

# Getting to grips with the basics 01

Every one of us who has ever checked work e-mails on a smartphone at a time we should have been either asleep, or doing something important like playing with our kids, eating a meal, or looking as we cross the road, knows two things: the way we work is changing; and the response to this change in the organizations we work for is way behind.

The new capabilities are not aligned with the old structures. As a result, many organizations find themselves confused – expecting workers to work more, without modifying policy or procedure to untether them.

This chapter explores:

- the context of the world we work in;
- what an organization really is;
- why starting a movement is important;
- how purpose gives meaning to and shapes the way your organization acts.

## A relentlessly changing world of work

While technology is rendering old approaches to work obsolete, many businesses are yet to realize that doing things the way they always have is, far from being the safe option, the biggest risk they can take. As long as it remains possible to download a standardized business model, or see a billion blog posts proclaiming the imperative of *digital transformation*, the greater the danger for organizations without the safety blanket of vast cash reserves (the modern equivalent of time) becomes.

The digital transformation is over. We live in an age where digital is the default setting. Anyone who is yet to transform is either obsolete, or on the way there.

## ***Digital by default***

A few years ago, my daughter started school. During one of our first school runs in the British countryside, we passed a traditional red telephone box. Once a feature of street corners everywhere and a cornerstone of the communication infrastructure, by now they were becoming rarer and rarer.

As we chatted and pointed out things we saw as we drove, she suddenly looked confused. Turning to me, she asked *Daddy, what's that red thing?*

*That's a telephone box,* I replied.

The puzzled look on her face made me realize the need to elaborate further. I explained that in the days before mobile phones, people would use telephone boxes to make a call when they were out and needed to speak to someone.

After a moment's pondering silence, the puzzled look on her face turned to one of incredulity.

*But Daddy, why didn't they just Skype?*

The idea that there is anything left to transform is an anachronism. While many organizations have, with characteristic sluggishness, recently started to respond to the first wave of change in the digital era by introducing agile environments, flexible working policies and the like, the world they operate in continues to move on at an ever-increasing pace.

That telephone box still stands, but today there's not even a telephone in it. Instead it has become a local book exchange.

The real world doesn't need to ponder a digital transformation – it's already the default setting. Technology is enabling us to create, work and think in new ways that render the structures of the industrial age obsolete. Because of the world view those structures were set up to operate in, changing them is a dangerously laborious process.

It doesn't need to be.

## ***Change needs a response***

It's not only a question of *if* organizations are set up to respond to these changes, it's a question of *how* they do it and *how fast*. You can't get on a train after it's left the station, and running behind it is both too slow and too exhausting to ever catch up.

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## CASE STUDY

Despite fire fighting by selling off various parts of its business, HMV Group went into administration in 2013. It had failed to adapt its retail model to suit the shifting landscape. A large stake in online music download store 7 Digital allowed it to set up its own download store later that same year, as it struggled to find a way back to profit. By that time, the music consumption landscape had shifted again to focus on streaming, leaving HMV's attempts to modernize outmoded by the success of Spotify and, latterly, Apple Music. The real digital opportunity had passed.

HMV returned to profit and by 2015, had once again become the UK's largest retailer of physical music (reclaiming this from Amazon). Capitalizing on a new wave of physical music demand, fuelled partly by vinyl which by 2016 had hit a year-on-year increase of 53 per cent (BBC, 2017), HMV restructured its core business to reflect that of Fopp, a keep-it-simple music and media retailer which it had owned for some years. A journey of musical discovery, clever retail tactics, nostalgia and tangibility.

When HMV finally understood what customers wanted from a physical music store, it managed to return to profit. The retailer had to adapt and managed to do so, by the skin of its teeth, by doing what it was good at in a way people wanted it to, not by doing things the way it had always done them.

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When Microsoft launched its Zune portable media player in 2006, the consumer market had long been cornered by Apple's iPod and iTunes. It wasn't innovative – it was a response that came too late. Unsurprisingly, it failed.

Waiting for your competitor to launch something, watching how it performs, then trying to go head-to-head by launching something similar just doesn't work today. The product or service life cycle is too short. By the time your first iteration hits the market, your competitor – assuming they have a connection with their audience – will already be innovating and iterating again, based on real feedback from real users.

There is no time to stand still today, so to respond to the changing demands, expectations and capabilities of the working world, our organizations not only need to act relentlessly, but do so at an almost instantaneous rate. In December 2016, a Tesla customer sent a tweet to its CEO Elon Musk, outlining a frustration with people using a particular Supercharger

Station as public parking. Musk responded, promising action. Within six days, Tesla had announced plans to charge an hourly fee to drivers parking in bays beyond the time needed to charge their cars.

That's the kind of speed required. Not only do you need good ideas, but you need to be able to act on them, with directional input from customer feedback, pretty much instantly to stay ahead of the game. Can your organization act that fast, or is the lag time between idea and execution just too long?

Admittedly, in the Tesla case, the rapid action came from the CEO and the question of whether a less senior employee would have been able to create action so quickly is a huge one. To perform at its optimum, every organization needs to be able to act that quickly in any context. To do that it needs the right information available at all times to inform those decisions, without just waving a finger in the air.

A good idea is a good idea, whoever has it, but unless you act on it, the window of opportunity disappears. Structuring your human workplace to allow information and ideas to flow freely, while trusting people by giving them the permission to act in the best interests of the business, is a major part of achieving amazing performance.

To really understand how it's possible, we need to rethink our fundamental views of what organizations really are and how they fit into the world.

## A new basic truth

There was a time when some people may have thought the world looked as seen in Figure 1.1.

**Figure 1.1** An outdated linear view of everything

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From the knowledge and experience they had available to them up to that point, they held the view that it was flat and therefore you could fall off the edge. I have no evidence that anyone actually held that view, but it's a nice anecdote because, of course, today we know that the world looks as we see it in Figure 1.2.

We all use the facts we have available to form a world view at a given time. In this connected age, where – through smartphones – in our own

**Figure 1.2** The world as we know it

pockets we carry the ability to plug into a global brain, we have access to facts, factors and opinions in an instant. Today it would seem crazy to argue the case for a flat, linear world (even though some people do!), because we all have the knowledge and experience that tells us the world is round and dynamic.

It turns, is always changing, always moving forward. It evolves in constant cycles. A year is a cycle, a day is a cycle, seasons, weather, climate – they're all cycles.

In light of the evidence we experience every day and the weight of popular opinion, who in their right mind would argue that the world is flat? It seems so obvious to us today!

For decades, centuries even, the story has been the same in business. Business has seen itself as linear, organizations have seen themselves as linear. You start, create a product or service, sell that product or service, do more of that. Keep doing more of that. Add more products/services, sell more of them. Add more people to sell more products/services. Sell each until you can sell no more, then remove it from sale.

It's a linear approach that assumes we're always moving from A to B. Traditional organizational development and product development aim for finished articles, mature, static structures. Because of that, they don't launch a product, service or idea until they see it as being 100 per cent ready, then they launch with a fanfare, and start the process.

This terrible assumption that linear process is in keeping with the modern world also assumes that what works today will work tomorrow. If we do what we've always done, we will win.

But that doesn't work today. The world has changed and so has business.

## Forget what you know

If you're going to create a remarkable, human workplace, fit for the future, it's probably good to have a clear idea of what you're actually building. There's absolutely no need to make anything any more complicated than it needs to be. Complexity is merely an opportunity for confusion to arise and it's been over-used for far too long.

Layer after layer of unnecessary complexity has been piled on top of the fundamentals of business and organizational development, to the point where we've lost sight of what's really important. Professional silos, best practices and industry standards are all evidence of this.

I spent a lot of my early career frustrated with bureaucracy and the inability of organizations I worked in and around to think differently. As a result, I embarked on an experimental year exploring the concept of *work* from the workers' perspective. A big part of the project was an exploration of how organizations influence us and why they operate in the way they do.

I'd already come to realize that the largest organizations have become far more complex than they need to be, for reasons that could fill a book in their own right. A great conversation with Alison Germain, organizational development consultant and coach, who at the time was with NBC Universal, shifted my thinking to an entirely new level.

Ali's premise was that organizations don't actually exist – and she's right! It's a simple idea, but completely true. It's also counter-intuitive to the way we have traditionally worked, where the organization has been held as an altar before which we bow down in gratitude for the gracious provision of employment.

Physically, organizations don't exist. They have no mass, therefore there are no set rules on how they should operate. The systems, models and theories that have developed around them are nothing more than conventions and ideas. They are certainly not gospels. The fact that every now and then, an organization arises that breaks the mould completely by operating in a wholly different way proves that.

Whether Airbnb and its committed focus on the experience all people have in their interactions with it, or Buffer and its global workforce that

has no physical workplace, being an outlier is an opportunity to be amazing. Because, when you realize that doing the same thing as everyone else will make you the same as them (and no better), the futility of the norm becomes apparent. Things can be and are done differently, because when something doesn't exist, it can be anything you want it to be. Within the basic parameters of the law, we can create whatever we want to. In fact, some people create highly successful organizations outside those parameters (even though I wouldn't necessarily advise it)!

Forget everything you think you know and build a new picture through your own lens. It's the only way to be completely different to everyone else.

## What is an organization anyway?

We're all guilty of something. I've even been doing it in this discussion, so far. We lump the idea of a business and an organization together as a single entity. The words have become interchangeable and it's this that has allowed the complexity to creep in. It's unsurprising, as the two things are so intertwined, but it's also time for clarity.

Your *business* is what you do.

Your *organization* is how you do it.

In most cases, the business does exist. It's registered and certified as real, legally. The type of company you are (partnership, limited and so on) is part of that. Your business is reflected by the brands, products and services it creates. It has a reason for existence that drives the creation of those things and also influences how you go about doing that.

The organization however, is completely of your making. It's the structure you put in place to do the things that help the business reach its aims. Organizations are frameworks of human making.

It's as simple as that!

Ignore the commercial association of the word 'business' and reimagine it as any kind of exchange. This applies everywhere – in all sectors, industries and approaches. Wherever goods or services are provided, this definition applies. Hospitals, governments, non-profits, charities, they all count. The organizations themselves are a manifestation of the strategy and approach required for that business to do what it's aiming to do, as simply and effectively as possible.

The ideas shared in this book can be applied anywhere. Anywhere that work is done can be a human workplace, because you can design it to be. We need to be clear on that from the start.

## End users

Both businesses and organizations have end users. This is important, because they are subtly different, yet the approaches taken to provide for each set of end users should be similar. Until recently, this wasn't the case.

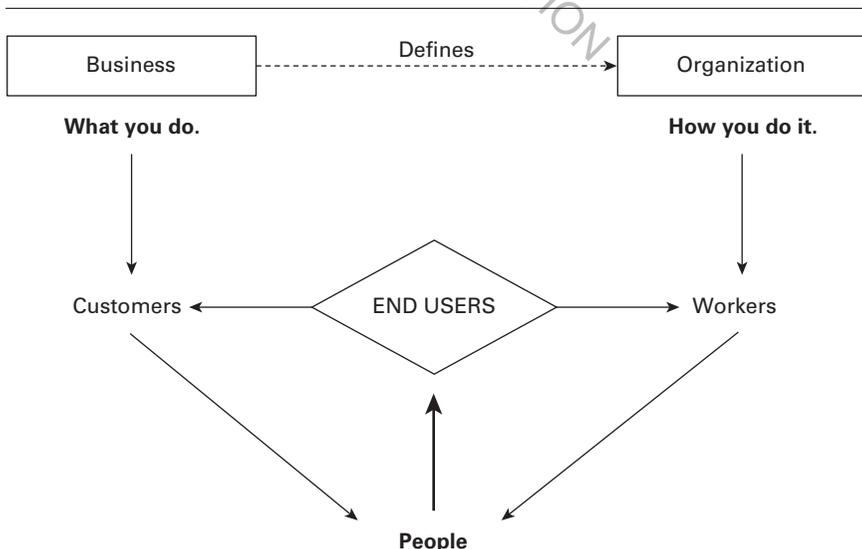
The end users of a business are its customers, the recipients of the goods or services it creates.

An organization's end users are its workers, the people creating the business. The organization, as a structure for delivering the aims of a business, is by default a provider of services to those people. As recipients of the services an organization provides, workers are also customers, as shown in Figure 1.3.

The realization that employees and workers are end users, has helped to change the philosophy of leading organizations and create the movement towards people-first, human workplaces. From well-known established organizations like eBay and Sky, to pace-setters like Vincit – winner of European Workplace of the Year 2016, rapidly expanding brands like Airbnb or Netflix and startups like Mind Candy and Deliveroo, the view of workers as end users is forming a central part of their organizational design and development.

Customer experience is a notion that has been around for a long time now. The idea that if you provide the best possible experience for your

**Figure 1.3** People as end users



customers, they will not only stay loyal to your business, but act as advocates and evangelists, is today seen as basic common sense. It's exactly the same with the experience you provide to your employees.

Give people a reason to work with you. Give them a reason to stay. Give them a reason to tell the world. Give them the opportunity to do their best work in a way that suits them and is in the best interests of the business. It doesn't sound too hard, does it – so why do we make it so complicated?

Building your amazing human workplace is like building an app, platform, or system. If it doesn't meet a need for its end users in a sufficiently accessible way, they won't use it.

Know your end users.

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## CASE STUDY

### **Vincit, best workplace in Europe, 2016**

Vincit is Latin for to conquer or win and the company aims to do just that. With a string of workplace awards over recent years, the software company believes its success comes from a combination of satisfied customers and satisfied employees. This belief that when people thrive, the organization thrives too drives a passion for work that has seen Vincit named Best Workplace in Europe 2016.

As director of people operations, Johanna Pystynen takes the lead in creating a workplace where everyone can thrive. She shared with me some of the ideas that drive Vincit forward.

#### ***The Vincit philosophy***

Everything is based on trust between everyone. If the company trusts people and people trust the company as their employer, we don't need to have so many rules and restrictions. We can allow people to make their own decisions and that leads to success.

When the company was established, the two founders came from big multinationals where they were led by numbers and they both wanted to do something completely different. That's why they decided to build Vincit on trust and create an environment where people can be happy and have the energy to make decisions.

#### ***Shifting from control to trust***

It's not easy for people to be suddenly given full autonomy. That's why leadership is about creating this environment where you can help people to make their own

decisions. Vincit's leadership style focuses on creating the channels people can use to help them make decisions and have a voice within the organization.

Instead of telling people how to decide or act, or just giving them information, we are trying to develop an environment that helps them to do it on their own.

In this setting, the leader is not the person who has all the information. Across the company we have a lot of experts who know better than the leader. As a leader at Vincit you have to see your role as helping people to succeed; you help them to lead themselves.

### ***Connecting people with organization***

We invest a lot of time developing frameworks for our organization. These help people to take responsibility for their own actions by providing the parameters of success. They know what is required, but then have the freedom to choose how to get there and plan the support they need to make it happen.

Both parties need to benefit from the relationship, so when we recruit, as a starting point we make sure people know what environment we offer and whether it can help them to succeed.

### ***Linking the people function to the business***

Vincit doesn't actually need a traditional HR function. Our own people team is evolving to become an internal service design team. My mission is to create the kind of human resource function that ensures there are no silos, just an organization that helps all of its people to succeed.

Already, the people team is proactive rather than reactive. We try to avoid risks and help people see the possibilities and threats their own actions may present.

### ***Creating an experience***

Most of the time, traditional HR tries to plan things from its own perspective. By building an employee experience, a wider view is required that ties together people functions with other areas like the physical workplace. Already at Vincit, we are thinking about welfare through a connection with people.

We have to start with the end users, who are our employees. For example, some of our recruitment processes are developed through a service design approach. Understanding the problems applicants face during the process informs our process. Simple things like responding to every application within 24 hours make an impact on positive experience. The experience starts with a person's first interaction with the organization.

### ***Benefits in traditional terms***

Vincit's main business is to sell its competence. When people are happy and motivated, the customer benefits. This is measurable.

We try all the time to help people to know what they want to do next. Our responsibility is to give them projects that automatically help them develop.

As well as the bottom line, when we succeed in these things, we don't have the traditional HR problems other organizations face. People are not stressed or feeling demotivated, because their daily worklife is supporting them.

### ***What makes an amazing workplace***

People always ask us 'don't you have any problems in your company?' I always tell them that we have a lot. The main thing that is different here is that we talk about these problems.

Our people can say openly when they have ideas, criticisms or changes they want to suggest. We take time to listen to them and then do something about it. That's why people feel they have autonomy and they can help us to create a better environment all the time.

Communication is a priority. Coming back to leaders, there's a level of openness required that is difficult for many. It helps the organization for people to know that leaders don't have all the answers, as it starts a conversation that helps progress.

### ***Staying amazing***

Vincit's strategy is to stay adaptable. We don't know what happens next, we're just trying to stay agile, so we can see all the possibilities around us. If we succeed in that, we will always have opportunity.

#### *Where to start to become a more people-focused workplace*

- Give people autonomy  
People have a lot of thoughts about their own job and are best placed to achieve goals in their own way.
- Provide a framework  
Understanding what they are aiming for helps people to decide how to act.
- Create an open forum  
Make sure there's a place to discuss everything. Vincit uses Slack – every employee is on the same channel and all questions, ideas or issues can open conversation for everyone.

### **A caveat**

Much conversation around organizations and workplaces talks about offices. It's far easier to rethink the way service workers operate than, for example, manufacturing teams or paramedics, due to the increased level of basic, unmovable parameters that exist around their work.

When we're talking about human workplaces, what we're really looking at is how any organization, in any sector, of any size, can build itself around its one constant feature –people – to succeed in the modern world.

The ideas in this book can be applied to any organization, doing anything, anywhere.

## **Dynamic systems**

Socio-economically, the bribe of a career path and a job for life can no longer be guaranteed. Politically, no one knows what will happen next and we're now starting to expect the unexpected as standard. Uncertainty rules our lives today and as the lines between work and home are blurred by technology, we're reassessing our relationship with work and the organizations that provide it.

If the connection between workers and their work requires more from them than a pick-up, put-down eight hour stint, then it needs to give them a damn good reason to be there. Increasingly, as balance erodes, work needs to integrate more seamlessly into our lives. Our experiences with the businesses and organizations we work with is a huge part of that. Workers, as end users, need a high-quality experience, or like their commercial counterparts, they will go elsewhere to get it.

I was recently speaking with the head of human resources for a UK manufacturing organization notorious locally for its less than favourable treatment of employees as anything more than paid labour. She reported the regular occurrence of workers not showing up for work and not calling in sick or otherwise. On contacting them, sometimes after a number of attempts, they'd nonchalantly say things like *I've left* and *I'm working somewhere else now*.

Of course, this lack of loyalty and adherence to proper procedure causes consternation within the management, although there is no change in the

way they treat their people, or operate their organization. Their approach is not about enabling people to do their best work to achieve the aims of the business, it's an antiquated belief that their workers should be grateful for a wage and that they are there to do nothing more than the basic tasks they are told to do.

The old models of work and ways of organizing it were designed for suppression and control like this. These two mechanisms, applied today, prevent the adaptivity, responsiveness and ability to innovate quickly that are required to compete. The way it's always been is no longer an option.

Our organizations can no longer deliver business aims in the most effective way through linear rigidity. They must be dynamic, evolving systems – a reflection of the world they exist in. In short, they need to be alive!

For many years the customer has been king. Customer service, customer experience, customer retention have all been major areas of attention over the last few decades and it remains true that if no customers turned up tomorrow, there would be no business. We're starting to realize though that it's equally true that if no one turned up tomorrow to serve those customers, there would be no business.

Every business has one thing in common – people. You can remove or change any other aspect of an organization, be it environment, equipment, or anything else and still be in business. Combining this with the increasingly consumer-like choice we have today as workers, it's clear that organizations are all about people. Without people, there is no organization!

Since the Industrial Revolution, organizations have been trying to use humans to undertake robotic jobs, turning individuals into numbers to repeat tasks again and again. Now we have robots to do the robot jobs. We need people to be people – it's what they're best at and it starts with allowing them to be just that. People are not assets, or resources – they are people and we need to start realizing and recognizing the benefits that treating them as such can have.

## **Do the right things – for the right reasons**

If we all used this simple mantra to guide everything we did, the world would be a better place. It implies a level of consideration in behaviour and to some extent, a level of ethics. In this age of uncertainty, we're finally starting to recognize the negative impacts we're having on the world and the problems that decades of rampant capitalism have caused environmentally, socially, economically and politically.

Because all resources are finite, models based on infinite growth are destructive and crazy. Traditional linear models of organizations that base success purely on growth in finance and scale are equally ridiculous – yet still they prevail.

Just as common logic came to realize that the world was round in the first place, so it's coming to realize that a relentless drive for nothing above profit is hugely damaging. Cheap clothing from a store in London, on the face of it, seems like a great thing, but consider the working conditions and treatment of workers required to produce these goods at a price that still leaves room for profit, as well as the environmental impact of materials and processes used to manufacture and transport them. The real cost is much greater, but it just doesn't show on a balance sheet.

In 2013, the collapse of the eight-storey Rana Plaza Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh killed over 1,200 people. It was reported that after cracks appeared in the walls the day before and the building was closed, garment workers were ordered to return to work the next day (The Fifth Estate/CBC, 2013). Under pressure to supply fast fashion items to the West, these workers paid the ultimate price.

Practices like these aren't infinitely sustainable and while the mechanisms of development slowly improve such situations, that they are allowed to exist in the first place is tribute to a profit-first mentality that has pillaged the world of its natural resources and treated workers as less than people since the Industrial Revolution (and before). No business making the right decisions for the right reasons would let such negative impacts happen. Profit can come as a by-product of doing business with conscience, but when it's the number one driver, it comes at the cost of everything else – even human life.

Worse still, we let it happen. As consumers we have choice, as workers traditionally less so, but that is increasingly changing.

It leaves a conundrum though; if people chose not to buy these items, the negative impacts of their production would be reduced with falling demand, but then the workers (poor conditions and all) would be even less able to support their families, so poverty would increase further, making them more likely to take terrible jobs with poor conditions. It's a huge symbiotic mess that needs to be unravelled, but it's starting to move onto the agenda.

The recent rise in businesses with conscience, who base their approaches on doing the right things for the right reasons show that profitability can come with a genuine belief in doing the right thing. You can bet that every one of the fashion companies outsourcing their manufacturing to Rana Plaza have corporate social responsibility programmes and charity affiliations, but

do they genuinely think about the ramifications of all their actions beyond whether they can achieve higher profits?

The people tied to and affected by an organization include, but go way beyond, those on its direct payroll. For example, consumer demand shapes the actions of smartphone makers' well-treated employees and has a knock-on impact on the communities that mine the precious and rare metals required to build the electronic devices they design (*The Washington Post*, 2016). Thankfully, positive impact is as powerful as negative.

In June 2016, the UK-based healthy food for workers startup Lunch'd took to the streets to actively seek out homeless people and provide them with a healthy meal. Using surplus ingredients that would otherwise have been discarded by business necessity, the gesture created positive impact, which in turn enhanced the reputation of the company with zero spending on PR.

Every day, tonnes of perfectly edible food is thrown out by major retailers. It makes you wonder what taking positive action on this could achieve for their business. Doing the right thing for the right reasons pays off – and not only via karma.

With the growth of accountability through technology, good and bad practices are starting to be highlighted first-hand, without the filter of organizational PR. Supermarket food waste is now well-documented in the UK and people are taking action to address the situation, applying pressure on the retailers. On a larger, global scale even fashion manufacturers and brands can be found behaving with genuine conscience.

They're actually benefiting from it too. Doing the right things, for the right reasons is morally and ethically rewarding and it creates advantages that can be measured in traditional business terms.

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## CASE STUDY

On Black Friday 2016, clothing company Patagonia donated 100 per cent of its sales to non-profit organizations working to protect the environment. That equated to \$10 million, five times their expectation.

Consumers got behind the idea because they believed in its positive impact and knowing Patagonia as a business that bases its ethos on activism and positive impact, the offer was recognized as authentic, not gimmicky. As a result, Patagonia achieved something amazing and contributed positively to the world around us, all while following their mission statement to:

Build the best product, do no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.

From a traditional business perspective, Patagonia's Black Friday actions seem crazy. The idea of a brand giving away its entire sales on one of the most important shopping days of the year is just not in keeping with profit-first wisdom. It certainly wouldn't please traditional shareholders.

Look at it the other way, though. Patagonia wanted to do something in keeping with its founding beliefs and in acting to its principles attracted more customers and greater loyalty to its business. The resulting coverage, exposure and goodwill generated by this act could not have been generated by an additional \$10 million added to the marketing budget, because what happened here was a genuine connection between a business and people. It's a case of Patagonia doing the right things for the right reasons – and benefitting from it.

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By doing the right thing, your business gives people, both customers and workers, a reason to believe in it. People congregate where they believe.

As we'll see later in the book, applying a little thought and doing the right things, for the right reasons can also create positive impact in the workplace itself, drive amazing leadership and help shape your simple, better, human organization.

## Making a connection

To encourage people to congregate around your business or organization, you need to give them something to believe in. There has to be a reason for people to buy from you or to work for you.

Price or salary can be a factor that attracts people to transact with you, but it doesn't foster loyalty and therefore will never create a lasting connection or a relationship that remains strong over time.

A strong connection between an organization and its people has many benefits. If a connection between an organization and its workers is based purely on salary, the offer of a better salary will tempt workers elsewhere. It's a temporary, transactional relationship where work is exchanged for money.

When the connection is based on a common belief or goal, there's a shared mission which leads to a deeper, two-way bond that offers more to all involved. People are more deeply invested when they believe in something – they care about making it succeed.

In a saturated world, where we're all faced with information overload, to succeed, our organizations need to stand out and create a connection with the *right* people – those who believe in its mission. It's the only way to cut through the noise and make a real connection. There are myriad opportunities for transactional relationships, but authentic connections based on shared beliefs are necessarily rarer and as a result, far more powerful.

Installing a slide in your workplace, or a ping pong table in a meeting room just because you've seen Google or another funky startup do it, doesn't make it right for your organization. Just as people thrive best when they're true to themselves, organizations do too. People look for something genuine to connect to; they need a reason to align.

Relationships based on connection rather than transaction are more productive, more forgiving, more sharing and more committed. Why would a worker voluntarily respond to e-mails or flex their hours to support a business beyond their basic contractual obligations without reason? If it meant doing something they really believed in or were passionate about, they would choose to.

There is no great separation between the way things work in our personal lives and the way they work in our professional lives. The dynamics of relationships are the same wherever people are involved, so the drivers of success are the same too. As a result, building an organization has more in common with the principles of operating a functional household, than creating a formalized system which requires people to adapt to operate within it and sacrifice much of their personal individuality for transactional gain.

The human workplace is one based on real, human connections. Connections we recognize and connections that recognize us. A great challenge for any organization is understanding how to foster that connection to ensure it has three fundamental things:

- the right people;
- in the right places;
- doing the right things.

There is nothing more to any organization than these three things. All that is required of any organization is to get them right. Creating an opportunity for the right people, place and action are all it takes to succeed and that all starts with a connection. When you get this right, everything else falls into place, but to do that you need to develop your organization in a far more open, collaborative and participatory way, which requires a lot of letting go.

It's a question of stripping back the layer of complexity and getting back to the fundamentals of what you do, why you do it and how. In itself this

isn't easy. Many managers have justified their positions and reinforced their positions by adding complexity, while often workers mark their contributions by adding extra tasks to procedures, paragraphs to policies and levels of committee approval. All of this complexity masks the real reason why the business does what it does and how it does it, reducing the opportunity for those genuine connections with the right people to occur.

Why make it any more complicated than it needs to be?

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## CASE STUDY

### **Making the connection: interview with Kirstin Furber**

*BBC Worldwide is the main commercial arm of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). I spoke to Kirstin Furber, people director about what it takes to connect a complex, dispersed organization with people who share its beliefs, why it's important and to learn more about how she continues to develop the human aspects of this workplace.*

My ethos around calling myself a people director is about enabling people to be themselves at work. Companies today need to understand how, in the challenging world with multiple pressures and external forces, that can be balanced with business aims.

My belief is that to best enable this, the organization must:

- be clear of the direction;
- involve people in that;
- make sure they understand and can buy in personally;
- facilitate and manage their views and feedback.

Focusing in this way allows people to congregate around purpose. They gain a common understanding of what needs to be achieved and to actually achieve it, people need to be themselves. That's core to operating now and into the future.

Most companies now are starting to think about how to transform from rigid corporate hierarchy to allow the flexibility needed for people to be themselves. It's an exciting time we're in! There are tangible business benefits to making this shift, too. When people *want* to work, they're able to contribute far better and by unlocking different thinking and deeper contributions, the organization can unlock new potential.

BBC Worldwide is a creative media organization. It has always needed to innovate to stay competitive, but today and into the future every organization needs to innovate to adopt the same mindset. Choice is allowing people to become much more fussy as consumers and employees, so they need to be given reasons to buy from or work for a specific organization. If you're not happy, you're not going to be able to do your best work, or want to engage. When that happens, the organization misses out on ideas that could lead to potential opportunities. Everyone has ideas and thoughts, so they should be able to bring these to work.

It's harder for more complex, dispersed organizations, because not everyone is in the same place at the same time. Success is about balancing out giving people control and influence, creating or maintaining the connection with the organization, while aligning it with a bigger, over-arching perspective. It all has to be done at the same time and it takes time to do.

Clearly communicating, clearly engaging and defining purpose and strategy at the top strategic level is important. At the same time there needs to be the freedom for individuals and teams to apply these ideas locally and create the experience that allows them to do their best work towards that. Respecting how people do things is important and when you work globally, even though you might be using the same language, words might have very different meanings. You need to be aware of that.

Gone are the days where you have 'engagement in a box' that is distributed from a head office to the world. It's not authentic. Today we create a set of principles, then ask teams locally how they want to implement them for their own market and culture, making sure we have the mechanism to receive feedback.

At BBC Worldwide, when we were looking to build out what type of culture we wanted in the organization, we started by celebrating what was good, then identifying areas to build on. We went out to over 1,400 people across the organization, led by managers and leaders instead of HR and started conversations of all shapes and sizes that shaped our organization's commitment behaviours.

These behaviours were all agreed and refined as an organization, at all levels. Now, three years on, it's still really powerful to say that we did this together, rather than through a consultant or management imposing an approach. The values of any big organization will always be there and combined with an ethos and purpose, they can shape the organization. But with a clear vision of how we all behave, it's easier for everyone to understand and implement, rather than trying to interpret value.

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## **BBC Worldwide behaviours and how they manifest**

- *Clear direction*  
Leaders provide clear information on strategy and what we need to achieve, employees ask when they don't know.
- *Achieving business results*  
We know what our targets are and aim to achieve those.
- *Innovation and creativity*  
Openness to different ideas and risk taking.
- *Relationships*  
Giving honest and open feedback. Respecting different voices, opinions and diverse backgrounds.
- *Global excellence*  
Not one size fits all. Respecting different ways of doing things that contribute to this overall mission.

This is important, but rather than analysing it too much, you should be doing it. It's far more powerful when behaviours are used every day to provide practical feedback to everyone, rather than just staying as words on a PowerPoint slide. Organizations that aren't open to the human element and fail to recognize the wealth of knowledge and opinions their people can offer, risk missing out on a lot of potential positive influence.

## **Create a connection**

Kirstin offers this advice for any organization looking to start on this transformational journey to connect with its people:

- be real;
- take a progressive approach;
- pilot first;

- engage people's opinions;
- take action;
- make it organic.

Treat people as you would treat each other. It's hard and it's not a question of being nice to everyone all of the time. Most important is being clear, transparent and honest about what's going on. People can make their choices and decide whether they're in or out based on this experience.

## Thoughts on seriousness

I'm often amused by the unnecessary behaviours that pervade certain types of business, the unnecessary reinforcement of importance or status. Just by looking at the way workers act, or businesses communicate, you can get a feel for how they organize. Traditionally, the more formal you were, the more seriously people would take you.

Richard Branson was one of the first to question this with his informal approach and then-revolutionary refusal to wear a tie (as well as his penchant for a knitted sweater). The notion that formality means business has been eroding ever since.

As our organizations change to fit the world around them, the idea of the ivory tower is disappearing. In some of the world's most successful organizations, it would be difficult to distinguish the CEO from a trainee in terms of appearance and approach. That has many benefits when it comes to creating connections and encouraging open communication.

Now, more than ever, it's your actions, rather than your words that define whether people align with you. Authenticity counts above anything else in creating the right connection with the right people. I spent many years as a manager trying to adapt myself to what I thought a particular business expected of me. It was only when I gave in to my own informality and started acting authentically that I was able to form meaningful connections with my colleagues.

Seriousness and formality are fine, if they are authentic. They should never be forced and doing so serves no purpose other than to add layers of complication and misinformation. People connect with other people when they have something in common. Fake or token attempts to force connections are always found out in the end.

After all, why would you want to hang around with someone you had nothing in common with?

The organizations of the future are no longer machines or systems, they are movements. To make a successful human workplace, you need to start a movement.

## ***What's the point, anyway?***

Behind every great movement is a great reason.

Have you ever woken up, to head to your futile job and wondered *why am I doing this?* Most workers have, at some stage and when people feel like this, their level of contribution drops through the floor.

The passionate people of Greenpeace, many of whom are unpaid volunteers, all believe fully in its cause:

We defend the natural world and promote peace by investigating, exposing and confronting environmental abuse, and championing environmentally responsible solutions ([www.greenpeace.org.uk/what-we-do](http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/what-we-do)).

They are activists, committed to this mission, passionately making their individual and collective contribution. It's unlikely that activists get out of bed wondering why they are doing it, because the mission is clear to them and it's why they align with their cause. The unlikely day an activist stops believing in the cause, is the day they stop aligning with and go elsewhere.

The word 'purpose' fits well here and although it has become over-used to describe simple business mission statements rather than a genuine reason to inspire a deep connection with people, it's a recognizable idea so we'll use it. An organization's number one purpose is to ensure the survival of the business, then pursue its aims. Whether the business aims prioritize a cause or profit affects how the organization operates. It looks something like this:

$$\text{Purpose} = \text{Survival} + X$$

How an organization behaves, its longevity, impact and ability to adapt depends on how it defines its X.

An organization that pursues profit above all else, will find it harder to create a genuine connection with people and its relationships will remain transactional, regardless of the engagement, recruitment, retention, reward and recognition programmes it develops.

There's a spectrum where profit and cause are the two extremes. All organizations fall somewhere on that spectrum.

To understand where any organization falls on the spectrum, you need to consider what drives it and how it operates around that driving force. Use Figure 1.4 to think about where these organizations might lie:

**Figure 1.4** Purpose is survival + X

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SURVIVAL    +    X    Define Here

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- traditional financial institutions like HSBC and Barclays;
- Greenpeace;
- the UK's National Health Service.

It's possible to make some profit while pursuing a cause, it's also possible to pay token attention to a cause, while focusing on profit. The question is true authenticity, because that real position on the spectrum defines who the organization connects with, how it operates and how it feels. Where an organization sits on the spectrum drives its behaviour, operation and ability to succeed in the modern world. It's interesting to consider that the extremes at both end of the spectrum are exactly that.

Businesses that organize around a profit-first purpose assume that perpetual growth is possible and focus on it. They act as if the world and its resources are infinite – and we know they're not. In these uncertain times, assuming constant economic growth and scale is dangerous and the wheels can come off very quickly.

On our tiny dot floating in space, everything is limited. Since there is only a finite number of people we can ever connect with our organization, it is prudent to concentrate on making that connection as powerful and strong as it can be while growing it to its natural maximum.

In an extremist organization, the power of a strong connection between organization and people is evident in the unrelenting pursuit of a specific aim. Extremism is destructive though and it's also slow to change and adapt, because of those unrelenting beliefs.

Positive activism, on the other hand, is exactly that. If your organization does the right things for the right reasons, it will attract the right people to it to form a strong connection and start a movement in pursuit of shared beliefs. It will make a positive impact ('positive' being defined in terms of pursuing a cause. It's worth remembering that what one movement defines as positive, another would view as the opposite!).

Where the right people congregate, they can achieve amazing things together, because they share a belief in what they're doing. Structuring an organization for positive activism is the optimum place to allow it to survive, thrive and (where it wants to) even make some profit.

The only way you get true activists is by giving people a cause to believe in and congregate around, without forcing them to believe that and that only. Providing the structure for this to happen is the purpose of the organization.

Purpose is a founding principle for any organization, it's why they do what they do. It's the basis of the connection with people – customers and workers and the fundamental principle on which the organization operates. It not only shapes the way the organization behaves, it provides the reason for action. It's the basis of their movement. Even if it's not consciously recognized, every organization occupies a place on the purpose spectrum.

They have to, because without purpose, there is no point.

## Doing it

There is no specific way to create your own movement, adapt your organization or attract the right people. In fact, the great thing is that there are no set ways to make that happen. Finding their own way is what makes organizations individual, rather than carbon copies of each other.

Your organization has an infinite number of opportunities to be amazing. It has the potential to do that and is full of the people who can make it happen. What it may be lacking is two things: 1) knowing what amazing really is; and 2) allowing it to happen.

Moving away from traditions and being different, although traditionally seen as a risk, is the best thing your organization can do. Amazing is remarkable and nothing ever became remarkable by doing things the same way as everyone else.

One specific project I have worked on completely rethought a process. Implementing it would exponentially improve the quality of the service and in doing so would also save £250k per year against existing budgets. Having moved the idea through levels of committee, identified budget, selected a project team and getting everything set to start, final approval from the board was required.

As we went around the table, one by one, approval was granted, until we reached one person. 'I don't see evidence of other sites doing this and if we're going to do something like this, we need to know that at least five other sites have done it successfully' was the general gist of the argument, which was upheld. The project ground to a halt and the service continued to struggle, creating low morale for staff and a negative knock-on effect to customers. My alignment with the organization ended soon after.

Through being too scared to be remarkable and innovate, instead the organization held itself back. Trusting your people to do what you need them to do in pursuit of your purpose shouldn't be a risk. It should be a given!

While this book can show those at the top how to open up and give the organization permission to succeed, it also shows how positive activism at all levels can be very healthy. I can't outline every possibility, technique or approach your organization could employ to succeed, but I can highlight key themes and suggest starting points – real actions that you can take to create your human workplace.

The rest is up to you ...

## ***The evolve or die thing***

The *evolve or die* mantra has become a staple of business bloggers over the last few years, but to some extent, it rings true. The world is no longer the same as it was and change is getting quicker. If your organization can't adapt to the demands of the world today and tomorrow, it will become obsolete. There are many famous examples of where this has happened already.

The demise of Kodak alongside the rise of Instagram is widely quoted as a classic example of evolve or die in progress, although it's mis-reported. Kodak didn't collapse completely. It went close to the wire, but its troubles were an example of how a behemoth that isn't set up to adapt as quickly as the world changes around it will struggle.

Today though, Kodak exists as a smaller, more agile and innovative organization, focused on products and services that fit today and tomorrow. As a result, it's returning to profit.

The previous version of Kodak was not in keeping with the world it operated in. Now imaging and tech are closely aligned, Kodak as a tech company has adopted the size and shape required for it to once again thrive and, as we've already seen, success isn't solely about size and scale.

There's a very famous quote from Henry Ford:

If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got.

That's fine in a static world, but the world we live in today just isn't static! In today's world, doing what you've always done is no guarantee of results whatsoever. What created survival or profit for your business previously may create a loss today. Staying the same is the single most damaging thing a business can ever do, so it needs to organize itself to insure against that.

Being static is now far more dangerous than it was in a century ago when Ford made his statement. Right now, there will always be someone more agile, more innovative, more responsive and more in tune with its people than you. The playing field is no longer level and competition can come from anywhere – not just your traditional rivals.

To stay relevant, you need to compete in multiple ways:

- to have the best ideas;
- to bring them into the world;
- to iterate and reiterate as your audience requires.

All of this has to be done on a timescale that allows it to happen before the playing field moves again. Because the world is constantly changing, achieving relevance is not a linear project, it's a constant, evolutionary cycle.

### ***Don't pull the rug***

It would be very easy to read this premise, panic and tear your organization apart completely. You don't need to!

Admittedly, it's imperative to act fast, continuously and consistently, but that doesn't mean a complete rethink of your organization from the ground up. What it really means is unlocking your organization to behave in a way that's fitting for the dynamic, shifting world. It just has to allow itself to evolve and then continue to do so.

Doing that requires certain approaches and a change in mindset. It needs to become a human workplace – built around the people who work in, around and interact with it.

The most important factor in this is approaching it all with an open mind and interpreting the ideas that follow in a ways that suit your people and their purpose. The second most important factor is allowing it to happen. To do that, you need to recognize that this change isn't the responsibility of one person, it's owned by everyone.

*Question: How do you define success?*

*Advice for other organizations looking to establish global communication, coherence and ownership*

- Reinforce key messages constantly and consistently.
- Make sure everyone understands why you do what you do.
- Invest time and money in bringing people together.
- Involve people in the conversation.
- Walk the talk.

## CASE STUDY

### Building around ownership at CGI

*To understand how a complex global organization, fuelled by consistent growth can truly retain a deep connection with its people and form an effective global community, I spoke with Julie Godin, vice-chair of the board, chief planning and administration officer at CGI. Julie shared how a company built on a dream that puts people at its centre thrives in the modern world, offering advice for other organizations looking to do the same.*

*CGI has grown as a people-first company. Founded in 1976 by Serge Godin, who used his own savings to start a computer business, the company has grown rapidly and aims to double its size every five years. Today CGI is a global IT systems business, with annual revenues of over C\$10 billion. From high-end consulting services, CGI developed through listening to its clients and understanding their needs. That close connection with people inside and outside the business remains a cornerstone of its ongoing success.*

*The philosophy of the organization was shaped by Serge's past and his experience, particularly early memories of his father losing everything when his uninsured sawmill burned down. He built CGI as a company for people, where they could come to build a lasting career and be an important part of its progress. Communication and collaboration has always been at the heart of the company.*

Typically, organizations start with their vision, but for CGI, there has always been a dream to create an environment where everyone enjoys working together and can contribute to building a company they can all be proud of. By retaining this as the driver, the organization naturally keeps people as its central focus. Growing fast through mergers and acquisitions, CGI reinforces this *one culture, one company* idea to retain coherence across the global workforce. Integration is essential and the organization has invested a lot in building its Management Foundation Framework which provides the philosophy, dream, mission, values and programmes of CGI, to provide the guidelines for success. Surveying, questioning and understanding satisfaction of people internally and externally happens regularly, giving people ownership of CGI and its actions.

The Management Foundation Framework creates a core platform for operations and integration, that delivers consistency across the organization. Right from hiring, ownership is a big thing at CGI, which believes that as owners, people have the right to information and to be consulted. From joining CGI, everyone is made to feel that they have a say and that they have the platform to contribute and play an active part in creating success. This is the starting point for CGI.

The organization operates a decentralized model, which means all regions are managed by local leaders who are empowered to and accountable for managing their own businesses within the regions. The common denominator for all the business unit leaders in CGI is the Management Foundation Framework. It's a recipe book for how to do things, designed for consistency of experience for all leaders, regardless of where they are in the world, that reinforces CGI as one company.

### **How the CGI decentralized model works**

- The regional location has to follow the CGI philosophy, set by head office in Montreal.
- To do that, local legislation and culture needs to be respected.
- The Management Foundation Framework layer is implemented as a set of principles, with that in mind.

Even within a decentralized model, technology plays an essential part in connecting CGI, particularly for collaboration and communication between countries and teams. The company invests in ensuring people can connect face to face, too. For example, the global operations meeting brings together all leaders of all business units around the world, every quarter. In this meeting everything from metrics, to best practice, to results are shared by the organization and the leaders themselves share their experiences, exploring how they can help each other in helping CGI progress.

The CGI 101 course provides a full week of training for all managers at all levels across the business, whether hired or promoted, in Montreal. It's an immersive experience, with presentations from all seven Presidents of Operations, as well as all corporate leaders engaging the participants in conversations. These are run three or four times per year and attended by around 300 people each time. It demonstrates how CGI values the connection between people and organization, at all levels. Once the work is done, the participants go back to their units to disseminate what they have learned, spreading the connection further.

Making sure that every level of the organization connects is an important part of CGI's identity. The principle of ownership remains consistent. All leaders take responsibility to provide the organization's governance information to their own teams and the organization ensures the platform exists to do that, while asking questions and making suggestions. Metrics are clear and made available to everyone at all levels, driving the coherent conversation, feedback, sharing and learning across the entire business. What great looks like is clear to everyone.

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If leaders don't do it, why should they expect anyone else to?

### 10 key ideas on the basics of a human workplace

- 1 There is no digital transformation, the world is digital by default.
- 2 Being able to respond to change before it's too late is essential.
- 3 Your business and organization are two different things.
- 4 The end users of your business are the customers.
- 5 The end users of your organization are the workers.
- 6 Do the right things, for the right reasons is a clear guiding principle.
- 7 A strong connection between people and organization is important.
- 8 Seriousness and formality are usually unnecessary.
- 9 Every business has a purpose.
- 10 Creating a human workplace doesn't necessarily require fundamental change in the structure of your organization.

There's no denying that the world today is different and the pace of change relentless. To be relevant and stay relevant requires businesses to think and act differently – they need to respond to the world around them. Doing that isn't a case of waiting until the world shifts, then doing something in response, the luxury of such a leisurely pace is over. The modern world needs human workplaces, built to be ready for whatever comes next!

## Task 2: What's the point?

The business you work in, the unit within the organization, or your team each has an overriding reason for doing what it does. They are usually connected, but there are often subtle differences in this purpose at all levels. Use the equation below to think about the purpose that congregates people in your workplace. Refer to the spectrum in Figure 1.3 for help.

Business purpose:

Unit purpose:

Team purpose:

Personal purpose:

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