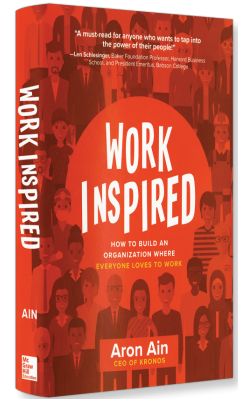


# WorkInspired

How to Build an Organization Where  
Everyone Loves to Work

by **Aron Ain**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Imagine a company where everyone loves to work, where employees feel not just “satisfied” but truly cared for, respected and energized. Think of the impact this would have on recruitment, retention, customer satisfaction, innovation and overall performance.

Aron Ain, the award-winning CEO of Kronos, a global provider of workforce management and human-capital management cloud solutions, believes that anything is possible when people are inspired. By embracing employee development and engagement as a growth strategy, Ain transformed his company’s culture and built a billion-dollar business. *WorkInspired* takes leaders and managers inside Kronos’ highly admired WorkInspired culture, showing them the surprisingly simple rules they can follow to replicate that success.

Many executives talk about how “their people are their greatest asset.” Ain challenges leaders to “walk the talk” and put people first, whether they oversee a team of five or an organization of 500,000. When they do, employees won’t be the only ones who thank them. Customers and shareholders will, too. This is what it means to WorkInspired.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How “un-leaders” inspire their people by adopting the right mindset.
- The importance of trust and over-communication.
- How to make work both fun and productive.
- How a culture of caring fosters innovation throughout the organization.

## Introduction

I've spent my career working at Kronos® Incorporated, the Massachusetts-based, billion-dollar global software firm founded in 1977 by my brother Mark. You might not have heard of us, but chances are we're touching your daily life. Our initial product was the first microprocessor-based time clock, a device that recorded, totaled and reported employee hours.

Today, under the banner Workforce Innovation That Works™, approximately 5,500 Kronos employees — or “Kronites,” as we call ourselves — around the world create, sell and service software that helps organizations track the time their employees work to ensure that everyone is paid properly; that employees are scheduled based on skills, preferences, seniority, availability and historic business data; and that organizations are better able to comply with complex labor regulations.

We believe that great businesses are powered by great people and that to be a great business you need to create and manage an engaged workforce. Lots of executives claim to put employees first, but when I became our company's CEO in 2005, I had a chance to put my philosophy to the test.

### From “Like” to “Love”

Although people seemed to like working at Kronos, employees didn't *love* Kronos, and they didn't see our organization as a unique and extraordinary place to build a career. That's what we changed.

Our drive to institutionalize a great culture got a boost in 2010 when we hired a seasoned executive with a strong quantitative background as our chief people officer. We performed a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the main drivers of engagement, identifying development and innovation as the biggest factors — and after further refinement, we discovered that manager effectiveness and a feeling of connectedness to the company's mission and strategy were also critical.

### Walking the Talk

Then we rolled out a slew of new programs, processes and benefits that our people wanted, branding them so employees around the world understood and valued them. We defined and branded our culture itself, calling it WorkInspired and linking it to three core competencies: character, competence and collaboration.

We've since tied these competencies to our business strategy, leadership, performance goals, competency assessments,

selection practices, reward and recognition programs, and merit and incentive programs and processes. We called our culture WorkInspired because we think of our company as a partnership built on inspiration: We provide an inspiring place to work, and we ask that employees perform their work tasks in an inspired way as well.

Our embrace of a strong people-strategy has paid off. Employee engagement has soared, with 87 percent of employees now reporting strong engagement, far above the global IT industry norm of 68 percent. In 2014, the *Boston Globe* named us the top large employer in the state of Massachusetts.

Taking care of people first — so they can in turn delight our customers and boost our sales — isn't rocket science. *Any* company or team can do it.

We need to stop taking employees for granted. Engaged employees lead to more innovative products and happier customers, which leads to stronger performance. That holds no matter your industry, and whether you're a manager overseeing a team of five or a leader running an organization of 500,000.

Each of the following sections presents a principle that we've deployed to nurture engagement and help people become “work inspired.”

## Become an Un-Leader

There's a name for the kind of humble CEO I aspire to be. I'll call him or her the “Un-Leader.” No matter where in an organization you reside, try regarding yourself as an “Un-Vice President,” an “Un-General Manager,” an “Un-Sales Supervisor” and so on.

Let's unpack the mentality that defines “Un-Leaders.” First, such leaders appreciate that their team or organization's success doesn't owe all to their personal efforts. Some executives and managers like to think they're indispensable. But Un-Leaders harbor no illusions about the unique value of their own contributions. As CEO of Kronos, I think of myself as just another team member. As I see it, the reason we have thousands of people in our organization is because we need thousands of people. It isn't all about me, nor is it about other highly visible members of our leadership team.

A second feature of Un-Leaders' mentality is an ability to put their work and their title in perspective. Being a CEO doesn't define how I think about myself. As a result, I don't

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spend a lot of time obsessing over my title, my authority, my power. Instead, like every other Un-Leader out there, I have more time and energy to think about what really drives the business forward: employees and customers.

### Humility Is Power

When we are humble, and when we project that humility outwardly in our behavior, team members notice. They come to feel that their leaders respect them, are dedicated to their welfare and are approachable.

Several years ago, when we were transforming ourselves into a company with cloud offerings, we set forth key desired behaviors for Kronites everywhere to focus on and embrace. One of these was humility. As we defined it, humility meant assuming “positive intent” and competence on the part of others, engaging others by asking questions and listening, and putting your own “agenda aside to operate in the best interests of the customer and company.” We also clarified that humility and “bold” leadership were not opposites but, rather, went hand in hand.

Precisely how you define humility for your people is up to you. What’s important is to

- Set a baseline standard with your own behavior.
- Lay out clear, formal expectations about how people throughout the organization are to behave.
- Infuse policies and processes with an ethic of humility.

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### Overcommunicate

I chat with everyone: employees, customers, prospective employees, vendors who happen to be visiting our offices. There’s a Yiddish word for this behavior: “kibitzing.”

At Kronos, I think of myself as the kibitzer-in-chief, and I recommend kibitzing to you as a powerful means of building a more engaged and inspired team or workforce.

CEOs of billion-dollar companies tend to converse primarily with their carefully chosen leadership team and no-

body else. To inspire people and create a workplace they cherish, I believe you must build personal relationships with them and establish a culture throughout the company of open and honest communication. Communicating frequently with employees and other stakeholders, preferably face-to-face, can help you accomplish both objectives. In fact, don’t just communicate — *over* communicate. You really can’t do it enough!

For the best results, you have to ask plenty of questions and really listen to employees’ responses. As I go about my day, I ask employees a variety of open-ended questions about their work and personal lives, simple queries like, “What are you working on?” “How was your weekend?” “How is your family?”

### Questions Are Key

When chatting with employees, I gain new insights into our business that I never would have learned otherwise — details about struggles teams are having, new opportunities that are cropping up in various corners of our company, big victories that teams have notched and so on. Just as valuable, I gain an intuitive sense for the personalities, needs and desires of our employees.

Over time, I forge personal relationships, creating a general atmosphere of free-flowing communication. Employees feel more comfortable coming to me with their problems or concerns, which affords me new opportunities to help drive our business forward.

You can conduct these conversations virtually, using tools such as email and social media. I strive to overcommunicate using every digital medium at my disposal.

Frequently during the year, I send out company-wide emails with personal messages from me. I also create “aron@work” videos, short, low-budget blogs that capture me speaking impromptu about company performance, year-end objectives, product launches — whatever is on my mind. Our employees in locales around the world tell me how much they appreciate these messages as a way to feel part of the Kronos family.

## Trust Them (Again and Again)

For a more engaged, higher-performing workforce, start by assuming competence, and then demonstrate to people over and over again that you trust them. Toss micromanagement out the window!

In managing my own team, I don't just refrain from micromanaging — I trust enough to *require* independence. If you run an organization or team, you have the power to create broader, more formal mechanisms to instill trust. Here are several important techniques we use at Kronos:

**Set expectations around trust.** Instilling trust organizationally begins with clarifying the behavior you expect of all employees. Several years ago, we introduced under the framework of our three core competencies (character, competence and collaboration) a larger set of desired behaviors that apply to Kronites at all levels. One behavior we emphasized was “establishing trust,” which we defined as “Gains the confidence and trust of others through principled leadership, sound business ethics, authenticity and follow-through on commitments. Establishes open, candid, trusting relationships; treats all individuals fairly and with respect; maintains high standards of integrity.”

**Deploy tools to help your people get to know one another better.** Like many companies, we have prospective hires complete a behavioral assessment — in our case, a tool called Predictive Index (PI) — that reveals traits such as how detail-oriented a person is, how extroverted, how patient and so on. The results of this assessment allow us to increase the chances that personalities will mesh well within teams, which facilitates trust building as well as overall performance.

**Infuse the principle of trust into your policies.** At Kronos, employees can decide when and how much time off they wish to take, so long as they discuss their plans with their managers, get their work done, and coordinate with them to minimize any disruptions to our business and to the service we provide to our customers. By showing trust in this way (we also show it through our longstanding openness to flexible, work-at-home arrangements), we further cement its importance within our culture.

**Teach managers to nourish trust in their teams.** Manager training and accountability offer another important vehicle for trust building at the organizational level. First, we ask managers to be both “bold” and “humble.” Don't jump to conclusions, and don't point fingers.

Humbly accept that you don't have all the answers, boldly look to your people for insight and expertise, and ask questions that others dare not ask.

## Hold Managers Accountable

Employees might join organizations because of the company and the compensation package, but they *leave* organizations because of their manager.

How do you improve the quality of your managers? The standard answer is training — lots of it. Most large companies offer some kind of training program for their managers, as do we. But training alone isn't cutting it.

What managers need, in addition to training, is accountability, including performance metrics and benchmarking. Otherwise, their efforts will diminish over time, and any formal training they receive will do little good.

In 2015, we launched Courage to Lead as a one-time training course, setting out a three-part behavioral model for all Kronos managers. This model sought to describe both the organization we were at the time and the organization we aspired to be even more fully going forward.

We asked managers to be bold yet humble, to challenge Kronites but also support them, and to disrupt existing practices but also make efforts to engage and connect with people.

### How MEI Came to Be

Building off of our Courage to Lead model, we researched the behavior of outstanding managers, contacting other companies for their perspective, studying the specific practices employed by top Kronos managers, and querying a group of Kronites about actions they associated with excellent managers.

Compiling all of this research, we created a concise profile of a great Kronos manager, refining it in employee focus groups to build a new model focused on the manager-employee relationship.

Out of this work, we created the Manager Effectiveness Index, or MEI, a survey that captured employee judgments about managers' performance, specifically in the areas of communication, development, empowerment and support.

We didn't just throw MEI out there, leaving managers to make sense of it on their own. First, we only shared the initial batch of MEI scores with the manager being

evaluated, not his or her manager. This would give managers time to digest their scores and think about forming a personal action plan.

Second, to protect anonymity, we only shared employee MEI feedback with managers who had three or more direct reports respond to the questions. Third, since we expected these managers to use the feedback to create and implement development plans for themselves, we provided them with materials that helped them understand MEI's format and purpose, interpret the data and identify areas for improvement.

Fourth, we gave managers access to one-on-one coaching and a set of training materials to help them hone their skills. These training programs spelled out a range of possible actions managers could take to develop specific skills in which they might have shown weakness. The training also helped managers discuss their evaluation results with team members, giving them sample agendas for conversation and suggesting ways that they might frame key ideas.

## Get Serious About Strategy

Many leaders and managers underestimate the links between strategy and creating a workplace that employees love. When I became CEO, I decided to make our corporate planning much more rigorous, data-driven and inclusive than ever before.

It takes us four to five months each year to “work the strategy” for the upcoming year. Starting in February, an external facilitator interviews me, other members of my leadership team, and five to 10 additional leaders within Kronos from areas such as product development, sales, services, marketing and strategy, to identify our strategic priorities and areas of interest.

On the basis of these interviews, we decide on a small number of key themes that we'll discuss during a three-day strategy off-site. We'll then spend a number of weeks collecting data relevant to the strategic questions and briefing all participants on the topics we plan to cover.

The strategy session typically takes place in May and results in a list of initiatives and guidelines for their implementation. A few months later, we meet again to refine this list before proceeding to the next phase, creating budgets around our strategic priorities.

My goal throughout our strategy process is to assure that we understand the truth of our business. If an existing

strategy or tactic isn't working, we need to know that so we can change course.

## Resource and Evangelize the Strategy

Once you have a smart, clear strategy in hand, you might think you're all set. You're all revved up, eager to execute — what else is there to do? Well, you have to actually follow up on the strategy. A couple months after our planning retreats, I'll review the budgets our leaders have drafted for the following year, comparing them to our strategies.

At Kronos, we also focus on communicating the strategy from its very inception. On the final day of our retreat, we typically spend time figuring out how best to summarize our decisions and communicate them to the rest of the company. From there, we mount a months-long internal campaign to communicate the strategy to every corner of the organization. I assume a lead role, talking about the strategy wherever I go as if it were my full-time job (which it is!).

To create an environment in which people love what they do, you don't need to embrace a strategy planning process that replicates the one I've outlined here. Simply focus on talking about strategy with others in your organization in a productive and inspiring way.

If you truly want to build engagement, be yourself each day at work.  
Have fun.

## Have Fun

To create a culture and a workplace that people love, it's important to humanize the organization and infuse it with levity and personality. So many companies seem gripped by excessive formality. Why does work have to be so serious?

Yes, we want employees to work hard and perform, and daily operations at Kronos and in most other organizations will involve a certain amount of drudgery and tedium. But why can't we make it *fun* to come to work?

If you truly want to build engagement, be yourself each day at work. Have fun. Let your hair down a little, even if it means sometimes breaking the rules. And always tell the truth. Your people will appreciate the authenticity of your words and actions. They'll believe in you because they'll feel they know you — the real you. Your personal brand and the company's brand will become humanized. Employee engagement and affection for the company will increase in turn.

### The Many Faces of Fun

An obvious place to start is with your workplace and lifestyle amenities. When designing our new headquarters, we dedicated an entire floor to fun and collaboration — what we call “we” space. There's a gaming area, a park-like space complete with swings, a high-end coffee and smoothie bar, a library, a variety of food options, board games, walking workstations and fitness classes.

As Kronites are discovering, it's a lot easier to lighten up and let your personality out when you're sipping a mocha latte with your teammates or enjoying a game of air hockey.

Wellness programs provide another opportunity for the building of authentic work relationships. We offer an array of initiatives under our global LiveInspired wellness program, not just the usual options focused on diet, exercise and smoking cessation but seminars on the healing power of laughter, a “March Madness” exercise challenge (which I did not win), a “Virtual Torch Walk Around the Globe” walking competition, an obstacle course challenge, company-sponsored running races, a chance to play on our cricket team (at our locations in India) and numerous seasonal events.

Collectively, the stream of events, initiatives and programs convey that Kronos is a different kind of company — a place where each employee can be him- or herself and where work isn't always so serious. Kronos itself takes on a “personality,” one of friendliness, authenticity and relaxed sociability.

### Astonish Them With Kindness

In 2017, a Kronite named Adam used our internal collaboration platform to contact fellow Kronites with an important request. A month earlier, his 15-year-old-nephew Sullivan had been diagnosed with leukemia. To cheer up his nephew, Sullivan's mother thought that it might be nice if he received postcards from all 50 U.S. states. Adam wrote asking his fellow Kronites for help. Would his colleagues, located throughout the country and the world, be willing to send a postcard to Sullivan?

The answer was a resounding yes. Within minutes, Kronites in states such as California, Illinois, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin wrote back promising to send postcards, as did employees in countries such as Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Every organization has its share of good, caring people who help their colleagues. But you don't often find a strong, cohesive *culture* of caring. What's noteworthy about Adam's request and the response it elicited is precisely how *unremarkable* they are at Kronos.

### How to Cultivate Caring

One of the most important steps you can take to cultivate norms of caring is to articulate firm expectations about behavior at every turn. We present “care for each other” to new employees as one of the signature values of the Kronos workspace.

Our emphasis on caring is reflected in numerous employee benefits the company offers. But mostly, we focus on creating a corporate environment where we simultaneously care for one another and produce great results. Our bonus program, for which all Kronites are eligible, rewards Kronites for behaving well toward their colleagues in the course of their daily work.

Specifically, in calculating a Kronite's job performance, we allocate 40 percent of the score to reflect how well a Kronite displayed our core values of character, competence and collaboration.

Leaders also have a strong role to play. If employees need help, and there's a way that Kronos can offer support, we're going to do that. And if there's a way that I personally can become involved, I'm going to do that, too. I take great satisfaction in lending a hand. But I also know that modeling such generosity through my personal conduct does a great deal to infuse a kind, giving ethos throughout the organization.

### Give Employees Their Time Back

What would you do if your daughters were offered roles in a national touring theater production? Would you quit your job so you could spend months on the road with them? Would you have someone else accompany them? Or would you tell your daughters that they couldn't participate?

One of our employees, Kristen, might have faced this predicament had she worked at another company. In 2016, her two talented school-aged daughters were offered roles in the musical *Annie*. The tour would take place over

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eight months, stopping in over 90 cities throughout North America. The production company required that a parent or guardian accompany the girls.

Kristen wanted to accompany her kids, but she wasn't sure what that would mean for her job. Kristen didn't have to worry because Kronos was among the few U.S. companies to offer employees open time off. In 2016, we implemented an open time-off policy that featured no preset limit on how many days off employees can take.

### myTime In Action

Called myTime, the program, along with our general commitment to flexibility, allowed Kristen to accompany her children on the *Annie* tour while still working full time. She handled her Kronos responsibilities while her daughters were performing, communicating closely with her team about her schedule.

Many companies seem to want employees to prioritize their jobs above all else. To maximize performance, they try to keep employees in the office for as long as possible, providing all kinds of perks to make that kind of lifestyle possible and even attractive.

We empower employees to put their families first, above the company. Our corporate values require this — and it's great for business. Productive employees are, first and foremost, *engaged* employees. If you want to maintain high engagement levels, then you must empower workers to prioritize their families and bring their whole selves to work. Because we enable Kronites to sustain their relationships at home, they come to work happier, treat their colleagues better and perform better.

Many employees today are used to working ridiculously hard and putting their families second. They might reasonably assume that their employers expect this level of commitment, even if companies move to open time off and affirm family's primacy. For this reason, leaders and managers need to make a company's family-first philosophy *personal*, affirming and modeling it with their own words and actions.

### Celebrate to Motivate

Many organizations and teams have programs in place to reward outstanding performance, offering trips, bonuses and the like. Yet these standard programs might not go far enough, especially when leaders don't become personally involved in extending recognition and gratitude.

To build engagement and enhance performance, managers have to make legends out of their most deserving employees, and organizations must create an array of formal mechanisms to recognize the greatness of individual employees and to mark turning points in their lives. It's about creating a *culture* of gratitude and acknowledgment.

#### **Create forums for employees to thank one another.**

One Friday morning in 2017, shortly before her team relocated to our new headquarters in Lowell, Massachusetts, one of our employees, Melissa, stopped by the new offices to take a look. She was blown away by how beautiful and functional the space was, and felt moved to say thanks to the dozens of Kronites who in one way or another had helped design and outfit the new headquarters. For Melissa, it was easy: Just jump on our internal collaboration platform and write a post.

Kronites thank one another all the time on our collaboration tool, and they have also used 5HIFT Shout-Outs, a global peer-to-peer recognition program that allows employees to acknowledge the efforts of colleagues cross-functionally and in any region.

**Provide public recognition, not just rewards.** "Career Spotlight" is a special feature we produce that profiles Kronites and their career stories. Any Kronite at any level can nominate a fellow employee. Our communications team then interviews the person nominating the employee, the nominee, and the nominee's manager and writes an inspiring story. This recognition not only raises the profile of the featured Kronite within the organization but also promotes our culture of caring.

**Practice mass gratitude.** We hold events that allow us to express gratitude to large groups of Kronites all at once. Each summer, more than 1,500 Kronites at our cor-

porate headquarters take an afternoon off from work to attend an employee appreciation picnic. It's an enormous BBQ extravaganza, with music, carnival games, volleyball, corn hole toss and a basketball tournament. Departments often plan team meetings around the picnic, too, so Kronites from other regions can attend.

## Put Yourself Out of Business

If you want to engage your workforce, you can't just nurture them, trust them, communicate with them, show respect for them and manage them in the ways discussed. You also have to give them the opportunity to put their *own* stamp on the business. You have to give them permission to take risks and innovate.

Further, you have to make innovation part of the culture, extending it to every part of your business, not just technology and products. In addition to investing more than \$500 million over the past five years on product innovation, we've adopted an array of programs over the past decade designed to empower Kronites to take risks and think creatively.

In our products and technology group, for instance, employees until recently participated in "Kronovation Days" several times a year. At these designated times, they worked on projects that normally fall beyond the scope of their daily jobs. They had the time and freedom to explore new ideas and push their own boundaries. At the end of the Kronovation event, employees presented their ideas to their peers, and managers offered awards for the most promising ideas, some of which we incorporated into our products as features.

Another step to take to instill innovation in your culture is to support employee communication and collaboration. Although it took some adjustment on the part of Kronites, our internal collaboration platform has become a vibrant place for employees around the world to connect with one another and share new ideas.

Aside from implementing organizational policies and programs that encourage a culture of innovation, leaders and managers should also adopt a number of key behaviors: listen to and implement employee ideas; give employees the space to develop ideas on their own; model the reasonable risk-taking you wish to see in your people; and encourage innovation in every part of your business.

What if employees and former employees were going out of their way to rave about your culture? What if they loved your company so much that they couldn't imagine ever working anywhere else? What if they consistently pushed your company's performance to new heights?

Take care of your people, support them, inspire them — and they will.

### IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- *Next is Now: 5 Steps for Embracing Change – Building a Business that Thrives into the Future* by Lior Arussy.
- *How to Create a Team of Leaders by Shifting INward* by Jeffrey Manchester.



Aron Ain is the CEO of Kronos, a global provider of workforce management and human-capital management cloud solutions, which are used by more than 40 million people every day in more than 35,000 organizations in more than 100 countries. He is a multiyear recipient of Glassdoor's Highest Rated CEO honor and has earned Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year award, the Mass Technology Leadership Council's CEO of the Year award, and the inaugural Ray Stata Leadership and Innovation award by the Massachusetts High Technology Council.

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