

WORK WILL KILL US ALL



AN
OPTIMIST'S
GUIDE TO
THE FUTURE

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WORK WILL KILL US ALL:
An Optimist's Guide To The Future
Early Reader Version

CHAPTER 1

I TRIED TO FIX IT FROM THE INSIDE

I didn't come to work angry.

I didn't come trying to burn anything down.

I came hopeful. Earnest. Convinced that if we just understood people a little better, things could be different.

In 2007, I took my first strengths assessment from Gallup. That moment cracked something open in me. For the first time, work felt like it might actually be about humans instead of just output. I went all in. Got certified. Went to grad school. Learned the language of engagement, motivation, purpose, leadership. I believed — deeply — that if leaders could just see people more clearly, work could become a force for human expansion instead of quiet harm.

I wasn't naïve.

But I was optimistic.

That optimism carried me for a long time.

Over the next seventeen years, I did everything you're "supposed" to do if you want to fix a broken system. I consulted. I coached. I built programs. I worked with iconic brands — companies employing hundreds of thousands of people. I helped start chapters of Conscious Capitalism. I merged firms. I trained leaders. I trained the people who trained leaders. I flew constantly. I wrote. I spoke. I believed.

And when that wasn't enough, I went even further.

I thought maybe the problem was scale. Maybe the ideas were right, but they just weren't spreading fast enough. So I did what a good capitalist does: I tried to build technology.

I poured years of my life into a platform designed to make work more human in five minutes a day. We ran pilots. We gathered data. Burnout went down. Psychological safety went up. Teams functioned better. People told us – repeatedly – that the work was changing their lives.

And still, it wasn't enough.

Because here's the part no one wants to say out loud:

The system kept rejecting the cure.

Not because leaders were evil.

Not because people didn't care.

But because the system itself is structured to prioritize something else entirely.

Quarterly returns don't have patience for human development.

Markets don't reward long-term flourishing.

Balance sheets treat people as costs, not lives.

Every time we made progress, the gravity of the system pulled it back. Layoffs erased trust overnight. Budget cycles killed momentum. "Nice-to-have" human initiatives vanished the moment conditions tightened.

Again.

And again.

And again.

That's when the realization began to take shape – slowly at first, then all at once.

This isn't just a leadership problem.

It's not a culture problem.

It's not a motivation problem.

It's something deeper.

At some point – without ever voting on it, without ever designing it intentionally – work became the organizing story of modern life.

Work determines where we live.

When we wake up.

How much rest we get.

Who we spend time with.

If you're in the U.S., whether you get healthcare.

How much future we're allowed to imagine.

We talk about “work-life balance” as if work is one category among many.

It isn't.

Work eats all the others.

When your job determines your survival, your mobility, your medical care, your time, and your energy, work stops being just “work.” It becomes the quiet governor of life itself.

And here’s the problem no one wants to touch:

We handed work the job of organizing life — and then optimized it for profit.

That’s not a leadership failure.

That’s a systems failure.

A bad system will beat a good person every time.

I spent nearly two decades trying to prove that wasn’t true. I wanted so badly to believe that if enough good people showed up with enough courage and compassion, the system would bend.

It doesn’t.

Because capitalism doesn’t optimize for humans. It optimizes for capital. That’s not a bug — it’s the literal definition.

Once you see that, you can’t unsee it.

You start to notice how often leaders have to go against the system to do the right thing. How every human-centered win requires personal risk, quiet rebellion, or moral exhaustion. How the people trying hardest to “fix work” are often the ones burning out the fastest.

Eventually, I hit my own wall.

Years of pushing, persuading, and carrying risk finally collapsed under their own weight. Financially. Emotionally. Existentially. I had to face the same truth I was helping organizations avoid:

You can't keep servicing debt — human or financial — on the promise that things will magically improve later.

That moment forced a reckoning.

What if the problem isn't that we haven't tried hard enough?
What if the problem is that we've been trying to fix the wrong thing?

This book is not an attack on work.

It's not anti-effort.

It's not anti-ambition.

And it sure as hell isn't anti-human potential.

It is a post-mortem on a system that quietly harms people while insisting it's the only game in town.

I'm writing this not as an outsider throwing rocks, but as someone who spent seventeen years inside — learning the rules, believing the promises, and eventually watching them fail good people over and over again.

If that makes you uncomfortable, good.

Discomfort is the doorway.

Because once you stop trying to fix people inside a broken system,
a far more interesting question appears:

If work is the organizing story of life...

...what happens if that story is *wrong*?

CHAPTER 2

THE CORPORATION IS A SOCIOPATH

Let's get one thing out of the way: if work feels insane, it's probably because *you're* sane.

If you're exhausted, cynical, numb, angry, disoriented, or quietly wondering how the hell this became your life... congratulations!

Those are not symptoms of personal failure.

They're signs of prolonged exposure to a deeply unhealthy system.

You are not broken.

You are responding normally to something very *abnormal*.

This chapter is where we stop blaming individuals – ourselves, our bosses, our coworkers – and start looking at the actual architecture of the thing we're inside.

Because once you see it, you can't un-see it.

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A QUICK THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Imagine a being that:

- Feels no empathy
- Cannot care about suffering
- Has no conscience

- Has no long-term memory
- Will harm others if rewarded for doing so
- Will stop harming others only if punished or constrained
- Exists solely to grow, extract, and survive

If you met this being in real life, you wouldn't call it "efficient."

You'd rightly call it a frickin' sociopath (and hopefully run the other way).

But here's the uncomfortable part:

That description fits the modern corporation with eerie precision.

Corporations:

- Feel no empathy
- Cannot care about suffering
- Have no conscience
- Have no long-term memory
- Will harm others if rewarded for doing so
- Will stop harming others only if punished or constrained
- Exist solely to grow, extract, and survive

They're not doing this because corporations are "evil" – they're doing this because they are structurally incapable of being human.

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THE DARK TRIAD (OR: WHY THIS PATTERN KEEPS REPEATING)

Psychologists have a name for a particular cluster of personality traits that reliably produce harm at scale.

They call it the Dark Triad.

It's made up of three traits:

1. **Narcissism** — grandiosity, entitlement, obsession with status and image
2. **Machiavellianism** — manipulation, strategic deception, ends-justify-the-means thinking
3. **Psychopathy** — lack of empathy, shallow emotions, indifference to suffering

In individuals, these traits are dangerous.

In systems?

They're *catastrophic*.

Now here's the part most people miss:

You do not need a single sociopathic person for a system to behave sociopathically.

You only need incentives that select for Dark Triad behavior.

And that is exactly what modern corporate capitalism does.

Let's look at all three of these traits in light of the modern corporation.

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NARCISSISM: “INFINITE GROWTH”

Narcissism isn't just vanity.

It's an inability to accept limits.

Sound familiar?

Corporations are structurally narcissistic:

- Growth is always good
- “More” is always better
- Scale is virtue
- Restraint is weakness
- Maturity is stagnation

There is no concept of “enough.”

A healthy organism knows when to stop growing.

Cancer does not.

When a system demands infinite growth on a finite planet, it is not ambitious.

It is delusional.

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MACHIAVELLIANISM: “IT’S JUST BUSINESS”

Machiavellian systems are obsessed with outcomes, not ethics.

They speak fluently in:

- Abstraction
- Metrics
- Optimization
- Strategy
- Shareholder value

This is where harm gets laundered.

Layoffs become “right-sizing.”

Exhaustion becomes “high performance.”

Surveillance becomes “productivity.”

Human suffering becomes an externality.

The brilliance of Machiavellian systems is that no one ever has to feel responsible.

Everyone is just “doing their job.”

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PSYCHOPATHY: HARM WITHOUT HATRED

This might be the most devious one.

Psychopathy is not rage.

It's not cruelty.

It's indifference.

A psychopath doesn't hurt you because they hate you.

They hurt you because you *don't register as mattering*.

Corporations exhibit psychopathy every time they:

- Know harm is occurring
- Could stop it
- Choose not to – because it's not profitable

No malice required.

Just spreadsheets.

How many times have you **personally** experienced this kind of psychopathy at the hands of a corporation? (How about every time you wait on hold for an hour?)

This is why corporate harm feels so... *surreal*.

There's no villain monologue.

No dramatic moment.

No bald man calmly stroking a white cat.

Just quiet decisions made by comfortable people in tall buildings who will never meet the humans who were destroyed by them.

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WHY THE “BAD APPLE” THEORY IS BULLSHIT

People love to believe the problem is a few bad leaders.

That’s comforting.

It means we don’t have to question the system itself.

But decades of research tell a different story:

Systems that reward Dark Triad traits will eventually be dominated by Dark Triad behavior — regardless of who enters them.

Good people can adapt or exit, but it doesn’t really matter.

The system keeps going.

Deming said this decades ago: a bad system beats a good person every time.

This is the reason why:

- The same dysfunctions appear across industries
- Leadership training doesn’t ever really fix it
- Culture initiatives stall
- New CEOs repeat old patterns

We're not watching individual failure.

We're watching a system just do what it does.

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AND NOW, THE MOST DISTURBING PART

Here's the real gut punch:

Many of the traits celebrated in modern leadership culture — “decisive,” “relentless,” “thick-skinned,” “visionary,” “data-driven,” “unemotional” — are socially acceptable euphemisms for Dark Triad traits.

We don't just tolerate them.

We *reward* them.

These are the things that get white men put on magazine covers.

But they are not GOOD things. They are malevolent traits straight out of the DSM-5 with a glossy rebrand.

Then we act shocked when, in organizations, people burn out, disengagement flares, and people run for the doors the second they get a whiff of a “labor market.”

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WHY THIS MATTERS

If you mistake Dark Triad behavior for “strength,” you will keep promoting it.

If you mistake systemic psychopathy for “efficiency,” you will keep designing it.

And if you keep telling exhausted humans that the problem is them, you will deepen the harm.

Naming the Dark Triad doesn’t make you cynical.

It makes you precise.

Once we see this, something clicks:

The harm we feel at work isn’t accidental.

It’s not incidental.

It’s not rare.

It’s predictable behavior from a system optimized around traits we would never tolerate in a person.

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CORPORATIONS DON’T HAVE VALUES, THEY HAVE
INCENTIVES

We often talk about corporations like they’re humans.

“Apple believes...”

“Amazon wants...”

“The company cares about its people...”

With all due respect, that language is poetic bullshit.

Corporations don’t “believe” anything.

They don’t “want” anything.

They don’t “care.”

Corporations are acts of fiction, they are concepts that are drawn up, and exist only, in legal ether and in our imaginations.

They can’t believe, want, or care.

They are collections of ideas. They are systems designed to really only do one thing: optimize for whatever purpose they’ve been set up for.

A corporation is not a moral actor.

It is an *incentive machine* — a legal and economic construct generally designed to convert inputs (labor, resources, time, attention) into just one output: more capital.

That’s it. That’s the game.

When people inside a corporation behave compassionately, ethically, or generously, it is in *spite* of the system, not because of it.

And when they behave cruelly, extractively, or cowardly, it is usually because the system quietly, efficiently rewarded them for doing so.

This is why, inside corporations, mostly good people keep finding themselves doing some really bad things.

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“BUT MY COMPANY HAS VALUES!”

Sure it does.

They're printed. Laminated. Framed. Slid into onboarding decks and PowerPoint footers like talismans meant to ward off reality.

But here's the acid test:

When values conflict with profit, profit wins.

Not because anyone woke up twirling a mustache — but because the system selects for it.

Leaders who prioritize quarterly returns over human wellbeing get promoted.

Leaders who slow growth to protect people get labeled “not scalable.”

Leaders who resist harm quietly exit “to spend more time with their families.”

The system is very polite about all of this.

That's what makes it dangerous.

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THE SYSTEM IS WORKING EXACTLY AS DESIGNED

The system isn't broken. It's working exactly as it was designed and is producing exactly what it was designed to produce.

This is ALL systems are able to do: they output what they've been designed to output.

Most people want to believe that what we're experiencing is a "bug"... a temporary glitch, a few bad apples, a leadership failure we can fix with better training.

But... what if it's not broken?

What if it's doing *exactly* what it was designed to do?

Isn't the system designed to...

- Extract maximum value
- Externalize as many costs as possible
- Prioritize short-term gains over long-term stability
- Treat labor as "resources" to be optimized, reduced, or replaced

Seen this way, burnout isn't a "failure."

Layoffs aren't "regrettable."

A.I. implementations that replace you aren't "unavoidable."

Like toxic pollution being pumped into your favorite body of water, these things are simply byproducts of the system working as it was designed.

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WHY THIS FEELS SO PERSONAL (BUT TRULY ISN'T)

Here's where the system gets really clever.

When something goes wrong, it doesn't say:

"The incentives are misaligned."

It says:

*"**You** need to be more resilient."*

When you're overwhelmed, it doesn't ask:

"Is this workload humane?"

It asks:

*"Have **you** tried better time management?"*

When the work drains your soul, it doesn't question the design. It offers meditation apps.

This is how structural harm gets laundered into personal shame.

You start thinking:

- Maybe I'm just not cut out for this.
- Maybe I need to toughen up.
- Maybe everyone else is handling this better than I am.

Spoiler: they're not.

They're just dissociating more efficiently.

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GOOD PEOPLE, BAD OUTCOMES

One of the great lies of modern work is that this kind of harm requires villains.

It doesn't.

All it requires is:

- Diffuse responsibility
- Abstract language
- Incentives aligned away from humanity

Nobody has to wake up wanting to hurt *anyone*.

They just have to say:

"It's not my call."

“That’s the market.”

“We don’t have the budget.”

“It’s just business.”

And just like that, harm becomes nobody’s fault.

This is how violence happens without fists.

This is how suffering happens without headlines.

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A NOTE ABOUT LEADERS

This is really, really important: most leaders are not monsters.

They are often trapped between:

- Their own values
- The expectations of capital
- The quiet threat of replacement

They learn – consciously or not – that to survive, they must occasionally betray their better instincts.

Some harden.

Some burn out.

Some leave.

Some learn to rationalize.

The system doesn't care which path they choose — as long as the numbers go up.

If we misdiagnose the problem, every solution will fail.

You cannot mindfulness your way out of sociopathy.

You cannot culture-wash structural harm.

You cannot fix a system that punishes humanity by asking humans to try harder.

Before we talk about solutions, we have to name the thing.

And the thing is this:

We built systems that reward behavior we would never tolerate in an individual — and then act surprised when everyone inside them feels like shit.

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WHAT COMES NEXT

This chapter is not here to make you angry.

It's here to make you free.

Free from self-blame.

Free from the lie that exhaustion is a moral failure.

Free from the idea that if you were just better, tougher, more optimized — this would all work.

In the next chapter, we go deeper.

We name the kind of harm this system creates — the kind that doesn't bleed, but slowly drains life anyway.

The violence we don't see.

But for now, sit with this truth:

You are not broken.

You are living inside a system that has no capacity to ever love you back.

And that changes everything.