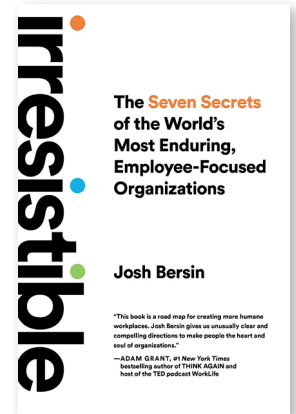


# Irresistible

The Seven Secrets of the World's Most Enduring, Employee-Focused Organizations

by **Josh Bersin**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

If you're a CEO, manager, executive, or HR leader in your company, you want your company, your team, and your department to be fantastic. In fact, you'd like your company to be so great people consider it "irresistible." Driven by a series of lightning-fast changes in technology, globalization, and social consciousness around the world, the rules of business have changed, resulting in extraordinarily profound rethinking of where, how, when, and even why people work today.

This book teaches seven management principles that will truly make your company irresistible—more focused, purposeful, and aligned. Your company will become more agile, more responsive, and more profitable. But even better, your employees, customers, and other stakeholders will be drawn to your company like magnets. It is possible to create such a place and in *Irresistible: The Seven Secrets of the World's Most Enduring, Employee-Focused Organizations*, Josh Bersin shows you how.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The new organizational model: a network of teams
- Why we should focus on the work, not the job
- The new leadership model: leader as coach
- The pandemic-inspired focus on employee experience

## teams, not hierarchy

Today's new business drivers—speed, agility, engagement, and empowerment—have created a new organization model identified as the “network of teams.” Fundamental to this definition are two ideas: first, that teams are the center of work; and second, that the company operates as a network, not as a hierarchy.

Regardless of existing organization charts, in reality, people work in cross-functional teams. There are design teams, sales teams, business unit teams, manufacturing teams, and dozens of others. It is possible to formalize, manage, and organize this way—with tremendous scale, power, and employee success—in a flexible work environment.

Teams make sense for many reasons: they are more engaging, they are quick to form and disband, and over time they generate camaraderie and trust. In today's irresistible companies, teams are multidisciplinary and demographically diverse, clearly defined and measured, and supported with artifacts, measurement tools, and infrastructure to perform successfully.

When people operate in small, empowered groups, they gain a sense of trust. In small teams, employees get to know one another and feel a sense of collective ownership, enabling them to design things faster, serve customers better, and iterate more quickly. Teams learn and adapt faster than individual workers by challenging each team member to come up with more creative ideas. As organizations shift their focus to learning, they will increase their reliance on teams to navigate uncertainty and generate growth.

We know that a strong team outperforms a strong individual. Look at any sports league to see how a losing team becomes a winning team when the right coach comes along. An irresistible company knows this. It facilitates and supports people moving from project to project, from team to team, and from office to home.

It lets people bring their A games—their skills and capabilities—anywhere they are most needed. Employees build skills rapidly through peer coaching, project experience, and senior technical support. Leaders succeed through making connections and winning “followership” rather than through power and tenure. People are evaluated based on their contributions to the team, not rigid performance goals and once-a-year reviews.

As you reconsider the structural modal, many practices become clear.

- First, teams must be aligned by the organizational culture and a set of team practices that companies often formalize.
- Second, a network of teams reduces hierarchy, eliminating a lot of the up-and-down communication that wastes time. The team makes decisions while the team leader maintains alignment with the network of teams openly and transparently.
- Third, in a network of teams, people move easily from team to team. People are sought out to join teams based on their reputation and skills, which encourages them to focus on expertise, not on politics, to succeed.
- Fourth, there must be people, infrastructure, and a culture focused on information-sharing and collective intelligence across teams. Meetings focus on coordination and information sharing, leaving detailed decisions to the teams themselves.

High-performing teams are exciting and fun; they empower and energize people; they thrive on purpose and mission; and they have a unique combination of leadership, clarity of roles, and self-determination.

A network of teams requires people who are self-motivated, passionate, and excited about their ability to have an impact. All humans seek this kind of work. The key is to give them an environment that makes it possible.

## work, not jobs

We have moved from an economy where your employer defines your career to one where your skills, experience, and ambition drive success. Formal job descriptions and hierarchies are going away, and internal job marketplaces are becoming increasingly common. It's time to focus on the work, not the job, to manage, lead, and build a career.

As companies develop new products, shut down divisions, digitally transform the enterprise, and adopt flexible work strategies, people find that their jobs have to change. The up-or-out career growth model doesn't apply in a dynamic, changing business. More and more, companies are adopting the “talent marketplace” model.

People move all over the company to find new opportunities or projects, and they learn and grow along the way. Internal mobility is now one of the most important management strategies of all. People who move from one function to another (from HR to sales, from sales to marketing, and from

# Rather than spend your energy trying to negotiate your way to the top, spend it trying to expand and improve your skill sets.

finance to operations) always outperform their peers.

Think about your company as a giant consulting firm. In a consulting firm, people are always working on projects. When a project starts, it's staffed up, and when it's completed, people are evaluated for that project and move on to the next one. Management is even treated this way.

Client partners who know the firm well move into management roles through a peer-review process. They gain three to five years of management experience, and then they often go back to being client partners. Very few managers are institutionalized in their jobs, giving the company tremendous dynamism and flexibility. This is happening all over business.

In a company organized as a network, business managers, designers, and engineers work together on projects, and team leaders select teammates based on skills, reputation, relationships, and followership. Individuals have career and personal goals, so they seek out projects and work based on their interests and desires.

The project manager or leader's goal is to find these people, build a team that fits, and manage the project so everyone feels they can succeed. The team decides who is responsible for what work, and while some people have functional specialties, the actual jobs may vary from team to team. Over time, as teams grow or change, people move from team to team.

Shifting from jobs to work centers the company on constantly developing, sharing, and rewarding skills. This means people have to upskill, reskill, and rethink their work every year. Rather than spend your energy trying to negotiate your way to the top, spend it trying to expand and improve your skill sets.

If we want to take advantage of this transition, we must change the way we hire. Irresistible companies hire employees based on how well they fit the purpose of the work, rather than on conventional metrics such as education and pedigree, experience, and skills. The good news is that managers and leaders can implement these changes relatively easily.

- Eliminate hierarchical and rigid job titles.

- Reduce the number of levels.
- Start to pay people based on the demand for their services and expertise rather than on their tenure or level.
- Inspire, reward, or force managers to encourage people to leave their teams, perhaps even evaluating managers on how many people do so.
- Provide career coaching inside the company.

Taken together, these steps will help your irresistible company adapt to thinking more about work than about jobs.

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## coach, not boss

The most effective leaders who stand the test of time know how to get the best out of their people. The more driven, aligned, and empowered your teams are, the faster your company will grow, the better its products and services will become, and the more service and support you'll provide to customers. It's quite simple. What is the new leadership model for this new world? It's simple: leader as coach.

Leaders are here to drive strategy, lead projects, help grow people, and identify the experts, innovators, and project managers we need. Leaders must understand the network, they must understand how the company makes money, and they must have the influence and followership to persuade people to move in a given direction without just telling them what to do.

And on the people side, they must have a deep instinct for talent and people. The simplest way to think of this is that leaders today must shift from being the boss to being the coach.

The role of a manager at irresistible companies is to get work done, not to manage people. This means we have two types of managers in companies going forward—those who manage projects and work, and those who lead and coach people, or “people leaders.”

A new model is emerging, one of human-centered leadership. This means the leader connects the business to communities, society, and the local economy.

Today's successful leaders lead by example, empowerment, and inspiration instead of by position, level, or title. Irresistible leaders excel at moving people into the roles that are right for them and the organization. They align teams, develop networks, and reinforce culture and adherence to the organization's values.

In sports, great coaches make everyone feel powerful and engaged. They know how to put people into the right position, where they can succeed. They give team members the subtle guidance they need to improve while the game is being played, rather than just handing down judgment when the season is over. Great coaches help keep people focused on the ultimate goal and ask team members questions they may not have asked themselves. This archetype shatters many of the traditional models of leadership in business.

High-performing business leaders, in fact, share many similar traits with sports coaches:

- **They communicate a clear direction:** They have a crystal-clear understanding of where they are going. They help a team win through the clarity of their vision.
- **They are good judges of people:** They put the right people in the right positions to play to everyone's individual strengths.
- **They develop winning game plans:** They have an uncanny ability to take complex problems and quickly break them down into step-by-step solutions.
- **They focus on developing people:** They focus on individuals, their strengths, opportunities, and areas of improvement.

The single most important lesson in culture and performance is really simple: the boss becomes the coach. Irresistible companies give people the ability and the responsibility to manage themselves while leaders or coaches align and improve them.

## culture, not rules

Whether employees work on-site or remotely from home, irresistible companies are pursuing a workforce strategy that elevates employee health, safety, and wellbeing. How do we define the workplace in businesses where people work in teams and share information electronically while managers are often busy doing their own work, not watching over our shoulders? And how do we build a work environment that overinvests in creativity and agility and focuses less heavily

on operational execution?

The answer is a new workplace defined by culture, not rules, with a focus on flexibility, freedom, and fairness.

There are five discussion-worthy aspects of irresistible culture:

### **The work environment—the physical, environmental, and virtual experience**

Workplace design really does matter. There is an almost perfect correlation between an employee's level of engagement and his or her satisfaction with the physical workplace. Choice and control are key—giving employees, regardless of their role and hob, the freedom to work the way they find is the most productive, supportive, and enjoyable for them. In a sense, the entire workspace should be focused on physical, cognitive, and emotional wellbeing.

### **Wellbeing—how the organization supports health, safety, physical, mental, and financial wellbeing**

The most important aspect of the “culture, not rules” mindset is a massive focus on employee wellbeing. In the last decade, the focus has transitioned from encouraging health and fitness to promoting wellbeing as a driver of performance. More and more companies are starting to realize that wellbeing is also a strategy for engagement.

Managers have a much bigger role than just driving results. We are responsible for taking care of people, monitoring our own behavior, and making sure we are creating a net-positive impact on the entire organization. Irresistible companies are moving wellbeing out of the “benefits department” and making it part of the corporate culture.

### **Inclusion—how diverse, open, inclusive, and transparent the work environment is**

In today's era of team-centered organizations, nothing is more valuable to employees than a sense of feeling included and respected at work. In irresistible companies, diversity and inclusion are not just HR programs; they're also critical to creating the right work environment. Diversity and inclusion must permeate all aspects of work and affect employee performance and engagement at all levels.

### **Recognition and reward—how the company treats and rewards people**

Much of corporate culture revolves around the way people are rewarded and rewards go far beyond money and bene-

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rather, it is the outcome.

fits. Recognition has a tremendous impact on performance. The research for this book suggests that companies with high-recognition cultures have as much as 30 percent lower voluntary turnover ratios on average.

### **Paying people fairly in the age of transparency**

Employees can look up their job title, level, tenure, and location and almost immediately see what others are making. HR managers used to buy this data from survey firms; today, it's freely available on the internet. Paying a fair wage attracts stronger candidates, increases the level of commitment to the company, and creates a more productive workforce. Pay should be based on multiple factors: job performance, skills and capabilities, reputation, network, the ability to lead, and the potential to grow.

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### **growth, not promotion**

If you want your company to be irresistible, you need the organization to learn as fast as it can. This means that learning should be essential to your entire people strategy so that people can grow, earn more money, and advance—regardless of level or job title.

The research for this book has continuously found that the highest performing companies always have one thing in common: they embrace a culture of learning. People are able to take time to learn, they have a culture of sharing and development, and managers are coaches, mentors, and educators at heart.

Organizational learning takes many forms. In some cases it's teams taking time to step back and talk about what's failed. In other cases it's giving someone a new assignment to help them develop new skills. And in others it means taking a course, completing an assessment, or finding a mentor. When you have a skill gap, you could try to hire someone to fit it, but people you hire from the outside may be expensive, hard to find, and often don't fit your culture. Sending an existing employee to a boot camp and giving them time to learn the new skill can be significantly cheaper than hiring from the outside. Irresistible companies focus on

growth, not promotion, as their learning strategy.

In a nutshell, the “growth, not promotion” management principle simply means that we optimize around growth in everything we do. Yes, people are promoted, but that is not the goal; rather, it is the outcome.

As companies become more and more networked, we have to create this environment inside companies and let people grow regardless of whether they are promoted or not. That's not to say that promotion is bad, but when people know they're learning and improving their skills, they know their market value is going up even if their job title doesn't change.

Since technology development is dynamic, everyone in every function must constantly learn new ways of performing their essential functional tasks. Not surprisingly, technical skills are in high demand—but so are skills in sales, customer service, healthcare, and general project management. A good career is one that builds all these skills together. For you as an employee or a manager, continuous learning has become one of your most valued skills.

At an organizational level, these are issues of life and death: if we cannot attract and retain the most highly skilled people, we are doomed to fall behind. At a personal level, career development is essential to our lives. We all have to get better at “personal reinvention.”

Stop thinking about yourself as a sales person or as a senior consultant. You can be whatever you want to be—this is the new way to manage a career. Rather than go to school, get a job, and retire, we now live in a world where we learn, work, and hopefully enjoy our lives in a series of continuous cycles well into our 70s and beyond.

Irresistible companies are figuring this new model out. They focus on an individual's growth, not promotion—moving forward in responsibility, expertise, and salary without necessarily being forced up the pyramid. We now know that a fulfilling career involves formal learning, stretch assignments, new projects, and opportunities to contribute across the company on many different teams.

People feel a sense of continuous personal progress, they learn new skills, and they steadily become more valued without a choreographed ascent through management ranks. Careers are experiences, not ladders. Employees are allowed to build skills on demand, explore new disciplines, and learn from their peers.

## purpose, not profits

Profits are important to a company because they affect the company's ability to secure financing and attract investors who can increase working capital and fund business growth. But purpose is the real fuel of a company. It gives people the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity to add value in many ways.

And today, amid worries about income inequality, immigration issues, bias, and discrimination, purpose has shifted into a new era of "citizenship." This means helping the society around us. In a business, we want our people to always think about what they can do to make the company better, what they can do to make their teammates successful, and, of course, what they can do to please customers, shareholders, and the community.

When you get on a plane, shop on Amazon, walk into a store, or go to a restaurant, you don't just want a good seat, good electronics, and good food; you want a good experience. This means that companies must give their people a sense of empathy, understanding, and true concern for their customers. It means shifting focus from revenue and sales to customer satisfaction and retention—and showing their people why and how their mission matters.

A large portion of global equity markets continues to focus on financial results, embracing the idea that business exists for that purpose alone: to make a profit. While profits fuel a company's growth, irresistible companies are essentially institutions that garner loyalty, commitment, and energy from their employees. And in today's service-driven world, they attract the same level of energy and loyalty from customers. Profit, rather than being a goal, is an outcome.

There's even a term for this now: "conscious capitalism," which is the conviction that businesses must operate ethically and with a higher purpose as they pursue profits, serving the needs of humanity and the environment. The word "citizenship" best explains this strategy.

In the context of a company, it means taking care of your employees, your customers, your shareholders, and the

communities in which you live. Well-run companies are good for everyone: employees, customers, and investors.

## employee experience, not output

Among the many changes driven by COVID-19, the biggest of all was the new focus on what's called employee experience. The idea, put simply, is that we can't just design jobs and work practices; we have to look at employees' total experience at work.

In the past, companies focused on engagement surveys to understand employee satisfaction. Today, this is a discipline of design: studying what employees do, understanding their work and job needs, and then designing the systems, workplaces, and rewards that help them thrive.

Research for this book revealed that among all the things we can do to make work better for employees, a focus on trust, productivity, inclusion, and belonging win out. Throwing perks and benefits has little real impact.

Irresistible companies understand this, and they build employee-centric systems, frontline worker platforms, and many forms of listening, communication, and feedback to make sure employees are supported. These are the practices that create results—not pushing for output.

Like any tipping point, the transition to hybrid workspaces and flexible work arrangements is in its nascent, imperfect stage. We know some of the downsides of remote work, such as Zoom fatigue, overwork, and rising stress and anxiety. We are also aware of the positive effects, such as equal or enhanced productivity.

Meanwhile, advances in artificial intelligence, voice and face recognition, virtual and augmented reality, chat and conversational systems, and technologies that read and analyze data and text are all moving at light speed. The issue for us is how fast we can design, invent, or discover new jobs as machines come in and automate more work.

Irresistible companies understand that by unleashing the power of the human spirit, their company can go faster and farther than ever expected. Business should not be an effort to force labor to do what managers want; rather, it should be an enterprise to empower people to build organizational success. Irresistible companies attract top people, customers, and partners. It is one that people admire and respect, and it is one that adapts, grows, and endures.

The seven innovations detailed in this book represent a set of new management philosophies in HR, all of them underpinned by an essential truth: people are still the most important element of a business. A shift from hierarchy to teams, jobs to work, will empower people, create more energy, passion, and commitment, and propel employees forward on a journey of mutual value.



Josh Bersin is an analyst and thought leader focusing on the global talent market and trends impacting business workforces around the world. He is frequently featured in publications such as Forbes, Harvard Business Review, HR Executive, Fast Company, Wall Street Journal, Economic Times, Financial Times, and Washington Post. He has more than 850,000 followers on LinkedIn. Josh Bersin founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. In addition to the company's ongoing research, Bersin and his team created the Big Reset, a series of collaborative sprints for HR executives, to tackle the workforce challenges of the pandemic and beyond.

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