

From the series *Witness the Common Good*



# THE LIBERATED WORKPLACE

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2024

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Something is calling for dramatic transformation in the places we call work. Does not matter whether it's an office, a restaurant or retail business, a warehouse, an information technology department, or a classroom. We have been hearing reports for years about the increasing disengagement of employees from the workplace. Those were survey results. Now it is real.

The pandemic made visible the widespread frustrations about work that have been present and simmering for a long time. Working at home, all of a sudden, we experienced a choice. It occurred to us that maybe we don't have to work so much. Or in the prior way. Now maybe I can live where I want, like closer to my children or nearer to the mountains. Now maybe I have more control over work than I was led to believe. Can I spend less time coming and going to work?

These questions about the workplace are surface expressions of the real point that the pandemic thrust upon us: What makes work meaningful and attractive? When we focus on that question, the current conversation about how to "get" people back to the office or the restaurant or the plant is put in perspective. These questions are too small a version of what is at stake. They treat people as objects to be retrieved, demanded, or induced to come in.

The change in our workplaces being called for is to discover ways of liberating the experience of work. Office, restaurant, warehouse. Our meaning of "liberation" in this conversation means the process of freeing a group of people from the constant experience of being watched, under another's control. Especially when that control -- labeled as forms of performance management -- is packaged as being for your own good and the effectiveness of the institution.

## Anatomy of Transformation

Seeing oppression as a central aspect of the dominant narrative of the workplace opens a portal to an alternate narrative. The purpose of this article is to question whether the focus of most of the performance and measurement attention in our workplaces serves the interests of those who inhabit them.

Transformation begins with seeing clearly and naming the dominant narrative we are living within. Seeing the context, without blaming any of the players, including ourselves. The challenge in liberating the workplace is that we are wedded to storylines that reinforce the existing conditions and make real change impossible.

If we are serious about our desire to create workplaces more conducive to human habitation -- and if we really want to improve the quality of life at work and have it be more productive and the office more appealing -- we have to change the story about what makes workplaces work.

The dominant existing narrative about what makes workplaces work has to do with our attraction to competition, testing, performance, measurement, and reviews. We need to consider them as possible forms of oppression and inhibitors of outcomes and growth. They are not wrong or evil; it may just be that they do not deliver what they promise.

## Present Performance Narrative of the Workplace

One of the existing workplace stories treats the worker as a consumer. It believes that increases in their satisfaction can be purchased. We need to satisfy employees by asking whether it is important for them to come to work or work at home. The union conversation is all about the market for labor. The worker is a commodity to be purchased, so let's negotiate price. We treat measures like employee surveys and turnover or retention rates as indicators of customer satisfaction, as if a happy consumer is the goal. As if we are in business to have high satisfaction scores and get people to stay. As if the purpose of the organization is worker loyalty, and we satisfy workers by believing what they really want is to take the next step on the ladder, even though -- because of our affection for ranking -- most employees will stay on their current rung. A dominant conversation about employee well-being is about wages. As if the purpose of work is rewards and retention. And we all participate in surveys that imply that supervisory likes and social media likes are similarly of central importance.

As long as these easy-to-measure landscapes of the workplace are the center of attention, nothing in the experience or meaning of work will be any different. Nothing in any of these storylines honors how our dominant organizational habits treat the employee as a commodity. An object.

These storylines of competition and easy measures are distractions from what it means to work, what work might mean, what the workplace might offer. They are affirmations of a misguided affection for a control- and performance-dominated worldview. They distract us from where real breakthroughs in experience and outcomes might reside. They express, in the subtle shapes of our language, our unconscious devotion to control for its own sake. Which is the essential definition of oppression.



# Managing the News

Each time there is discussion of some disruption of the story that exposes that control is not working, we seek more control. The belief in more control is rarely questioned. Instead, there is a management and media response describing how reform is underway and leadership is changing. A new special task force or department is formed. New leaders are brought in as new role models and are celebrated as change-makers.

All of these habitual and predictable storylines, reported in the business and workplace news, described and researched by academics and consultants alike, and spoken by our leaders in town halls, are simply reinforcing the existing belief, context, and conditions that represent advanced lip service.

They embody the performance myth in a predictable cycle of --

1. A **challenge** in the field. Bad outcomes. A loud constituent with leverage.
2. **Investigation**. An investigative reporter if a public challenge, a task force if internal, a trusted advisor if small scale. A consultant to deflect the heat. The theme is consistently about controls, performance, measures, reorganized reporting responsibilities.
3. **Leadership response**. Management manages the news by issuing a statement, a new mission, a firm vision or values statement.
4. **Internal planning**. More management, measurement, and control follow.
5. **Worker experience continues as usual with a little more stress**.

This cycle ensures nothing fundamental changes.

In the business workplace, we bring in a change management group to study ways to reduce labor costs, restructure management or work teams, more clearly define blueprints for action, provide more coaching. In the not-for-profit and public sector, hard times are met with increased Board activity, more oversight. Perhaps new leadership. There is a religious belief in better defined objectives.

Nothing changes because these actions are based on a myth about performance. The myth is that more pressure on performance and improvement delivers outcomes. Rarely questioned is that the way we focus on performance and the way attention to it is managed are based on a passionate love of control, measurement, ranking, and, in the classroom, grades. Nor do we question our attraction to constantly seeking a more predictable and standardized way of working.

The usual response rests on a belief system, a context, a narrative that has nothing to do with the talent, skill, and sincerity of the individuals in place. It is language and patterns of thinking that have everything to do with keeping things the same.

## Mythology of Performance

The workplace language that speaks most directly to the cause of discontent around us has to do with the mythology of performance. The performance myth is that high employee “performance” leads to better organizational outcomes.

Performance is the management way of assessing employee actions. We think that watching and monitoring people improves outcomes. We use performance and control language thinking that this will create better products, save time, make customers happier, provide higher quality service, whether food or social service.

Whether we are the boss, HR professional, or owner, we have come to accept the performance myth as essential. And, more critical, whether we are the employee or contract worker, we also have come to accept that the word “performance” equals outcome. That it is the point. When some performance is unacceptable, we automatically think that more control is needed. Performance appraisals and exit interviews come to mind.

This mythology is engrained in our linguistic devices like “performance management,” “performance appraisals,” “Key Performance Indicators,” “standardized testing.” “What you measure is what you get.” “Grade point average.” It is even embedded in the function called talent acquisition. We don’t hire people, we purchase them. Now that we own them, their behavior -- “performance” -- is subject to our direction, and in exchange we will provide for their well-being.

We live in the illusion that controlling people, and making performance measurement systems consistent across the board, serves the institution. That watching and measuring people more closely improves service, ensures a productive workplace, builds an enterprise and a community. This reasoning is why one large bank, with America in its name, told all employees at one point after the pandemic they had to return to the office full time or lose their job.

What is paradoxical and revealing about the question of working in the building or working at home is the strategies that employers use to lure people back into the workplace. Rather than ordering people to the office, many companies use an aesthetic appeal to make coming in to work more attractive. They have created “Sanctuary Suites,” elegant, high-décor workspaces for the employee to come in to work three times a week. The work culture is the same, just as individualistic, yet it’s still a workplace structured to facilitate watching and supervision, only with first-class accommodations and room service. A workplace that on the surface looks like a resort. The executive suite moved down a few floors. It is control and business as usual, made palatable with perks to communicate care and esteem. All still considering worker as customer, worker as object.



## Essence of the Myth

The word “performance,” with its inherent grading system, holds profound implications. To perform is to play to an audience. Like in theatre, sports, music, arts and entertainment. The performance myth believes that competition is the essence of motivation. It constructs employee motivation and work as an activity delivered for the pleasure of someone watching, the audience and critic. Top management.

Fair enough for entertainment and sports, but something gets distorted when work is produced for the pleasure of the manager. Does the waitperson exist to perform for the chef or to serve the guest?

The myth is that ranking human beings motivates them and makes them high “performers.” It begins on the first day of school. As I walk into the first-grade classroom, I step under a normal, bell-shaped curve as the grading system gets underway. Let the performance begin. Each student will be given an A, B, C, D, or F. In this practice, achievement and value are measured through testing, verbal participation, and writing skills. The audience for the student is the teacher. The principal is the audience for the teacher. The Board of Education is the audience for the superintendent.

The stated goal of education is learning; the performance goal as practiced is winning, scoring well. The intended effect is not learning for every child, but to sort and select students. Those with C’s, D’s, and F’s -- often 65 percent of students -- have fallen short. They are a problem to be solved by more services. It is their fault. They have not achieved or “performed” up to and above standard. They are sorted out and not selected.

Selected for what? The next step up the ladder. Graduation from high school. Admission to an elite college. Employment in an elite workplace. Labeled High Potential by the performance system in the workplace.

This transition into the workplace performance mindset is seamless. Performance is the rationalization for control, the real intent of most places where students are taught and work is done.

# Choosing Liberation Over Performance

What we are considering here is that the real cause of discontent in our workplaces is the dominant focus on performance practices and use of the language that supports this idea.

This means that to transform the workplace we need to make a distinction between performance and the more authentic intent of the work: service delivery, product outcomes, impact that the institution promises to its legitimate customer or public.

If transformation is of real interest, we have to face the idea that, perhaps, in our desire for control of employees and workers in the name of cost and efficiency we are currently -- by design in concert with the performance myth -- unable to create workplaces that can both be satisfying and deliver on their promises. Meeting the boss/audience expectations is now the primary object of our attention. Liberation would take the form of meeting expectations of those in charge as a secondary effect, not the central narrative.

For employees and workers experiencing the persistent dissatisfaction made unmistakable by the pandemic, a transformation would mean that strategies of better financial and developmental incentives, improved talent acquisition, and higher-end employee working décor have been set aside. Transformation will be found only on a path marked by something other than the performance myth, by some alternative to better management and control.

What we are calling liberation offers a pathway to finding meaning and realizing intended outcomes in the workplace. It begins in a shift in our way of thinking. We begin to see workers as agents and producers of a different experience from improved performance. We see them as citizens, not subordinates or consumers or objects to be grown.

This means turning away from the programs and investments of reform, performance improvement, performance management, change management. Away from more training, better incentives, clearer vision and purpose statements. These are all forms of fencing me in. Treating me like a commodity. The effort to enter a counternarrative of workplace liberation becomes a more nuanced mixture leaning on relationship and connection, through which we come to realize that workers have the possibility to construct a place that they are proud to inhabit, acting as owners, limitations included.



# Liberating Leadership

Liberation calls for us to make peer relationships, worker agency, and chosen accountability the prime objective of how we create meaningful work and success. These become the action steps that matter. This would mean we consider relationship building the number one priority in producing work outcomes. Currently we consider the person in the front of the room, the occupants of the corner office, the chef, the shop owner our first priority.

This is not an argument against what is commonly called leadership; we want people in charge. Their expertise in the work or the subject matter always remains valuable. Valuable for its own sake. We also need their ability to attend to the well-being of the whole. Leadership simply does not need to use the performance myth to fulfill its role. The force inherent in all the performance language has too many dehumanizing side effects.

Bosses do have a function to play. They need to contribute to the tone and culture of how the organization functions, through efforts and structures other than measurement and control. One example is to focus on people's gifts, instead on deficiencies and ways they should improve. Another is using groups of peers to engage with each other in producing accountability by making promises to each other. Leaders bring workers together as partners and coproducers, not as objects and commodities to be managed or pieces of a puzzle to be arranged.

Liberating leaders watch their words and language. Remove performance from their vocabulary. Use their rightful position to implement all the convening and facilitating wisdom that used to reside in third parties. Now they decide that people connecting with each other through conversation as agents, owners, producers is first priority. This is the activating action step.

This has significant implications for Human Resources. Called the People function in some places, HR has become the delivery system for the performance myth. For tending the ladder and its climbers. For cultivating the people we call High Potentials. Succession planning, retention bonuses, and, of course, the importance placed on compensation are ways of perpetuating the myth.

## The Liberation Narrative

Liberation gives central attention to the quality of our lives. It values nuances, aesthetics, and aliveness in the conduct of our work. Liberation at work believes that livelihood best occurs in ways that do not hinge on performance measures, nor does management hinge on the deification of bottom lines. Bottom-line talk is a world without nuance, always directed at cost control and restraints, never is it about imagination or connection. Liberation works to create accountability and deliver on promises, but it removes the restraints and controls on workers and makes them primary players in the learning of a child, serving a customer, making a place safer.



If we care about service, satisfaction, and fulfilling our promises to a market or a community, we keep measures and controls in perspective. We drop the performance language and myth. No performance appraisals. No ranking of workers. Stop treating top management as if they were the point. The buck stops at each of our desks. The reality of cost and schedule is valuable in the creation of products and exchange -- it is everyone's concern -- but is not our central organizing principle.

A workplace that really works and is appealing is about collective action stamped with the central importance of human connection. Call it the connection effect. That means social capital and relational capital become the central linguistic platforms.

## The Connection Effect

With liberation comes belonging, which values an affinity for a place or a set of people. Belonging is a shared belief that we have enough in common and enough gifts to create the outcomes that the world demands. The liberation counternarrative includes the belief that the ways we physically and operationally come together are transformational elements. Liberation in the workplace begins by deciding to erase the word "performance" from the structures we use. Take away the watching and the audience, except when a play and a stage is the point.

This way moves our attention from the language and devices of performance toward attending to the room itself. Not to its décor and entitlements, but to how we inhabit the room. When we come to the workplace, we give primary attention to how we physically design space to embody people's relationship to each other. More like a coffee shop. Or a front porch. And we attend to what questions we ask. We give primary attention to all the ways that constitute how we find each other in the midst of this place where we work.

This movement from a mythology of performance to the effect of connection is foundational to any hope for a different future. The concept of liberation can launch a culture and practices where a lateral and horizontal focus, with workers at its center, will allow our common concerns to be more fulfilled in the world. This is built on the belief that it is not decisive who occupies the front of the room or how clearly expertise can be delivered; liberation believes that the function of leaders is to connect and invite people, especially strangers from other units, to have conversations that hold agency. To engage in powerful speech acts -- like asking what is the crossroads we are at -- and not discussing opinions, or judgments, or what we did last summer. Better to talk about what doubts we have, what we want from each other, what gifts we come to offer.

## Accountability with Peers and Citizens is the Point

Transformation comes with finding structures for lateral relationships. If I am going to be watched by other human beings, let it be peers. This means arranging the room for connection versus presentation. This is the vehicle for constructing a workplace that workers will choose to inhabit as agents and authors. This is where liberation and accountability for the whole take shape. This is where performance and competition and individualism are present, but not reinforced. Outcomes resting on connection and chosen accountability prevail.

The task and skill for bosses is to engage workers with each other. To provide an experience for them where, from their willingness to belong, they choose to produce the well-being of the whole. They desire and realize they do not have to surrender a piece of themselves or each other to have that happen. They are not here to perform. The challenge for Human Resources is to identify practices that bring connection and ownership to scale. HR's primary function is to change what we pay attention to, from performance to trust and connection.

The focus on connection and convening here is built on questions, not answers. Experience replaces measures. Maybe we have KRI's, Key Relationship Indicators. This can be created by questions that accelerate trust among employees. This has peers performing the functions that had been called performance management.

Liberation gives primary attention to the belief that relationships are inseparable from institutional outcomes. In any gathering, in any room, the primary attention goes to whether the structure of the questions and how the room is configured facilitate trust, in this moment. Each time, we are engaged with each other in a unique, intimate, and vulnerable way, a way not based on the myth of performance. This is how a new narrative is constructed, in small moments and peripheral vision.

Making horizontal connections first and top priority is what constructs the liberated workplace. This is the primary reason to come to work. This is what creates a workplace that people will choose to engage in.



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