how to turn meetings from lectures into productive conversations.

While it sold quite a few copies, few people ended up adopting Al's core techniques.

The status quo is resilient.

For a boss to have a productive conversation, they have to be willing to create strong enough conditions of safety, increase, and significance for employees to voluntarily enroll and contribute. That means giving up short-term status.

And for the employees to participate, they have to be willing to be on the hook. They have to feel safe enough to leave a sinecure behind. They have to trust the process enough to speak up and take responsibility, even when they don't have authority.

A significant organization offers change, possibility, and responsibility. It creates the conditions for humans to engage without the traditional dominance roles of industrial management.

And meetings culture is designed to undermine that.

Creating a Significant Organization

You don't need more time. You simply need to decide.

124. Mileposts on the Road to Significance

There are some simple but transcendent foundational principles that enable us to create the sort of organization that attracts, amplifies, and challenges people who want to make a difference.

Specifically:

1. Important organizations make change happen
2. Humans are not a resource
3. Management is not the same as leadership
4. Enrollment is more powerful than coercion
5. Culture can amplify enrollment
6. Seek out useful impostors
7. Leaders create the conditions for culture
8. Page 19 opens the door
9. It's the work, not the worker
10. Embrace uncertainty
11. Withhold definition
12. Seek out the benefit of the doubt
13. Avoid false proxies
14. Rigorous standards
15. Scale is not the point

16. Hiring is not dating

17. Find positive uses of tension

125. Important Organizations Make Change Happen

Change is the essence of the work. Industrialism fears change; significant organizations cause it.

We change the external world, the state of our customers, and our internal processes as well. We change what we make and how we make it, and the impact of our work shifts as we do.

We don't apologize for change because the change is the point.

126. Humans Are Not a Resource

Human resources was invented by the same folks who decided to invest in machines, in supply chain management, and in litigation strategies.

Humans are not machines to be manipulated and maximized. They are not a resource to be cost-reduced or even managed.

Humans are people.

They are our colleagues. If we create the conditions for them to find a path to significance, those conditions will enable all of us to thrive.

127. Management Is Not the Same as Leadership

Management is the hard work of getting people who work for you to do what they did yesterday, but faster and cheaper. It requires authority—a hierarchy that gives the manager the power to insist.

Leadership is voluntary. Voluntary to perform and voluntary to follow. It's the work of imagining something that hasn't happened before and inviting people to come along for the journey. Without voluntary enrollment, it's not leadership, it's only management.

128. Enrollment Is More Powerful Than Coercion

The most skilled and committed people are participating voluntarily. They have options. As a result, managing for compliance via coercion is never as effective as coordinating the work of passionate, enrolled individuals.

Creating an intentional culture that focuses on finding, empowering, and amplifying enrolled individuals is the work of a skilled leader.

129. Culture Can Amplify Enrollment

Culture can be captured in a simple sentence: "People like us do things like this." It's the way things are around here.

It's easy and practical to build a culture of management and compliance. It's far more difficult to build one based on connection and affiliation.

There are some jobs that simply won't get done without managers. There are jobs that are done by people who believe they have few options, and those people need to be motivated to show up to do things that they're not intrinsically motivated to do.

But more and more value is being created in a different way. By people who know that they have options, who are dedicated to improving their skills, and who are enrolled in doing work that feels significant to them.

We can create systems and pathways and a culture that attracts and amplifies that desire. Culture defeats strategy, but culture is

more difficult than strategy. It requires clarity, commitment, and daily persistence.

The moment you embrace a shortcut by sacrificing enrollment to satisfy short-term profit objectives, your culture of significance takes a substantial hit.

130. Seek Out Useful Impostors

Impostor syndrome is real. It's the feeling we get when we're doing something that we can't prove is going to work, when there isn't certainty or built-in assumptions of privilege and power.

But useful impostors manage to get the job done.

A significant organization makes change happen, change that isn't guaranteed or obvious. Who else can possibly accomplish this but someone intent on being useful at the very same time that they're okay with feeling like an impostor?

A culture of significance embraces the generous and honest impostor instead of pushing them away.

131. Leaders Create the Conditions for Culture

That's the job. Not to manage—management is easy and cheap, a shortcut when you are unable to earn enrollment.

Your culture is more powerful than your strategy or your tactics. Combine “what things are like around here” with “people like us do things like this,” and quite suddenly your team has leverage beyond the industrialist's imagination.

When the culture embraces enrollment, possibility, and change, new opportunities quickly arise. Work gets done because it's important and desired, not because a surveillance system insisted.

132. Page 19 Opens the Door

Significant work is often done by teams of people, none of whom could produce something similar on their own.

The mythology of the lone genius undermines our ability to show up and contribute enough to make things better.

Three hundred people in forty countries showed up to build *The Carbon Almanac*. Early on, we coined the Page 19 Principle and used it every day.

The truth is that no one knew how to write page 19 of the *Almanac* alone. No one on the team had the qualifications to completely write, edit, fact-check, and illustrate even a single page of the book. But it needed to be done, so a few people contributed to a page, and then the next one and the one after that. Each page was improved and polished by more than a dozen people, working around the clock, from time zone to time zone. The Page 19 metaphor is the antidote to paralysis, overwhelm, and perfectionism. It welcomes the generous impostor and the eager contributor. It's not about getting it right the first time out. In fact, each person acknowledges that it's impossible to get it right the first time.

"Here, I made this, please make it better."

There's a process and it can be trusted. It gave people permission to take action and advance the group's goal.

There were plenty of opportunities to improve the work, and we regularly resisted the temptation to criticize the worker. Page 19 is a posture of possibility, not blame. "This page isn't good enough . . . YET."

Page 19 amplifies trust, because we can always make it better. Sure, go ahead and go first. Anyone can take the next step to advance the group's goals. Do the reading. Show your work. Realize that someone else is going to take it from here. Layer by layer.

Today, nearly everything is built this way, not just almanacs. No one built Nike or General Electric or Google from a singular plan. No

one builds a great organization alone.

Anne Marie Cruz, one of the *Almanac*'s volunteer leaders, highlighted four steps of Page 19 thinking:

- Simplify
- Clarify
- Triage
- Decide

Start with a problem, and make it as simple as possible.

Then clarify the goal. This work you're doing, the change you seek to make—who is it for and what is it for? Most recalcitrant problems are caused by a lack of clarity about what change is being sought.

Triage is the work of figuring out what to work on next. Sort the incoming and work on the important, difficult, influential parts first. As the essential gets done, the rest follows naturally.

And finally, decide. Decide to move on. Decide to focus on the critical parts. Decide to ship the work.

It ships when you're out of time or out of money. You don't need more time, and you don't need more money. You simply need to decide.

Page 19 thinking is about being of service, which makes it easier to listen to others. It's about generosity, not territory. Taking responsibility is much more difficult than taking credit, but that's the way forward.

The past is over, and the posture of Page 19 thinking gives us a chance to improve the future that's about to arrive.

Back to the bees. The bees start their jobs a few moments after being born. Each is responsible for their own contribution, their own cell, their own impact. They do it poorly on the way to doing it well.

But together, the work is polished and improved, decisions are made, and the hive continues.

The song of increase is a vivid example of the incremental leap of this approach.

133. It's the Work, Not the Worker

That's not true in school. And it's not true in sports, or politics either.

Criticism feels personal. The tall poppy syndrome is worldwide, and it pushes us to keep quiet. "I don't stick my neck out for nobody." After all, in the industrial management paradigm, bad performance sticks with the worker, making them bad as well. It's tempting to mark someone as a failure, as opposed to doing the more nuanced work of differentiating the work from the person who made the work.

In some cultures, bad performance is seen as preordained, the result of a moral defect.

But none of this is useful or true.

In fact, innovative performance is almost always related to random events (good or bad), and innovations can always be improved. Valuable contributors aren't consistently right, they're consistently contributing.

Criticizing the work with useful, skilled feedback makes the work better. On the other hand, becoming emotionally attached to the work, considering it an authentic statement of personal performance, makes it difficult to respond and improve.

"If I'm no good, why bother contributing?" could not be more different than "We can make this better if we're clear about what it needs . . ."

134. Embrace Uncertainty

"I don't know."

You're not supposed to say that in an industrial system. Not in a meeting, not in a forecast, not to the board.

But saying it with clarity and intent is powerful. It creates space for others to pitch in. It establishes a need for resilience instead of a guarantee. And it allows us to move forward without pretending that we're certain.

The only honest statement we can make about the future is that we're not certain. If we can use this as a tool, we're more likely to create the change we seek.

Demagogues play on our insecurity and assure us that they're certain. It's tempting to believe them, but it's clear that they're as wrong as anyone else.

The resilient, professional solution is to avoid the false confidence of certainty and be open to the possibilities that uncertainty brings.

135. Seek Out the Benefit of the Doubt

Cory Doctorow has written eloquently about adversarial interoperability. It's a system that is open enough that other organizations and individuals can use it without permission.

You can put any dish in your dishwasher, plug any appliance into your wall socket. You don't need approval from the company or the utility.

I know I can depend on the screwdriver I bought to work for the foreseeable future, because I've used it on countless different sorts of screws. If the screwdriver doesn't work in one setting, I'm more likely to try it in a few different ways before I decide that the screwdriver is defective.

On the other hand, a closed system that hoards information and power is possibly (probably) doing something behind the scenes, something we can't test and thus can't trust.

This seems obvious, until we see how it falls apart when organizations insist on taking too much control. You can't plug your own software into Facebook, or easily use your own toner with a laser printer. The phone system was paralyzed until the government required AT&T to let us use fax machines, modems, and other tools that they didn't approve of.

And the same thing is true with how the supply chain for herbal tea works at a big hotel chain. The servers know that they're out but have no way to interact with the resupply system, so instead they have to deal with disappointed customers day after day. They're not allowed to make things better, so they don't.

Beyond the moral implications of building systems that work with and for people, there's also a profit incentive: when people trust you, they give you the benefit of the doubt. That means that when something is confusing or mysterious or simply new, people assume that it's a good thing that they don't understand (yet), not a threat that they should be wary of.

Culture that is based on goodwill and connection is more resilient, faster moving, and more productive than one that is based on mystery, selfishness, and power.

Don't hoard. Don't hoard information, interoperability, access, or love.

If you want to lead, you'll need to be trusted. One way to do that is to make promises openly and consistently—and then keep them.

136. Withhold Definition

In the liminal moments, when we seek to get from here to there, we will encounter the unknown. As we work to invent a desired future, it's inevitable that everything will not go according to plan.

The future, by its nature, is not a clean, well-lit place until we arrive.

Alexander Technique teacher Tommy Thompson suggests that when we encounter the unexpected or the unknown, we embrace the tension and withhold putting the new situation into a familiar box.

Once we name it, we know precisely how to handle it.

Naming something is useful when we're right, but it's a challenge when we're wrong. Because the act of putting something into the wrong box will prevent us from understanding what it really is.

And it also can numb us to the feeling of awe we experience in the presence of something we don't understand.

When the World Wide Web arrived in the early 1990s, I turned to my team and said, "This is like AOL and Prodigy, except it's slower and has no business model."

My box led us to six months of ignoring the web and cost me a few billion dollars.

"I'm not sure what this is yet, let's interact and see" opens the door to forward motion and wonder, instead of pushing hard for things to get back to normal.

137. Avoid False Proxies

Measuring the easy thing is the easy thing.

We can measure the lap time for the new electric sports car or the number of defects on the production line. We can measure how many social media followers we have or how much profit we made last week.

This is one reason it's easier to coach someone for the Olympics than it is to train someone to be a nurse. If we can measure performance with a stopwatch, there's not a lot of room for discussion.

But these easy measurements can be a crutch, and we may end up failing to talk about the things that really matter.

Looking at the past (what we did and how we measured it) is a good place to begin, but our work is to consider the future—messier, murkier, and far more magical—instead.

Anything easy to measure is rarely important, because our competition is better at maximizing the easy measurements than we are.

And yet the easy-to-measure is what gets measured. Personal charisma, hours worked, the chemistry with the boss, and of course high-profile mistakes versus chronic lack of extra effort.

High-stakes organizations are desperate to measure the productivity of their assets. And if humans are expensive assets, then measuring them becomes a priority.

At Bloomberg, I'm told, they measured keystrokes per minute, time sitting in front of the terminal, and even bathroom breaks.

These are precise measurements, but not useful ones.

If the work of the organization involves innovation, connection, or the creation of change, then only humans are going to do that work. Treating them like a measurable asset is a trap.

The alternative is to measure the health and output of the culture itself. To hold the leaders accountable for enrollment, commitment, and the rigor of shipping work that makes an impact.

138. Rigorous Standards

A significant organization makes change happen. There is tension whenever change occurs. Comfort is neither the point nor the goal.

It's not comfortable to swim across a channel in Greenland, it's not comfortable to care for a beehive, and it's sure not comfortable to feed and clothe a toddler. But humans do these things all the time, without pay and without a boss, because they can. Because it's significant.

Enrollment in the journey includes voluntarily agreeing to the standards that matter. Not accepting bullying, disrespect, or the cavalier display of status. Instead, acknowledging the principles of a significant organization and embracing the structures that allow change to happen.

Work doesn't have to be authentic, vulnerable, or even personal. It simply needs to matter.

139. Scale Is Not the Point

In the industrial age, the math of scale is pretty compelling. More machines and more sales directly translate into more profits, which gives you the ability to buy more machines and generate more sales.

But if a significant organization is built on community and innovation, adding more employees doesn't make you more effective. In fact, it might do the opposite. When Facebook or Amazon lays off ten thousand people at a time, it's clear that a CFO somewhere is treating people like a resource, not like humans.

The internet opens the door to massive scale when an idea is built to spread. WhatsApp had only nineteen employees when it sold for more than a billion dollars.

Bigger isn't the goal, better is.

140. Hiring Is Not Dating

We spend more time at work than we spend with our families. So it's not surprising that when people have a chance to interview and hire coworkers, they look for people they like.

That includes selecting for folks with similar backgrounds and even a similar appearance.

This makes the hiring process inefficient, ineffective, time-consuming, and a barrier to possibility and mobility.

We end up hiring people who are good at being interviewed, as opposed to those who would be useful additions to the team.

Once again, the internet is an agent of change here. The internet makes it easy to see far more people, and to learn what they've contributed in the past. Suddenly, a body of work is a lot more interesting than a resume, and a sample of work is more effective than a short face-to-face conversation.

Almost all the systems we rely on to hire and to be hired are wired around the old model of hiring as a dating process. We use false proxies in our resume keyword searches, mistaking an Ivy League education, for example, for a useful indicator of job performance.

We then miss our chance to find commitment to the methods and the journey and simply use money or perks as a proxy.

That's how we end up with people who are only doing their job, managers who treat employees like a resource, and the industrial dynamics that lend themselves to compliance and surveillance.

As tenures get shorter, domain training gets faster, and digital work diminishes the importance of personal attractiveness and charisma, we have a chance to rethink the entire process of selection and onboarding.

Instead of hiring based on the performance of interview skills, perhaps we can pay people to do a project with us. The best way to see how someone works is to work with them.

In short, we have a *Moneyball* problem. In Michael Lewis's book about the miracle of the Oakland A's baseball team, he describes the centuries-old scouting system used in Major League Baseball. The scouts sought out players who matched their expectation of how good players looked and acted. Since this profile was scarce, players like this were expensive.

The manager of the A's discovered that a single overlooked statistic was the only metric that actually predicted a certain kind of success. By forcing his scouts (who fought back) to focus on finding these players, Billy Beane built a world-class team on a budget. But

even after his team's success, scouts on other teams persisted in hiring the old way.

If we're going to hire compliant cogs with certain traditional attributes, we're going to sacrifice diversity, passion, and teamwork. We'll maintain caste roles, limit mobility, and harm our work as well.

Bosses lie when they try to hire. Employees get their revenge by lying when they answer. Bosses pretend that they have a fascinating, humane environment that prizes individuality, while selecting people who have demonstrated that this isn't their goal. And employees swallow their pride when they need a job, because that's what they've been trained to do.

The alternative is a set of mutual commitments, together with trial projects, to see what's really on offer.

A key step forward is to find a path to mutual trust. Let's get real or let's not play.

141. Find Positive Uses of Tension

As they are about to open the envelope, the auditorium grows silent. Everyone wants to know who the winner is.

Tension focuses us, and we eagerly wait for resolution.

If you're lucky enough to visit the Climate Museum in New York, the final interaction you'll have is a chance to send a postcard to your congressperson.

Confronting the reality of our changing climate creates tension. A negative sort of awe about what's happening, together with a feeling of dread.

Nearly every honest discussion of the climate leads to this sort of helplessness.

"What should we do now?"

That's the question we ask whenever we come face-to-face with possibility, positive or negative.

“Please, relieve the tension so we can go back to what we were doing.”

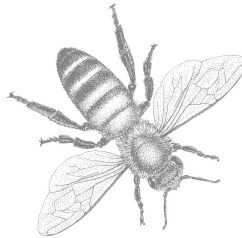
What we were doing was idling, coasting, passing the time. What we were doing was phoning it in, doing our jobs and wasting another day.

The tension changes that. Significance creates change, and change is a dance with tension.

Relieve the tension too soon, by offering someone a postcard to mail in, by telling them the punch line of the joke too soon, by resolving the mystery . . . it's a waste.

The tension is good. The tension might be the point. You can't walk on a rope unless it's tight.

The best part of a knock-knock joke is the pause after someone says “Who's there?”



AND THEN WE BEGIN

The bees don't wait.

They don't wait to be told, they don't wait for perfect, and they don't wait until later.

And we don't have to wait either. Today must be considered unwastable, and the urgency of now presents us with the opportunity for better.

Significance is the generous incremental process of possibility. The smallest useful change produced for the smallest viable audience.

Again and again, with humanity.

The Broomstick

*I bring you the gift of these four words: I
believe in you.*

BLAISE PASCAL

142. Management vs. Leadership

Managers seek to avoid defects. They work to improve productivity. They measure to standards, so they do their best work when they figure out how to remove subpar performers and eliminate roadblocks that slow down production.

Average, at scale.

Leaders, on the other hand, seek something better. Something previously undefined, unbuilt, or untapped. They are looking for Mozart, not Muzak.

In any given day, the culture we live in might require both. But unless we notice the difference, it's quite likely we'll simply revert to the dominant, convenient narrative of management.

There's a weird attraction in the brutality of industrialism. It creates wealth and celebrates engineering, consistency, and the satisfaction of consumer needs and wants.

Industrialism can meet its straightforward and easily measured goals, but it has trouble creating beauty. Beauty often lies in the mystery of connection and human creation, and beauty might just be the point.

We can embrace industrialism for what it can give us, but not accept that it is the purpose of our days. When we use the resources it offers us to create the right conditions for growth and connection and humanity, it's possible to make magic happen.

The magic of humanity.

143. Perhaps the Yellow Brick Road Is the Point

Dorothy had the slippers all along. The Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion already possessed everything they needed to find happiness. And the wizard didn't actually need a broomstick. So why bother going on this perilous journey?

The quest for the broomstick was a MacGuffin, of course, an illogical centerpiece that moved the story forward. Illogical, and yet *The Wizard of Oz*, eighty years later, remains one of the most remembered and beloved movies ever made.

Corporate profits aren't at the center of Dorothy's journey in *The Wizard of Oz*. Neither is selfish gain.

The movie resonates with us because it's about connection and possibility. It captures our desire to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to help others when, perhaps, there's not much in it for us.

144. The Wonder of the Swarm

One day, you might be in the right place at the right moment. In a field, late in the spring, surrounded by the song of increase. Jacqueline Freeman describes the magic of being entranced by the chaos of ten thousand bees moving from one home in search of another. Organized without an organizer, swarming in seemingly random directions, flying ever faster but never colliding, the bees are leaping with purpose and with focus.

We'll never fully understand what it's like to be a bee, just a few weeks old, part of a colony that is following its destiny to possibility. But each of us understands the lesson that it offers to humans.

Our role isn't to simply fit in or to mimic or to comply. Our job is not to follow precise instructions. The coordinated hum and motion of the hive is a message for each of us, a vivid story about waking up from a culture-induced torpor to get back to what really matters. To not

only reclaim the agency that is our humanity, but to open the door for others to find it as well.

Thank you for creating opportunities to contribute, to grow, and to connect.

Keep leading: it matters.

Significance isn't what we get. . . . It's what we do for others.

Acknowledged

“Thank you” and “I’m sorry.” In our culture, these words mean many things. We can say thank you to someone who didn’t know that we had incurred a debt or asked for help. Simply because they opened a door, shined a light, or showed up when no one asked. And we can say we’re sorry even if we didn’t directly cause any harm. Because it helps to see and to be seen. To acknowledge.

Thank you to the leaders, writers, and contributors who have come before, who have established the foundation that enables each of us to produce something of value. Thank you to the people who went out of their way to give me the benefit of the doubt and who were patient with my mistakes, which were often (but, alas, not always) well intentioned.

And I’m sorry to the countless victims of discrimination based on race, gender, caste, or social standing. People who deserved better. People who have had their land stolen, their lives disrupted, and their work disrespected. I’m sorry to the people who haven’t received the access they deserved, and to those that were brainwashed and indoctrinated into believing that they had little to offer.

There’s no easy way to square things, but we can begin by seeing it and leaning into making things better.

We live in a world of eight billion people now, and each one (or at least every person I’ve met) has done something original, creative, important, and generous. At least once, and often more. That

distributed, decentralized fountain of possibility is a way forward for all of us.

Chip Richards introduced me to the Song of Increase and that led me to Jacqueline Freeman and her extraordinary book. Anne Marie Cruz, Louise Karch, Eva Forde, and the TCN helped me develop Page 19 thinking. Thomas Seeley is the world's foremost explainer of bees. Dan Fitzgerald and Alex Carr helped spur me to take this journey, and Frankie's memory is at the heart of it. She shined a light for so many people. Thank you, Frankie, you are missed. ♥

I've learned countless lessons from the leadership journeys of Mo, Alex, and Helene.

Thanks to Bernadette Jiwa and to Brian & Amy Koppelman, who know how to see and are unstinting in their support. And to Steve Pressfield, Margo Aaron, Lori Sullivan, Kristin Hatcher, Ramon Ray, Neil Pasricha, Barrett Brooks, Avaleen Morris, Kevin Kelly, Nazanin Ash, William Rosenzweig, Tobi Lütke, Fiona McKean, Danielle Butin, Hon. Neil Ross, Harley Finkelstein, Lindsey Taub, Carla Vernon, Rich Roll, Carey Nieuwhof, Maurice Mitchell, Shoshana Zuboff, Tim Ferriss, Abby Falik, Michael Lopp, Debbie Millman, Cory Doctorow, Krista Tippett, Jacqueline Novogratz, Ben Zander, Jodi & Fred, Mahan Khalsa, Marie Forleo, and Matt Mullenweg for over-the-top insights and contributions. Thank you to Michelle Kydd Lee for her guts, compassion, and co-piloting, and to Gina Murphy-Darling, Rebecca Schwartz, Ryan Schleicher, Aaron Schleicher, Lisa Gansky (always), Stuart Krichevsky, Rose Marcario, Zohara Rothenberg, John Acker, Pam Dorman, Carrie Ellen Phillips, Rodger Beyer, Jonathan and Audrey (Sackner) Bernstein, Drew Dusabout, Adrian Zackheim, and Jodi Sagorin Spangler.

Thanks to Susan Piver, Steph Corker, Danny Meyer, Ari Weinzwieg, and Douglas Cardinal.

I learned about Ray Anderson from Nathan Havey's terrific movie *Beyond Zero*. And thanks to Michel Porro, Jennifer Meyers Chua, Tania Marien, Anna Cosentino, Tonya Downing, Manon Doran, Paige

NeJame, Linda Westenberg, Fannie Theofanidou, Richie Biluan, Jasper Croone, Paul McGowan, Steve Wexler, Andrea Morris, Felice Della Gatta, Vivek Srinivasan, Anna Kohler Smith, and 1,900 other generous souls who helped launch and amplify the *Almanac*. Thanks to Sam Miller, Marie Schacht, Willie Jackson, Mel Butcher, Wes Kao, Alex Peck, Grayden Shand, Ishita Gupta, Frasier Larock, Carla Lisio, Alan Kuras, Anne Shepherd, Alex DiPalma, Kenya Denise, Dona Abramson, Jeff Kempler, Al Pittampalli, Kelli Wood, and so many others who have joined me on the journey. Thanks to Tom Peters, Liz Gilbert, and the dosa, and Justin Brice, for shining a light before it's too late. Thanks to Pema Chödrön, Roz Zander, Simon Sinek, David Curhan, Apollonia Poilane, Liz Jackson, Christina Tosi, Rohan Rajiv, Elly Markson, Ann Marie Scichili, Will Guidara, and Stanley Tucci, who isn't mad at me. Thanks to Zig Ziglar for many things, and for the birds-in-forma-tion story. To Joanne, Leon, Mara, and Max, thanks for living it. And thanks to Niki. Of course.

I learned more from the forty thousand Akimbo grads (and their altMBA cohorts) than they ever learned from me. And the coaches and leaders who joined me in the worldwide effort to help people level up are each contributors to a system of possibility and connection.

Thank you to the generous people who read my blog, sharing their experiences and questions with me each day. Much of the work in this book was foreshadowed in my online writing, and I couldn't do it without you.

Dedicated to Sarah Cassidy.

I am not a number.

JOHN DRAKE

Appendix

An Encyclopedia of Real Skills

The fact that there isn't an accepted taxonomy of real skills demonstrates how little effort organizations, both large and small, have put into finding, improving, and developing real skills among their teams.

In this first draft, I've chosen five large categories and then given examples of each. Not a definitive taxonomy, but a start, a way to move the conversation and the investment forward.

The five categories might include:

SELF-CONTROL—Once you've decided that something is important, are you able to persist in doing it, without letting distractions or bad habits get in the way? *Doing things for the long run that you might not feel like doing in the short run.*

PRODUCTIVITY—Are you skilled with your instrument? Are you able to use your insights and your commitment to actually move things forward? *Getting nonvocational tasks done.*

WISDOM—Have you learned things that are difficult to glean from a textbook or a manual? *Experience is how we become adults.*

PERCEPTION—Do you have the experience and the practice to see the world clearly? *Seeing things before others have to point them*

out.

INFLUENCE—Have you developed the skills needed to persuade others to take action? *Charisma is only one form of this skill.*

SELF-CONTROL

Adaptability to changing requirements

Agility in the face of unexpected obstacles

Alacrity and the ability to start and stop quickly

Authenticity and consistent behavior

Bouncing back from failure

Coach-ability and the desire to coach others

Collaborative mindset

Compassion for those in need

Competitiveness

Conscientiousness in keeping promises

Customer service passion

Eagerness to learn from criticism

Emotional intelligence

Endurance for the long haul

Enthusiasm for the work

Ethics even when not under scrutiny

Etiquette

Flexibility

Friendliness

Honesty

Living in balance

Managing difficult conversations

Motivated to take on new challenges

Passionate

Posture for forward motion

Purpose

Quick-wittedness

Resilience

Risk-taking

Self-awareness

Self-confidence

Sense of humor

Strategic thinking taking priority over short-term gamesmanship

Stress management

Tolerance of change and uncertainty

PRODUCTIVITY

Attention to detail

Crisis management skills

Decision-making with effectiveness
Delegation for productivity
Diligence and attention to detail
Entrepreneurial thinking and guts
Facilitation of discussion
Goal-setting skills
Innovative problem-solving techniques
Lateral thinking
Lean techniques
Listening skills
Managing up
Meeting hygiene
Planning for projects
Problem-solving
Research skills
Technology savvy
Time management
Troubleshooting

WISDOM

Artistic sense and good taste
Conflict resolution instincts

Creativity in the face of challenges
Critical thinking instead of mere compliance
Dealing with difficult people
Diplomacy in difficult situations
Empathy for customers, coworkers, and vendors
Intercultural competence
Mentoring
Social skills
Supervising with confidence

PERCEPTION

Design thinking
Fashion instinct
Judging people and situations
Mapmaking
Strategic thinking

INFLUENCE

Ability to deliver clear and useful criticism
Assertiveness on behalf of ideas that matter
Body language (reading and delivering)
Charisma and the skill to influence others
Clarity in language and vision

Dispute-resolution skills

Giving feedback without ego

Influence

Inspiring to others

Interpersonal skills

Leadership

Negotiation skills

Networking

Persuasive

Presentation skills

Public speaking

Reframing

Selling skills

Storytelling

Talent management

Team building

Writing for impact

Is it possible to teach these real skills? Is it possible to focus on them, hire for them, and reward growth? Can we put in place programs and insights that will lead to progress in all these areas?

If we did, would it matter? Would an organization that excelled at these real skills be more productive, more profitable, and a better place to work?

What are we waiting for?

As the swarm heads to its new home, it moves quickly and directly. Tens of thousands of bees, flying in unison to a place they've never been.

But looking closer, we can see what looks like chaos. No bee remains at the front—the faster bees fly back and forth, shepherding the others as they protect the colony and the queen at its center.

There are no collisions, no dead ends. The bees are consistent, direct, and effective in their work, organized without an organizer. Each bee contributes, singing the song they came to sing, the song that needs to be sung.

Lead together.



About the Author

Seth Godin is the author of 21 international bestsellers that have changed the way people think about work. His books have been translated into 38 languages. Godin writes one of the most popular marketing blogs in the world, and two of his TED talks are among the most popular of all time. He is the founder of the altMBA, the social media pioneer Squidoo, and Yoyodyne, one of the first internet companies. Find out more at seths.blog.



Penguin
Random House
PENGUIN PUBLISHING GROUP

What's next on your reading list?

**Discover your next
great read!**

**Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this
author.**

Sign up now.