

OWNING THE WORK · CHAPTER FOUR

Threats From, Threats To

Chapter Four of Owning the Work

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Chapter Four of Owning the Work. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/owning-the-work (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23988988).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Consider a composite, built for teaching and not a real person: two warehouse supervisors at the same loading dock on a wet Tuesday in March. A pallet of glass has been stacked badly by the night shift. Both of them see it at seven in the morning. The first supervisor is paid a wage. He notices the pallet, and the first thing he thinks about is who will be blamed if it falls. He photographs it, sends the photograph to his manager with a time stamp, and moves on to the next bay. The second supervisor works in an employee-owned firm, and she sees in the quarterly results what breakage costs. She notices the same pallet, and the first thing she thinks about is the glass. She restacks it with a colleague, then walks to the night-shift lead's locker and leaves a note about the strapping.

CHAPTER FOUR

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HAUTE LUMIÈRE · OWNING THE WORK · CHAPTER FOUR

Two people at one loading dock

Consider a composite, built for teaching and not a real person: two warehouse supervisors at the same loading dock on a wet Tuesday in March. A pallet of glass has been stacked badly by the night shift. Both of them see it at seven in the morning.

The first supervisor is paid a wage. He notices the pallet, and the first thing he thinks about is who will be blamed if it falls. He photographs it, sends the photograph to his manager with a time stamp, and moves on to the next bay.

The second supervisor works in an employee-owned firm, and she sees in the quarterly results what breakage costs. She notices the same pallet, and the first thing she thinks about is the glass. She restacks it with a colleague, then walks to the night-shift lead's locker and leaves a note about the strapping.

Neither of them is a better person. They are standing in different structures, and the structure has turned their attention in different directions. That is the claim at the centre of this chapter, and it is the house's own. Ammanuel Santa Anna puts it in *Ecstatic Economics* in two sentences that are the clearest statement of the living-systems reading of ownership in his work:

> *The wage employee's neuroception is scanning for threats from the organization — layoffs, pay cuts, arbitrary management decisions. The worker-owner's neuroception is scanning for threats to the organization — and mobilizing creative energy to address them.*[30]

Neuroception is the psychiatrist Stephen Porges's word for the nervous system's unconscious scanning for safety and danger. Santa Anna uses it to name something any manager has seen and few have explained: that the same person brings different attention to the same pallet depending on whether the organisation is a source of threat or a thing in their care.

The two chapters before this one found that the research keeps arriving at one condition. Ownership helps when it comes with information, voice and decent treatment; ownership alone does much less. This chapter offers a reason, from the house's lens, for why that condition holds.

The direction of attention

The living-systems reading starts from a simple observation about organisms. Every living thing allocates attention between defence and growth. A plant under drought closes its stomata and stops building leaves. An animal that hears a predator stops eating. The allocation is not a moral choice; it is how living things survive.

Santa Anna's book applies that observation to the firm. In a structure where the organisation is a source of threat, people allocate their attention to defence: documenting, protecting, avoiding blame. In a structure where the organisation is theirs, more of that attention can go to the work itself. He describes the change in orientation as a move "from defensive to generative," and he is careful about the kind of belonging he means: "Not belonging in the sentimental, team-building-exercise sense, but belonging in the proprietary sense."[30]

This reading explains something the research found but could not fully account for. Kruse and Blasi observed in 1995 that ownership alone did not automatically raise perceived participation.[31] Pendleton and Robinson observed in 2010 that stock plans seemed to need voice to be effective.[32] The living-systems reading says why. A share certificate does not tell a nervous system that it is safe. What tells it is evidence: numbers it can see, decisions it can influence, a record of being treated fairly. Without those signals, the scan for threats from the organisation carries on, and the shares are an asset held at a distance.

The evidence for this reading should be graded honestly. Porges's polyvagal theory is contested among physiologists, and no study has measured the neuroception of employee-owners. What the research does show is the behavioural pattern the reading predicts: in Freeman, Kruse and Blasi's surveys, workers under group incentives in firms with good employee relations were the most likely to act when they saw a colleague shirking.[33] That is attention facing inward, toward the work, in exactly the conditions the reading would expect.

The loop, sutured

The second idea in the house's reading is about feedback. In Santa Anna's account, the extractive pattern in economic life is marked by a severed link between action and consequence. The person who makes a decision does not feel its effects, and the person who feels the effects did not make the decision.

He describes every arrangement he counts as working in the same terms. "Every ecstatic alternative restores that connection," he writes, and he lists the cases: the member of a community-supported farm who knows the farmer, the community currency user who can trace where value goes, and, among them, "The worker-owner who shares in the consequences of business decisions." In each case, he concludes, "the feedback loop that extractive economics severed has been sutured back together."[34]

The surgical word is chosen with care. A suture is not a reconnection by decree. It is a stitch that holds two edges together long enough for the tissue to grow across. Ownership is the stitch. The tissue that grows across it is information and voice: the quarterly results shared on the dock, the trustee who is a forklift driver, the profit share that moves with the year so that the year can be felt.

This is also why profit sharing, the most modest form of shared capitalism, can do more than its size suggests. Douglas Kruse found in 1991 that manufacturing firms where all employees took part in profit-sharing pension plans cut employment less in downturns than firms without them; outside manufacturing he found no significant difference.[35] Chapter 5 works through those figures. Here the point is the mechanism. When pay moves with results, the firm has a second way to absorb a bad year besides laying people off. The feedback loop runs through wages, gently, instead of through jobs, abruptly.

The root graft

Santa Anna's notes on finance offer a third image, and it is the most generative of the three. Writing about cooperative ownership, he says:

> *The moment you stop treating ownership as a fence and start treating it as a root graft, finance stops being a zero-sum game and becomes a photosynthetic one.*[36]

A fence divides. It says *this is mine and not yours*, and its whole function is exclusion. A root graft is what happens when the roots of neighbouring trees fuse underground. Foresters have long observed it in stands of the same species: the trees share water and sugars through the joined roots. Ownership as a fence is about who may not touch the asset. Ownership as a root graft is about what flows between the people who share it.

The same notes describe what that flow does to governance. "When capital, labor, and community hold overlapping stakes, the feedback loops become circular rather than extractive," Santa Anna writes, and then: "Governance isn't about voting shares; it's about sensing system health."[36] The second sentence is the practical one. In a firm read as a living system, the purpose of ownership is not chiefly to settle who wins a vote. It is to widen the number of people who are paying attention to whether the organism is well.

The Luminous 100, the house's catalogue of familiar strategy tools carried up into living-systems terms, makes the same move with sociocracy, the governance method in which decisions stand unless someone raises a reasoned objection. Its upgrade describes the circle structure as "an organizational mycelial network where each circle is a sensing organ connected to every other."[37] A firm with broad ownership and real voice has more sensing organs. That is a different argument for employee ownership from the incentive argument, and in the house's reading it is the deeper one. Incentives change what people want. Sensing changes what the organisation can know.

Working the reading, in order

A lens is only as useful as the order of operations it suggests. Read this way, the sequence for a leader who wants shared ownership to reach the loading dock is fairly clear, and it runs in the opposite order from the one most firms follow.

Information first. Most firms adopt a plan and then, perhaps, open the books. The living-systems reading reverses it. The signal that the organisation is safe to care about arrives through what people can see. A firm that begins by publishing a small set of honest numbers every month, the same numbers to everyone, has started the suture before any shares change hands. Profit, cash, breakage, customer complaints: four numbers people can watch move.

Voice second. Once people can see the numbers, give them a place to say what they see. This need not be a board seat on day one. It can be a monthly half hour in which anyone may ask leadership about the numbers and receive an answer on the record. The record matters. A question answered in a corridor reaches one nervous system; a question answered in writing reaches all of them.

The share third. Only then does the share itself do its full work, because it lands in a structure that has already begun to turn attention inward. A modest profit share, visible every quarter, is often a better first step than a large allocation of stock that vests in five years, because the feedback is closer to the action.

Scale last. Chapter 3 showed that free riding grows with the size of the unit. The living-systems reading agrees for its own reason: sensing works where people can see each other. Federate before you swell.

The Luminous 100's reading of the balanced scorecard gives a sentence that serves as a test for this whole sequence. It recasts each measure as a question, and the first is "What financial patterns reveal our deepest generativity?"[39] A firm that can answer that question about its own ownership plan has understood it as a living arrangement rather than a line on the pension statement.

For a household the order is the same in miniature. Know what you own and what it depends on. Ask, at least once a year, for the information that would let you judge it. Then decide how much more of your life you want tied to it.

What this reading adds, and what it cannot claim

A lens earns its place by explaining what the evidence already shows and by pointing somewhere new. This one does both, within limits.

It explains the contingency at the heart of the research. Ownership works with voice because voice is how the safety signal arrives. It explains the free-rider finding, because people who are scanning for threats to the organisation notice the colleague who is not pulling, and in a firm with good relations they say something. It explains the drift described in Chapter 3, because an organisation that stops sharing information has cut the stitch while leaving the shares in place.

It points somewhere new in what it asks a leader to measure. If the purpose of ownership is to turn attention inward and widen sensing, then the right questions are not only about productivity and profit. They are about where attention faces. How much of the working week goes to self-protection? How quickly does bad news reach someone who can act? How many people noticed the pallet?

It also changes what counts as a good result from a plan. On the incentive reading, a plan succeeds if productivity rises. On the living-systems reading, a plan can succeed before productivity moves at all: when the time bad news takes to travel shortens, when fewer hours go to self-protective paperwork, when people outside the leadership team begin to ask sharper questions about the numbers. Those are early signs that the organism is sensing more of itself. Productivity, if it follows, follows from them.

The lens cannot claim what it has not shown. It is an interpretation, built from Santa Anna's book, his notes and the house's catalogue, set beside the research. It is not a finding about anyone's physiology. The fear it names is real, and Santa Anna names it precisely: "the fear that the structures you depend on will be captured by interests that don't care about you."[38] Whether a given ownership plan relieves that fear is a question for the people inside it, and the tool below is a way to ask them.

The lineage's other series carry this reading into neighbouring ground. Elinor Ostrom's work on the commons describes, from field evidence, the rules under which people sharing a resource monitor it themselves (*The Pasture Was Never Empty*). Albert Hirschman's *exit, voice and loyalty* gives the clearest economist's account of why voice matters when leaving is costly (*The Embedded Market*). Where a leader wants to see the flows of value through the firm before deciding where to share them, the Alpha Papers' reading of the value chain is a natural companion.

Return, for a moment, to the dock. The pallet is the same in both versions. What differs is the direction the supervisor faces when she sees it, and that direction was set long before seven o'clock, by a structure she may never have read.

The reading at the scale of one team

The reading in this chapter is easy to agree with at the scale of a firm and easy to forget at the scale of a Tuesday. It is worth showing how it works for a single team, because that is the scale at which most leaders can act this month.

Take a dispatch team of eleven people, a composite built for teaching. Their manager has no say over the firm's ownership plan, which is set two levels above her. She can still do three things that the living-systems reading predicts will matter.

She can shorten the distance between action and consequence. Every Friday she writes three figures on the whiteboard: deliveries made on time, deliveries returned, and the cost of the returns as the finance team reports it. None of them is secret; all of them were previously read only in the office. Within a month, the conversation at the board changes from *who was late* to *why the Thursday route keeps coming back*. The figures did not change anyone's pay. They changed what people were looking at.

She can make the record of voice visible. She keeps a sheet by the board headed *What you raised, and what happened*. Each line names a concern, the date it was raised, and what was done, including *nothing yet* where that is the truth. The living-systems reading holds that a nervous system learns safety from evidence, and this sheet is evidence. Its most important lines are the ones that say *we could not change this, and here is why*, because they show that a concern was heard even when it could not be met.

She can protect people from the cost of telling the truth. When a driver reports a near miss, the first response is thanks and the second is a question about the conditions. The manager knows the research does

not prove this works; she does it because the alternative, a team that learns silence, is the outward-facing attention this chapter describes.

Santa Anna's book puts the claim at its widest: "Money is not neutral. It is a design system, and the design shapes the behavior."[40] The same is true of a whiteboard. A team's information design shapes where its attention faces, and the shape can be changed by a manager with no authority over the cap table.

When the firm does introduce a profit share or a plan, this team will receive it differently from one that has never seen its own numbers. The share will land in a structure that has already begun, in the language of this chapter, to suture the loop. That is the practical meaning of *information first*, and it is open to anyone who leads anything.

The Tool: The Two Directions Audit

A short anonymous survey and a short leadership review, run together. It does not measure anyone's nervous system. It asks people where their attention goes, and it asks leaders whether the stitch is holding. Run it before any change to an ownership plan and again a year after.

Part A · For everyone (anonymous, five minutes)

Answer each on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (almost always).

1. In the last month, I spent time documenting my work mainly to protect myself if something went wrong. ___
2. When I see a problem outside my own job, I fix it or tell someone who can. ___
3. I understand how the company's results affect my pay or my shares. ___
4. I have seen the company's financial results in the last three months. ___
5. If I raised a concern about how the business is run, it would be heard. ___
6. I can name a decision in the last year that changed because of what employees said. ___
7. I worry that the company could be sold or changed in ways that would hurt people like me. ___
8. When a colleague is not pulling their weight, people here deal with it fairly. ___

Reading the results. Items 1 and 7 describe attention facing outward, toward threats from the organisation. Items 2 and 8 describe attention facing inward, toward the work. Items 3 to 6 are the stitch: information and voice. Compare the averages by team. A team with high scores on 1 and 7 and low scores on 3 to 6 is a team where ownership, if it exists, has not yet reached the nervous system.

Part B · For leadership (one page, written)

- How many days does it take bad news from the front line to reach someone who can act on it? Give a recent example: _____

- Number of employee-owners, or employee representatives, who saw last quarter's results before they were published: _____
- Decisions in the last year that affected the value of the shares or the profit pool, and whether employees were consulted on each: _____
- The single piece of information that employees most often ask for and do not receive: _____
- The one change to information or voice we will make before the next audit: _____

Part C · The comparison

- Team with the strongest inward attention: __ · what is different about how it is run: ____
- Team with the strongest outward attention: __ · what it would need: ____

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