



The Regenerative Business

Redesign Work, Cultivate Human Potential,
Achieve Extraordinary Outcomes

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

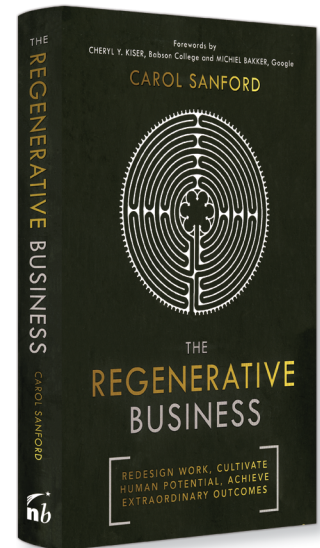
Through a profoundly contrarian paradigm, Carol Sanford shows leaders why today's so-called business "best practices" undermine success — and then, how to transform a business into something so flexible, so innovative, so developmental, it becomes virtually nondisplaceable in the market.

A regenerative business is one that connects every one of its people to its "essential core" — its unique foundation for innovation and market power. This provides the fulcrum for an organizational culture that embraces the internal destabilization and discomfort that comes with responding creatively to the unfamiliar. The payoff is a motivated and innovative workforce that is prepared to take a business to the top of its industry — and stay there.

Sanford's work focuses on what fundamentally fuels an organization: the capacity and capabilities of the people within it and the design of work to empower them. By implementing this all-encompassing way of working, businesses are able to have a positive impact beyond the bottom line to the broader marketplace and the communities in which they operate.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to make your business flexible, innovative and developmental.
- How to build a motivated and innovative workforce.
- How to take your business to the top of its industry.
- How to design new and better ways of working.



by Carol Sanford

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE REGENERATIVE BUSINESS

by Carol Sanford

The author: Carol Sanford's work is deeply rooted in the belief that people can grow and develop beyond what their leaders or anyone believes is possible: to be incredibly entrepreneurial, innovative and responsible in their business and personal actions. For 40 years, she has worked with leaders of successful companies, such as Google, DuPont, Intel, P&G and Seventh Generation, helping them to innovate and grow their business by growing their people. Carol is currently the Executive in Residence and Senior Fellow in Social Innovation at Babson College.

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Introduction: Pursue Disruptive Innovation

When it's done well, disruptive innovation has the power to regenerate whole industries and markets. Beyond this, it also has the potential to regenerate the social and ecological systems within which an industry operates.

The potential for disruptive innovation exists in every aspect of business, not just its offerings. It is possible and important to innovate with regard to management, production, distribution, customer relations, marketing, supply system, investment and at least a hundred other arenas. *Regeneration* is a process by which people, institutions and materials evolve the capacity to fulfill their inherent potential in a world that is constantly changing around them.

The Regenerative Mindset

In practice, there are some real and not-so-obvious challenges built into creating regenerative organizations. The single greatest barrier to innovation is our unconscious attachment to comfortable and habitual patterns of thought — that is, to our mindsets. We can develop the ability to choose and evolve our mindsets.

A mindset is a lens through which we view and make sense of the world. In business, the regenerative mindset is actually quite rare. Yet the capacity for disruptive innovation depends on the ability to see the world through precisely this lens. To create and continue to evolve a world-changing business, the regenerative mindset must be intentionally built in, not unconsciously designed out. ●

Go Beyond Training and Develop Your People

Automation and artificial intelligence are expected to displace 50 percent of what's left of blue-collar jobs in the U.S. by the end of this decade. At the same time, there is a global shortage of workers with the critical-thinking skills, technical agility, motivation and independence needed by the emerging economy. What is urgently needed now is an approach to work design that educates workers to be successful in the 21st century.

A number of businesses and the consultants who serve them have worked hard to create flat organizations with self-directed employees. But, unfortunately, many of these alternative structures are still based on the old belief about motivation — namely, that it is fostered through a system of rewards and punishments. Also, many of them focus on the development of technical skills rather than on the deep work of growing critical thinking, personal mastery and business acumen.

By tapping into the inherent, self-organizing, creative energies of your workforce, you will improve margins, cash flow and earnings. As an added bonus, you will contribute to making better lives for the people your business affects and more enduring democratic institutions for society as a whole. ●

The Evolution of Work Design

Work design is the key to developing people who have the ability to create a regenerative business. If a business



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wants to differentiate itself and not do the same things in the same way that everyone else is doing them, it needs to give conscious attention to how it's working and what it's working on.

The regenerative approach to work design begins from the recognition that human beings share certain fundamental characteristics:

- They have an innate desire to grow and improve.
- They are social and benefit from opportunities to engage with and learn from one another.
- They derive a sense of meaning and purpose from contributing to something larger than themselves.

A regenerative business elicits and strengthens all three of these characteristics in its employees and builds them into the core of its operations.

Three Approaches to Work Design

Initially, work design focused on *performance improvement*, or how well a business and all of its people were performing with regard to serving its customers. It has since become apparent that when performance is the primary concern, the scope of design tends to be narrow, limited mostly to efficient functioning.

The beginning of the second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of a new focus on *human growth*. This grew out of the human potential movement, cognitive psychology and breakthroughs in neuroscience. The scope of work design expanded to include the facilitation of people's ability to work together as part of creative, self-directing teams.

Parallel to the development of this approach, a third stream of thinking explored the implications of theories of complex living systems for work design. This approach made *systems regeneration* its primary concern and considerably broadened the focus of work design to include the improvement of all of the multiple, overlapping socioecological systems that a business is a part of. This provided the basis for building regenerative businesses.

Each of these approaches — representing three historical eras in the evolution of work design — can be found in the business world today.

The Case for Regenerative Work Design

The emerging business environment of the 21st century demands that businesses be nimble, resilient and — above all — innovative. They will require intelligent and adaptable workforces that are capable of anticipating and responding to evolutions in markets long before they

become generally apparent. Without this intelligence and adaptability, more than 60 percent of businesses worldwide are expected to fail within the next two decades.

Not surprisingly, executives are focused on how to build these qualities into their companies. They tend to focus on six pressing issues that are the main drivers of change for business at this time. Fortunately, all of these issues can be addressed through a regenerative approach to work design.

How can I hire and retain top talent? A regenerative organization focuses on developing its talent rather than buying it. Instead of wasting energy chasing a limited pool of talent, a regenerative organization grows talent in everyone it touches.

How do we become a “best place to work”? In a regenerative business, the work design, itself, rather than the amenities or human resource programs, motivates people to become part of the organization and to take on more and more challenging work because they feel themselves to be part of a future that they want to help create.

How can I make my company an innovation powerhouse? A regenerative organization sees innovation as the responsibility of everyone, not the province of a specialized team. As part of the work design, each individual commits to making an extraordinary contribution and is given the support needed to carry through on that promise.

How do we build the resilience to weather wild fluctuation in our markets? For a regenerative business, financial effectiveness comes from effectively managing both top-line growth and bottom-line returns. The aim of regenerative work design is to shift a business's orientation away from selling more of the same product to more new customers to becoming the industry leader in product and service development for a loyal, growing customer base.

How do we deal with ever-increasing complexity? By design, a regenerative business sees through the chaos to the patterns that will allow a system to evolve and designs its work to respond to the opportunities that are revealed. Rather than creating jobs, a regenerative business creates space for reinvention.

How can I make my company a healthy place to work? Research shows that people experience health and well-being at work when they have a sense that they are making life better for customers and other stakeholders. Because a regenerative business has a systems-actualizing orientation, it creates the conditions for workers to innovate with regard to how their work is going to benefit people and systems outside of the business. ●

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Source Work Design from First Principles

Three criteria work on growing human capacity, enabling people to take the kind of risk that produces strong businesses (and, by extension, strong individuals, families and democracies).

Criterion One: Internal Locus of Control. *Locus of control* refers to a belief about where power lies with regard to the events in people's lives. An *internal* locus of control arises when people understand that they have full responsibility for their actions, how they experience the world, and the outcomes they produce for themselves and others.

Criterion Two: External Considering. This means caring deeply about something or someone in addition to ourselves, a concept developed by Armenian philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff as a way to counter the nearly universal human tendency to be narrowly self-referential. External considering requires understanding that what we care about is whole and alive, with its own purposes and potential, and it demands the reflective capability to understand how our actions contribute to or diminish this potential.

Criterion Three: Personal Agency. This refers to the strong inner urge that people have to be active players in the world, taking responsibility for manifesting the effects they want to create. Personal agency is important to businesses because they need people who are able to take appropriate initiative. A workforce made up of people who can see what needs to be done and who will step up to do it is far more powerful than a workforce that depends on delegation to know what to do.

Using these criteria, it is possible to test the regenerative potential of any work design. For a business or any other organization to work in a coherent and systemic way, all three must be present and rigorously cultivated. ●

Build Innovation into How Work Is Done

Most organizations know that to engage in real, disruptive innovation, they need great, creative people. They also understand that they must provide the conditions within which these people will flourish. In addition to a vibrant culture, they must design work in such a way that it invites and even compels innovation. A regenerative organization establishes the conditions that will grow creativity across the entire organization.

The right conditions can radically expand what people consider possible while nurturing a compelling desire in them to be part of it. Three design criteria focus on these fundamental conditions.

Criterion One: Initiative Activation. *Initiative activation* is a structured means for drawing out the inherent human tendency for personal agency, bringing it into the business and its endeavors. Most businesses spend people's initiative on proscribed activities that have been delegated by someone higher up in a hierarchy or dictated by the organization's track record. This severely limits the potential for true innovation. Organizations have an obligation to foster creative initiative.

Criterion Two: Developmental Infrastructure. Businesses can create a *developmental infrastructure* that enables the establishment and evolution of a regenerative culture by setting up a pattern of recurring processes to support the individual and collective development of all workers. The key to working developmentally is to recognize that all members of an organization are unique. If their creative energies are to be effectively unleashed, then businesses must ensure that this uniqueness is drawn out, realized and amplified.

Criterion Three: Change Accelerator. A *change accelerator* is an approach to change that connects people's motivations to the meaningful effects they could have in the world. Most businesses, instead, work only on internal changes that have to do with how they operate. They try to redirect people's attention and energy through incentives, and those who receive rewards for adopting new behaviors become role models for the rest.

These three criteria are specifically designed to enable businesses to provide focus, organization and order to the initiatives of their members, so that their creative energy gains coherence and trust. ●

Eliminate Toxic Business Practices

As we move through different stages of our lives, we are shaped (often unconsciously) by our family and social environments, our cultures, and the character of our times. These social forces frame how we interpret our experiences, and they also affect the decisions and choices we make. Unless we expend real effort, we can be completely blind to the impact of social forces and the habitual patterns of thinking and behavior they reinforce. Businesses are just as susceptible to this accretion of unconscious influences handed down from one era and generation to the next.

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To become regenerative, an organization must engage in a process of self-examination in order to recognize and root out self-destructive practices that might otherwise prevent the company from pursuing its potential.

A regenerative approach is systemic and based on a coherent worldview or paradigm. It can't be bolted onto an existing work design that was built out of toxic practices and derived from antiquated paradigms. Why would you want to drag the old destructive patterns into the different future you are trying to create? You might be able to achieve a few improvements here and there, but the transformational benefits of a regenerative work design would be lost. You need to clear the decks of old, toxic practices and the mindsets from which they arose. ●

Design a Developmental Organization

There's a myth out there that people naturally hate and fear change. It's simply not true. What people hate is the sense that change is inflicted on them — that they are victims of circumstance and have no ability to participate in shaping the future that they are being dragged into. Even when the reasons for the change effort are excellent, an external approach triggers a natural and completely appropriate resistance from those on whom it is imposed.

Real change arises from the desire and agency of individuals who see an audacious possibility on their horizon and are willing to try almost anything to make it happen.

Developing Whole Human Beings

There are three critical learning principles that are necessary guides for the kind of human development program that regenerative work systems are based on.

First, human development comes through education rather than instruction. That is, it needs to be designed to draw people out rather than cram things into their brains — to build their critical-thinking skills rather than spoon feed them content.

Second, when people come to an educational session, they need to be working on real business endeavors with their natural working team so that together they can implement what they've learned and planned immediately upon leaving the room.

Third, the development of people is directly tied to their ability to make a difference in the lives of customers, those individuals and communities that a business exists to serve.

Whether for individuals or institutions, transformational change takes strong effort. The almost overwhelming

tendency to slip back into habitual ruts and well-worn ways of working competes in people's minds with the initial motivation to change. Thus, all those who are evolving regenerative organizations need to accept that profound change requires growth through time as they pass through subsequent phases of development. ●

Phase One: Evolve into Strategic Disruption

The purpose of the first phase of regenerative work design is to destabilize an organization by introducing a provocation that causes people to think from radically new perspectives. This is called a *conscious shock* for two reasons. It's *conscious* because it invites people to remember the origins and purpose of their work and to discover meaningful new ways to express these in the world. It's a *shock* because it also makes people aware of how conditioned the organization has become, how mechanically reactive it is to outside forces and how easily it loses connection to its authenticity.

A successfully applied conscious shock challenges familiar routines and shakes people out of their comfort zones. Yet it does this without introducing any sense of threat to their identity or position. Rather, it connects them to the essence of who they are, as individuals and as a company, and to the essence of their customers.

The Core Team

It takes time to introduce a conscious shock across an entire organization. In practical terms, a business leader makes this possible by setting up a *core team*, whose purpose is to grow the business. The first step of the core team's work is to dismantle the tradition of hierarchical decision-making.

The core team is chartered to learn how to think systemically and strategically and to channel this new knowledge directly into transformational change. They are not representatives; they are not elected, and they are not expected to represent the opinions of a particular group. Rather, they are expected to use their diverse perspectives to generate understanding about how each aspect of the business influences and participates in the strategic direction of the whole.

The first and most important task of the core team is to help the entire company shift the way it thinks about who it is in relationship to its customers. This requires upending conventional practices of market research, which deliver *knowledge* about customers but very little *understanding* of what it's like to live their lives. Market data

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can shed light on various aspects of customers behaviors or preferences, but it doesn't help businesses see the customers as a whole.

This same caring for the customers can be awakened in others, and it is one of the core team's primary responsibilities to invite their coworkers to join them in becoming curious about their customers' lives.

This shift in orientation from static to dynamic produces a risk-taking culture and develops workers with the agency to be self-directing rather than dependent on direction from above. ●

Phase Two: Evolve a Courageous Culture

To make real change in an organization, it is necessary to change its culture. And if we want to create a new culture, we need to change the ways we work — in every activity, every day.

Characteristics of a Regenerative Culture

Imperturbability in the Face of Uncertainty. A regenerative business wholeheartedly embraces the reality of a changing market and world. Because it strives to innovate in ways that will anticipate and define these changes, it is inevitably venturing into the unknown.

Purposefulness Beyond Reproach. Purpose is not something that people have; it is something that people serve. In other words, it is the opposite of self-aggrandizement; it always comes from the benefits people deliver to something other than themselves. In a regenerative business context, these benefits need to ripple out so that customers are better able to serve their own larger purposes (for example, the intention to be a good parent, citizen or business person).

Developmental Means. In a regenerative business culture, change leaders see their colleagues and employees as individuals with potential that can be developed rather than as problems to be solved or managed. These leaders learn to see the new capabilities that people will need to grow if they are to fulfill their potential, and they devote their energies and talents to ensuring that opportunities are provided for this development to occur.

Regenerative Thinking. Regenerative thinking is a rigorous discipline. It demands that people concentrate as they seek to understand what is at the core of how something works. Regenerative thinking also demands that workers be present and creative — generating new thoughts rather than recycling thoughts that they've had before. Unlearning nonregenerative habits of thought takes effort and patience,

which is why it is so helpful to have a regenerative culture to support employees in their development.

Unifying Strategy. When people have a shared focus, they gain confidence in their ability to stay on the same path, even as they are pursuing diverse initiatives. This encourages self-direction in decision-making and action taking. It also helps eliminate fragmentation of focus because it links every aspect of work back to a single origin.

Self-to-Self Relationships. Thinking together, which grows organizational intelligence, is extremely difficult to do in conventional hierarchies, which promote role-to-role relationships (manager to subordinate, investor to executive, representative to customer and so on).

In a regenerative business, self-to-self relationships are supported by the use of systematic frameworks that enable diverse people to think together about complex questions. Using frameworks, colleagues from throughout an organization can build on each other's work, while challenging one another to become more comprehensive and innovative in their thinking. ●

Phase Three: Evolve People and Thinking Processes

Process refers to how people think, act and interact. Process is where change hits the ground. A developmental organization grows the ability in every one of its workers to see the world in process terms. This means enabling them to be present to what is happening in this very moment.

Some processes that most people consider essential to running an organization are: hiring, working, disciplining, managing outputs, developing and celebrating accomplishment. Here are two examples contrasting the conventional approach with a regenerative one.

In most companies, working means following a job description in order to perform tasks prescribed by others. The implication is that the job is independent of the person filling it; it consists of a set of procedures that any qualified person should be able to follow.

In a regenerative business, working is a creative process undertaken by a team. Because it is not locked into pre-established procedures, a working team in a regenerative business has the freedom to invent new ways to deliver the results its customers are looking for.

Most companies equate developing people with training them, helping them build skills they will need to perform particular functions. Some companies also work on providing challenges that will stretch their employees,

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giving them opportunities to grow by exposing them to diverse aspects of the business or difficult problems that need to be solved. Where coaching or support is provided, it is focused on problem solving and advising, rather than on deep education to produce new, systemic thinking capacity.

In a regenerative business, educational activities are developmental. They provide resources and support as people develop the qualities they need to take charge of their own destinies and make profound contributions to their work communities. These qualities include self-management, critical-thinking skills and the ability to embrace complexity and conflict as necessary dimensions of significant work. ●

Phase Four: Evolve Business Work Systems

Once a company has charted a new strategic direction for itself, started to grow a new culture and transformed its key processes, it will no longer fit comfortably in its own skin. At this point, it will need to redesign its systems and structures to better serve the role it has chosen to play in its market and industry.

Organizations create systems to keep multiple people and functions aligned, so that they can achieve a shared purpose in a relatively predictable way. In a regenerative organization, systems themselves are instruments for the development of people — designed to be managed and continuously upgraded by those who are using them.

One of the reasons that so many of the systems found in businesses work against innovation is that they are intended to make things easy rather than make them developmental.

Five Categories of System

There are five categories of system; each will mean developing a particular capability across the entire workforce.

Managing. At every customer interface, managing systems should ensure total satisfaction. Amazon, for example, has become dominant in its market by setting up systems designed to consistently give purchasers an experience of customized service, without ever having direct contact with employees. On the relatively rare occasions when things go wrong, it's easy for customers to reach live service agents.

Site. Site systems work on the interacting dynamic flows — for example, of material, equipment and people — required for operational work. The critical capability needed for designing and improving site systems has to do with letting go of what currently exists — including

all of the limitations built in to ways that the various elements of the business currently work — in order to see directly into how things *want* to work.

Operating. Operating systems work to improve performance across various aspects of an organization in order to build its overall effectiveness at producing intended results. Southwest Airlines built its business model around flying only one kind of airplane, the Boeing 737, so that every plane and every part is interchangeable, and every mechanic, pilot and member of the cabin crew knows all of the planes they're responsible for intimately.

Personnel. Personnel systems work on growing people as a way to evolve the development and expression of an organization's potential within the context of agreed upon purposes. This is fundamentally unlike the conventional system of job descriptions, which is designed to slot people into existing, predetermined positions.

Planning. Planning systems lay out the work that needs to be done and then ensure that production stays on track with regard to strategy, budget and goals. It's not enough to check off boxes with regard to goals and benchmarks. As a company's strategy evolves, its systems should evolve as well. In a regenerative business, people within the organization take this on, and it becomes a critical arena for their personal and professional development, forming a basis for their promises beyond ableness. ●

Phase Five: Evolve Work Structures Last

Structures serve as the enduring frame within which change happens, providing the coherence that allows an entity to grow and evolve without descending into chaos. Work design also uses structures to direct traffic, but in this case, traffic is the ingenuity and decision-making required to get work done. In a regenerative organization, work design produces dynamic stability, like the stability required to ride a bicycle or ski down a mountain, and its structures support evolution rather than stasis.

Structures dictate choices and cannot be shifted or removed without real investment of effort.

Three Kinds of Regenerative Structure

Developmental Thinking Structures. Thinking structures shape and direct our mental processes. For example, businesses will use cost-benefit analyses to organize their thinking about where to invest. As often as not, we utilize thinking structures without awareness of them, and they function as mental models. *Developmental*

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thinking structures, on the other hand, enable us to become conscious of the way our thinking is structured and to reshape it. We may unconsciously experience the world as polarized — right or wrong, winner, or loser, left wing or right wing. To broaden our options, we can use developmental thinking structures to actively examine decisions.

Generative Structures. Generative structures enable a company to transform itself from functionally static to functionally dynamic by disrupting familiar ways of working that have become calcified, dysfunctional or outdated.

A *core team/market field team/task team* structure can be introduced to accomplish this disruption, and initiate phase one of an organizational change process.

A *core team* identifies critical work that has been ignored, such as discovering the essence of buyers, and it democratizes work that has formerly been the province of small groups, such as marketing or tracking financial performance. At the same time, it evolves work design in ways that generate new capacity.

Market field teams dedicate themselves to understanding customers. Each team focuses on a specific buyer class, inquiring deeply into its unique needs and aspirations. The market field teams receive support and take strategic direction from the core team.

From time to time, the strategic growth of an organization requires focused work to develop new systems or processes. This is the role of *task teams*, whose scope is always clearly defined and whose members disband once their work is accomplished. Because task teams serve the transformation of particular aspects of the business, they are inherently formed to serve disruptive purposes.

Manifestation Structures. Manifestation structures direct the flow of decisions, outcomes and accountability so that the daily cycle of work can get done. In a regenerative organization, workers are expected to be self-motivating, self-managing and conscious of the whole of the business, as created and held by its strategic direction; the essence and identity of buyer classes and how they live; financial performance; primary processes, systems and structures; and so forth. Because it starts from this philosophy, a regenerative organization designs very different manifestation structures than are usually found in a conventional business.

For example, in conventional reporting structures, higher levels in a hierarchy provide to lower levels their plans, procedures and standards, ensuring compliance in order to obtain orderly, controlled operations and improvements. In contrast, a regenerative reporting structure expects that

levels are needed only in order to provide a distinctive and additive contribution toward business and functional excellence. No one serves as boss over another person's work. In some instances, supervisors might become educators, providing expertise to help teams achieve the purposes they undertake on behalf of the business. In other cases, they may resource an employee's personal development. Roles will evolve as the company evolves.

In a regenerative organization, individuals and teams are accountable for their behavior based on mutually agreed upon principles and purposes. This works because teams create clear deliverables linked to the markets they serve and because self-reflection is built into every team process. Also, resourcing support is made continuously available rather than provided only during annual reviews. ●

Epilogue: The Regenerative Paradigm

A regenerative business doesn't get into bidding wars for talent because it grows on its own. It doesn't need to chase after trendy benefits packages because it attracts and keeps people by offering them profoundly meaningful work to do. Managing complexity is no longer an executive suite problem because everyone is trained in the collective use of systemic frameworks. And the best way to keep people healthy and happy is to provide them with opportunities to express their potential in service to something greater than themselves.

In other words, a regenerative approach to work design is elegant. It simply dissolves the kinds of issues that cause other executives to tear their hair out. It does this by giving workers permission to focus on potential rather than problems and, thereby, to create the world that wants to come into existence. ●

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