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Beloved Economies

Transforming How We Work

Jess Rimington and Joanna Cea • Jess Rimington © 2022 • 400 pages

Management / Management Concepts

Take-Aways

- Work isn't working for the great majority of people.
- The US economy largely benefits the privileged few – but it doesn't have to be that way.
- Transformation begins when workers assert their right to participate in designing their workplace.
- Avoid chaos and ensure inclusivity by agreeing on malleable protocols.
- Develop authentic connections based on mutual care.
- Learn from past injustices and work to right their wrongs.
- Foster a healthy, respectful approach to divergent viewpoints.
- Source wisdom from your body, emotions and nature.
- Slow down to be more fully present and productive.
- Develop inexpensive, user-friendly prototypes that facilitate early feedback and testing.

Recommendation

In this passionate call to action, next-economy researchers Jess Rimington and Joanna Cea describe practices individuals and organizations can use to break away from economic models that fail most people, urging readers to work towards a more loving form of capitalism. Stories of organizations that have achieved genuine collaboration and outstanding business outcomes bolster their case. For readers dissatisfied with business as usual, Rimington and Cea outline seven innovative business practices to improve work and the wider world.

Summary

Work isn't working for the great majority of people.

Workers in the United States often juggle child care responsibilities with two or more jobs and unpredictable work schedules. Many jobs offer no set hours and few or no benefits, and employers often require workers to sign punitive nondisclosure contracts. In addition, many employees work in precarious at-will arrangements where employers can release them at any time for virtually any reason. Other employers offer no work guarantees in the rapidly expanding gig economy. In response, many American workers say they suffer high stress levels and burnout.

“More and more people have arrived at the same conclusion: Our current ways of working are not working.”

Work often contributes to strife at home, isolation and unhealthy coping mechanisms. Relentless work demands can produce chronic health conditions that sometimes lead to early death. And work often leaves too little time for more healthy and nurturing life pursuits. In addition, the economic framework in which work occurs damages the environment, as producers plunder forests and other resources, depleting collective natural wealth to enrich the few.

The US economy largely benefits the privileged few – but it doesn't have to be that way.

In the simplest terms, today's form of capitalism means people who possess high amounts of capital can use it to bet on various investments and reap the profits. As people who have money can afford to take more risks and tend to accumulate even more wealth, income gaps grow and inequities accelerate. Today, the top three richest men in the US possess more wealth than the bottom half of the entire US population – that's 160 million people. And 47% of Americans report that even in an emergency, they wouldn't be able to come up with \$400.

In the current paradigm, even the word “wealth” has become corrupted, because money comes from ravaging true sources of riches – clean air and water, forests, oceans, minerals and other natural resources. The extractive economy turns what's truly valuable into a source of purchasing power. Other forms of wealth – such as time spent with family and friends, in community pursuits or enjoying nature – don't count towards GDP, while actions that harm the environment and the well-being of living things do.

“Spent, frustrated, disoriented and stuck putting one foot in front of the other, it can be hard to confront the reality that we are largely working to benefit a small group of people.”

The United States’ unsustainable economy financially rewards companies that buy up distressed assets in communities and then sell them to extract profits – at the cost of forests, farmland and decent pay for workers. When this happens, towns lose their tax base, and hospitals, schools and grocers close, to be replaced by dollar stores. These calamities happen mostly in poor communities and often among people of color. But most workers, no matter their race – including those in the middle class – see no way out of this rapacious system. Most would scoff at the notion of work and an economy based on love.

Capitalism, though, can work better. The economy enriches a few historically privileged people largely because the rest have a hard time envisioning alternatives other than socialism or communism. However, a small but growing number of people and organizations are demonstrating that other forms of capitalism – ones that nurture and enrich workers’ lives – can exist, and these alternatives can succeed for a much broader group of beneficiaries than today’s business as usual.

Transformation begins when workers assert their right to participate in designing their workplace.

The economy is a construct: People create it. It survives in its current form because people allow it. When people demand a voice in decisions that affect them, they take the first step in freeing themselves from a loveless economy.

Participation often leads to real, widespread breakthroughs; these innovations can free people from the lack of imagination that make them put the financial interests of others ahead of their own. This process can transform work – and it also improves traditional measures of economic success, such as revenues, profits, customers and investment, while allowing workers and the environment to thrive.

“We are all complicit in upholding business as usual when we do not actively choose something different and instead renew what is, rather than what could be.”

Workers’ rights to design include participation in imagining, planning and building the circumstances of their lives. Rights to design apply to large decisions, such as shaping an entire organization, and small ones, such as determining working hours and location. The concept of rights to design pushes against the paternalistic status quo in which a few people with power dictate everything, even if they pretend to listen to other voices and concerns.

By establishing their rights to design, workers fight a system that has grown out of hundreds of years of colonialism, enslavement, racism and ruthless wealth extraction. Workers who imagine different ways of work and organizations that include the voices of the many will benefit from new ideas and innovations that build creativity and resilience.

For workers and organizations interested in escaping the loveless extractive economy and creating better workplaces, seven practices will support their efforts to break free from business-as-usual constructs.

These practices work in concert with one another to expand people's imagination and courage for change. They demand continuous effort, learning and practice, but when applied consistently, they have helped organizations move beyond the status quo.

Avoid chaos and ensure inclusivity by agreeing on malleable protocols.

In many people's experience, collaboration and consensus-building among large teams or groups have led to poor compromises or chaos. Collaborative decision-making demands careful effort. Avoid chaos and ensure inclusivity by agreeing on protocols.

Use protocols and frameworks as boundaries, but don't apply them so rigidly as to stifle ideas and creativity. Individuals who share in a decision should also share in the rewards when it succeeds, and the accountabilities when it doesn't. Share influence, ideas and decision-making to build trust, spark engagement and reduce stress.

"When decision-making power is shared through a thoughtful and deliberate process, the practice can elevate a team from feeling like a set of disjointed individuals at work to operating as a tight-knit community."

Concordia, a New Orleans community architecture and planning firm, was charged with helping to rebuild the city after Hurricane Katrina. Concordia's approach included facilitating the genuine involvement of the people who lived in the neighborhoods destroyed by Katrina. Extending decision-making power to the people who would be directly affected led to breakthrough results that had eluded two previous – and expensive – rehabilitation efforts.

Develop authentic connections based on mutual care.

Instead of framing relationships as, "It's not what you know but who you know" and emphasizing network building for the sake of furthering sales or careers, slow down and invest in authentic connections based on mutual care. By deliberately building care into a culture, you nurture relationships of trust and safety.

"Prioritizing relationships is the practice of bringing a spirit of care to everyday interactions with team members and people in the broader community whom our work affects."

Trust and safety, in turn, reduce needless friction at work and open the door to courageous conversations that yield faster, better results. When people feel safe with one another, ideas and creativity blossom. Relationships of care and trust foster openness to opposing ideas and constructive feedback. They can assuage frustrations, resentments and other difficult emotions that might cause stress and, eventually, negative conflict. Care and trust generate empathy even beyond the group, engendering a larger worldview in which people consider the impact of their actions on others, the community and the environment.

Learn from past injustices and work to right their wrongs.

When you don't know the history of your country, community, industry or organization, it hobbles your ability to avoid past mistakes and make better, values-based decisions about the present and future. Ignorance of the foundations of business as usual can cause you to perpetuate them. And previous generations offer insights and wisdom that can aid efforts to redress past wrongs and to recognize and stop present harm.

“Reckoning with history is the practice of creating intentional time, space and processes to unpack and address the past in ways relevant to the work at hand.”

You won't likely consider the past until you carve out specific time for it. Put storytelling about the past on the agenda. Discuss past hurts deliberately, not to inflict sorrow but to learn and grow.

Reflect on recent decisions, including wins and losses. Conduct after-action reviews to examine the impact of decisions and to learn from successes and mistakes. The sustainable housing nonprofit PUSH Buffalo uses stories from Buffalo's fascinating past, including narratives about the nation's first Black-run cooperatives, to demonstrate the past success and current potential of African-Americans.

Foster a healthy, respectful approach to divergent viewpoints.

For organizations to see the benefits of diversity, its practice must go well beyond compliance. It demands inclusion and belonging – a seat at the decision-making table for all. Diversity of thought leads to diversity of ideas: more ideas to consider and, as a result, better decision outcomes. Bring people together across age, race, economic background, gender, sexuality and class. A sense of safety and trust in one another will enable the kind of full candor that makes progress possible.

“Seeking difference is the practice of refusing to accept business-as-usual assumptions about who should be at the table.”

Invite input from stakeholders inside and outside the organization. Encourage constructive disagreement about which course of action to pursue by deliberately inviting people who oppose consensus ideas. Make sure to include people who bring real experience about the issues at hand.

Source wisdom from your body, emotions and nature.

In the status quo, knowledge results from formal learning – college degrees, certificates and other credentials. Informal learning and wisdom gained through experience, intuition and spirituality attract less respect in Western culture. But when individuals and organizations embrace art, bodily intelligence, emotion, deep breathing and connection to nature, additional knowledge can emerge.

“Sourcing from multiple ways of knowing is the practice of considering, valuing and attuning to multiple types of knowledge.”

Recognize and discourage biases that devalue nontraditional sources of knowledge. Encourage walks in the woods, share stories and even insights gleaned from dreams to cultivate new insights. Honor hard-won discernment gained from experience as much as that from the written word or so-called expert opinion.

Take time to slow down, de-stress and tap into your own wisdom. At the Heart Research Alliance, for example, scientists invited the deep involvement of patients as experts in their own conditions – a practice crucial to the group’s innovations in medical research.

Slow down to be more fully present and productive.

Believing you can slow down to speed up might prove the most difficult practice. Business as usual promotes an always-on mind-set; people rush from project to project, producing but rarely contemplating or thinking. When people slow down to become fully present in a conversation or task, time matters less, urgency falls away and people accomplish more, better, faster.

“Trusting there is time means believing there is always time available to prioritize engagement and care in how we work.”

To change people’s attitudes toward time, acknowledge constraints and deadlines. Give yourself and others the necessary time for priority work, as well as breaks, reflection, collaboration and thinking. Don’t risk burning yourself and others out by making everything urgent. Recognize and reward people who seek and give assistance. Encourage longer-term thinking over immediate gains or quick fixes.

Develop inexpensive, user-friendly prototypes that facilitate early feedback and testing.

Borrow from the Lean movement, which emphasizes the development of cheap, quick prototypes that stakeholders can see and even touch or use. This highly inclusive process facilitates early feedback; it tests ideas against tangible prototypes and often results in final products, services or outcomes that prove superior to those created by traditional top-down approaches.

Prototype to better serve stakeholders’ needs rather than to maximize profits. Keep an open mind and practice the scientific method: Assemble feedback, make revisions and repeat. Learn along the way, and don’t wait for a perfect solution.

About the Authors

Jess Rimington is a scholar and strategist focused on the methodologies and ethics of emerging economic systems. **Joanna Cea** is co-director of the Beloved Economies initiative, which researches models for improving work and the US economy.



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