

OWNING THE WORK · CHAPTER THIRTEEN

What Moves Between the Roots

Chapter Thirteen of Owning the Work

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THE LICENCE

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Chapter Thirteen 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

This book began at a desk, with an owner, a worker and a leader each holding a question about who owns the work. It has followed the idea of employee ownership from Louis Kelso's newspaper plan and the first stone of a Basque workshop in 1956, through three decades of research, six objections, two deep cases and four houses that made their purpose permanent, to a field manual, a measurement sheet, six conversations and a page for one household. It is time to read the whole once, the way the house reads any economic arrangement: as a living system. The research said one thing so consistently that it is worth stating a last time. Ownership is associated with modestly better outcomes for firms and for the people in them, and the association is much stronger where ownership comes with information, voice and fair treatment. Kruse, Freeman and Blasi's sentence carries it: workers can gain by sharing, "but whether this happens is contingent on other workplace policies." Every chapter since has been, in one way or another, about those other policies.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The whole, read once

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The house's reading, set out in Chapter 4, offered a reason. Ammanuel Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* describes a person whose attention, inside a firm that could at any moment be a source of threat, faces outward in defence; and a person whose attention, inside a firm that is in some real sense theirs, can face inward in care. What turns it is not the share certificate. It is evidence: numbers a person can see, decisions a person can influence, a record of being treated fairly. The share is the stitch. Information and voice are the tissue that grows across it.

That reading has limits, and they have been named throughout: it is an interpretation, not a measurement of anyone's nervous system. But it gives the evidence a shape that a leader can act on, and the shape is an order. Information first, voice second, the share third, permanence last.

Three things the book has tried to show

That the order matters more than the instrument. A profit share, an ESOP, an employee ownership trust, a cooperative and a steward foundation are different organisms, and Chapter 2 insisted on telling them apart. But the evidence suggests that what decides whether any of them changes a workplace is less the in-

strument chosen than the relationship it lands in. Chapter 5's composite bakery learned its most useful lesson, about a Monday flour delivery, from four numbers on a wall, before anyone owned anything new. Chapter 6's four houses each built their permanent structures last, after decades in which the relationships those structures protect had been formed.

That the failures are failures of design, and can be read in advance. Chapter 3's six objections, one basket, the free rider, ownership without voice, the shield, the drift and who is left out, are each real, and each has a design answer. Chapter 7's account of Fagor showed what happens when a boundary is drawn in the wrong place: a cooperative federation that protected its members unusually well, and could not protect the workers of the subsidiaries it had never made members. Santa Anna's book gives the principle: "Honesty requires acknowledging that vitality-centered economic experiments fail — sometimes spectacularly." The failures belong in the record because they are the most useful part of it.

That a household is part of the system. Every plan has a person on its other side, and usually a family. Chapter 11 tried to take that side seriously: the share on top of the wage, the ceiling chosen at a kitchen table, the questions worth bringing to the plan, and the second column beside the figures that asks what working there is like. A plan that is good for the firm and concentrates a household's risk beyond what it chose has not finished being designed.

The fence and the graft

Santa Anna's notes on finance contain the image this book has returned to more than once, and it is the one to end on. "The moment you stop treating ownership as a fence and start treating it as a root graft," he writes, "finance stops being a zero-sum game and becomes a photosynthetic one."

A fence is the ordinary picture of ownership. It marks a line and says *this is mine and not yours*. Its whole function is exclusion. Most of the arguments about employee ownership are arguments about where the fence should go: around the founder, around the shareholders, around the management, around everyone on the payroll. Those arguments matter. Chapter 7's boundary questions, and Chapter 3's account of who is left out, are arguments about fences.

A root graft is a different picture. It is what can happen underground in a stand of trees, when the roots of neighbours fuse and what one draws up can reach another. Ownership as a graft is not chiefly about who may not touch the asset. It is about what flows between the people who share it: information, attention, care, and in a bad year, the capacity to absorb a shock that would break one alone.

Read through this image, the research of this book says something simple. Ownership that is only a fence, a certificate in a drawer, does little. Ownership that becomes a graft, through open numbers, real voice and fair treatment, does more. And the graft does not form on the day the deed is signed. It forms over seasons, where roots are close enough to touch.

The same notes describe what the graft does to governance: "Governance isn't about voting shares; it's about sensing system health." That is the deepest claim of the house's reading. The purpose of sharing ownership is not only to change what people want. It is to widen the number of people who can sense whether the enterprise is well, and to give what they sense a way to reach someone who can act.

A stand in a dry summer

Consider, to finish, a stand of trees at the end of a long dry summer. From above it looks like many trees, each with its own crown. Some are tall and some are not; some stand at the edge and take the wind, and some stand in the middle and are sheltered. A forester walking through would count them one by one.

Below the soil, some of their roots have joined. Nobody planned it. It happened where roots grew close enough, for long enough, to fuse. And in this summer the stand is holding water that no single tree could have held, moving it, slowly, from the places where it is plentiful to the places where it is not. Some trees that would have died alone are still green.

That is the picture this book has tried to give of a firm whose people share in what they make. Not a single tree with a fence around it. A stand, in which what moves between the roots matters as much as who holds the deed to any one trunk. It cannot be made by decree, and it does not form in a quarter. It forms where people are close enough to see each other's work, for long enough to trust what they see.

What remains

The work this book describes is not finished by reading it. It begins with an inventory, completed honestly: who already holds a share in the place, and who does not. The workbook that follows gathers every Tool in the book in one place, with a ninety-day plan for the first steps.

This book is one of a lineage. Its sibling volumes read the same ground from other sides: Elinor Ostrom's commons (*The Pasture Was Never Empty*), the history and evidence of gainsharing (*The Gain Was Always Shared*), Hirschman's exit and voice (*The Embedded Market*), the gift and reciprocity (*The Channel Keeps It*), and patient capital and purpose (*The Long Clock*). All of them grow from *Ecstatic Economics*, and all are kept at hautelumiere.life.

Ammanuel Santa Anna works with a small number of leaders and owners on how their organisations share what they make, from the first inventory to the question of permanence (hautelumiere.life).

The stand will be there in the next dry summer. What moves between its roots is being decided now, in small ways, by the people who are close enough to touch.

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