

Betray the Age

In researching and discussing this book, the most common question has been how this change in philosophy and action for corporations would be encouraged. Considering the incentives many industries have to keep things the way they are, I had been unsure until the final months of writing. In the beginning, I was not even sure it was legal.

Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. – Margaret Mead

Today's "small group of committed people" is really a growing number of public corporations with innovative ideas and leadership committed to changing the world. These companies embrace the freedoms and incentives that capitalism provides a for-profit company while also understanding the responsibility that large corporations, like family businesses before them, have to the community at large.

Companies that have already changed and influenced industries outside of Silicon Valley should be supported in their efforts to continue injecting information age philosophies and economic ideas into other industries. Telecommunications, journalism, recording, television, retail, publishing, and others have already strongly shifted in growing favor of the consumer due to influences from companies outside of those industries.

Apple and Google completely changed our capability expectations for cell phones. Craigslist destroyed the classified business for newspapers, leaving them crippled to catch up with Google and the blogosphere. While the recording industry resorted to suing teens for stealing music, Apple cornered the online music market with the iPod and iTunes and subsequently decimated the brick and mortar retail music industry. Amazon forever changed retail overall and was a significant reason for the failure of Borders's Books; while Netflix rendered the video store obsolete and combined with YouTube and other entertainment options is increasingly threatening traditional broadcast media. Further innovative actions by profitable empathetic technology companies into even more traditional industries will continue to push this shift.

Singer Bono during his 2004 University of Pennsylvania Commencement Speech quotes a line from Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly's epic *The Book of Judas*.

There's a line in that poem that never leaves my mind, it says: "If you want to serve the age, betray it." What does that mean, to betray the age? Well to me betraying the age means exposing its conceits, it's foibles, it's phony moral certitudes. It means telling the secrets of the age and facing harsher truths. Every age has its massive moral blind spots. We might not see them, but our children will.

Bono then describes how slavery and segregation were previous moral blind spots overcome by earlier American generations. He goes on to share his love of America because it is not just a country, but an idea; an idea that requires responsibility, equality, and where anything thought of – is possible.

We are a proving ground of new ideas and innovation. The technology and the information ages are being shaped by the innovative outliers of the Boomer Generation, the innovative early adopters of Generation X, and a majority of value-driven Millennials.

At first the idea of empowering corporations and industries to act with empathy seems foreign, the title of this book an oxymoron. According to Joel Bakan's 2004 book, *The Corporation*, it is not something we can even expect from people as individuals, let alone a corporation.

No one would seriously suggest that individuals should regulate themselves, that laws against murder, assault, and theft are unnecessary because people are socially responsible. Yet oddly, we are asked to believe that corporate persons--institutional psychopaths who lack any sense of moral conviction and who have the power and motivation to cause harm and devastation in the world--should be left free to govern themselves.

Besides being published before most millennials reached college and social networking exploded, the statement above has a fatal flaw. We absolutely expect and witness individuals that regulate themselves every day. Laws against murder, assault, and theft are only necessary so that we have a fair and just system of dealing with the relatively few individuals who are not able to carry themselves in a socially responsible manner within society.

The opinion that capitalism and corporate governance must revolve around the exploitative pursuit of profit is a moral blind spot that will be resolved by today's innovative corporations and the boards, shareholders, employees and consumers that support those companies. The same year *The Corporation* was published, Bono gave his commencement address to one of the earliest graduating Millennial classes, and Mark Zuckerberg had just started writing the code that would become Facebook. The gigantic cultural shift created by social media has brought on what author Gary Vaynerchuk in 2011 described as *The Thank You Economy* and has shifted marketing and consumer behavior in a way that is having a dramatic effect on the traditional corporate model.

The world of business is coming full circle. The rise of the Internet and the empowerment of the common consumer has created a fundamental shift in how businesses are expected to behave. – Gary Vaynerchuk, *The Thank You Economy*

Being just a year older than myself, Vaynerchuk has witnessed the same developments in technology and how the information age is shifting corporate behavior as I have. There are a growing number of examples that illustrate how companies and the people leading them understand this shift. While researching this book, it was not until mid-June that I discovered the works of Bakan and

Vaynerchuk and subsequently read them along with *Married to the Mouse* by Richard Foglesong that detailed the relationship between The Walt Disney Company and Orlando and Osceola County in Florida.

Foglesong's narrative history of Disney's relationship with the state of Florida published in 2003 is told in the terms of a marriage that goes through stages like serendipity, seduction, growth, conflict, abuse and therapy. Like Florida's relationship with Disney, I believe we have arrived at the therapy phase in our relationship with corporations in general. The open dialogue created by the Internet among the public, as well as with companies, is permanently changing our economic system.

Companies are no longer able to ignore the voices of consumers, employees, staff and shareholders or hide the shortcuts in quality and safety that are taken in order to increase profits. Corporate irresponsibility is quickly becoming a large enough economic liability that proactively making socially responsible and empathetic choices will soon be the more profitable and competitive choice.

Imagine the level of innovation industries would reach if companies actively made better choices for long-term advances. The companies that embrace empathy today will hold a significant competitive advantage over those that continue to pretend that the world is not changing around them.

I am excited that we are a part of this great new age.