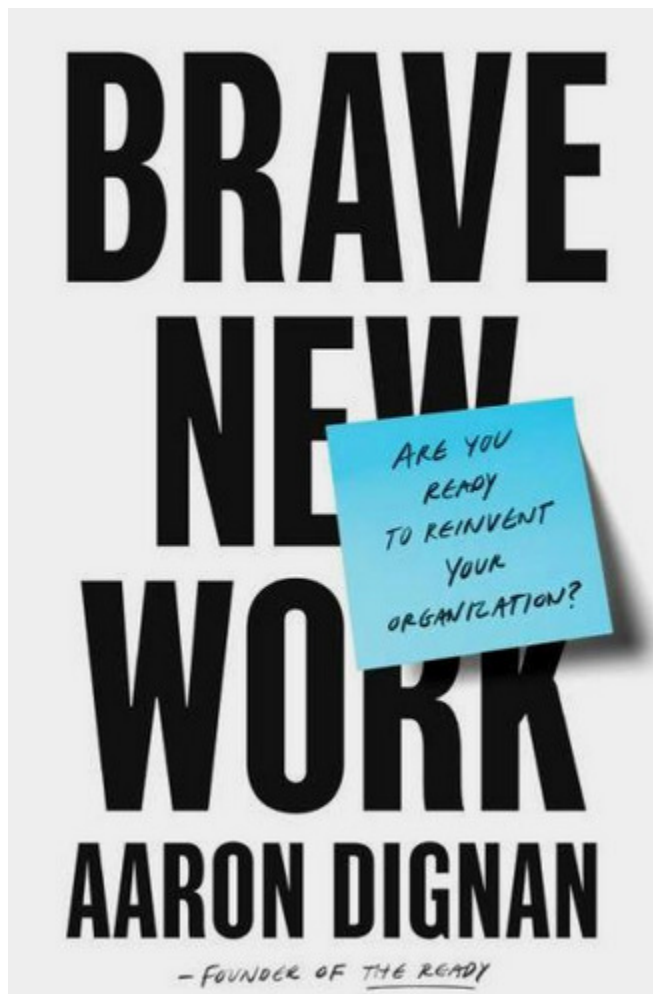


We're stuck in a loop with economic, other systems: Dignan offers potential solutions

Posted: Sunday, June 2, 2019

"Brave New Work: Are You Ready to Reinvent Your Organization?" by Aaron Dignan. New York: Portfolio (an imprint of Penguin Random House), 2019, 304 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“What if your organization could run itself?” Aaron Dignan asks near the beginning of “Brave New Work: Are You Ready to Reinvent Your Organization?” – his new treatise on the coming trend in business, industry, education, government and the not-for-profit sector. “What if your corporation, your startup, your restaurant, your school or your church were able to get better every day, without you having to move mountains to make it so?”

“What if you could stop giving orders?” he continues. “Stop checking to see how things are going? Stop obsessing over your budget, your plan, your next quarter? This is not only possible; it is already happening inside organizations round the world.”

If you are at least a little skeptical of these somewhat audacious claims, then join the club. I’ll have to admit that as I made my way through the first few pages of this extraordinary and paradigm-shifting manuscript, I had a decidedly cynical reaction to the vision Dignan was articulating. The more I delved into the concepts and applications he was espousing, however, I found myself slowly but surely coming around to his perspective – especially

given the hard-to-refute examples and case studies he liberally references throughout the narrative.

“Brave New Work” is extensively researched, with 14 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the four major sections that comprise the main text (The Future of Work, The Operating System, The Change and What Dreams May Come). I was particularly intrigued by the inclusion of an Appendix, which describes the criteria by which the author selected the “evolutionary organizations” that form the framework on which the book is built. After listing some basic requirements related to size (employs more than 10 people) and age (has been in existence over five years), Dignan proceeds to define what he considers the key characteristic of an evolutionary organization: “The organization must have documented principles and practices that reflect a “people positive and complexity conscious” (get used to that phrase) way of working. These practices do not need to be evenly distributed across the entire culture, but they do need to be firmly established and flourishing where present.”

Dignan begins the journey he has planned for the reader by making some of the same observations others writing in this general area have been making for the last 60 years or so. Yes, many contemporary organizations are still using a leadership and management strategy that was introduced more than a century ago and often appropriately dubbed the “factory model.” And while the outputs may have evolved considerably over the last 100 years – from goods and services to information and experiences – basic assumptions about how to maximize effectiveness and efficiency have remained virtually intact. So why are many organizations still dealing with a basic lack of trust, decision-making bottlenecks, siloed teams, communication overload, flawed budgeting systems and short-term thinking? Good question – and one for which Dignan provides a solid answer.

For me, the heart of “Brave New Work” can be found in the second chapter, “The Operating System.” Here, Dignan describes what he calls “The Operating System (OS) Canvas.” A three-by-four square matrix that includes the following 12 elements: purpose, authority, structure, strategy, resources, innovation, workflow, meetings, information, membership, mastery and compensation. Most of us have heard of all these dimensions before; they are at the core of every successful organization. It is in the way the author explains their complex dynamics and interconnected relationships that distinguishes this book from many garden-variety management tomes. Although I found the entire effort inspiring, this particular section was where the clouds parted and the sun shone through for me. In fact, I plan to use this book in my graduate leadership and administration class. Reflect deeply on the following:

“Each domain of the OS Canvas asks us to consider an aspect of our organization more deeply than we typically would. For example, what is authority? How should it be distributed? And how does that manifest (or not) in your culture? How do you make decisions? How should you? Is your approach to authority a signal-controlled intersection or a roundabout? Is it people positive and complexity conscious? The canvas forces us to confront the deltas between our assumptions, our beliefs and our reality. If we say we want to hear every voice but spend most of the day talking over others, that tells us something. If we say we value agility, but every decision requires a dozen approvals, the opportunity is clear.”

Dignan is founder of The Ready, an organizational design and transformation consulting firm; he regularly consults with Microsoft, American Express, Johnson & Johnson, Charles Schwab, Kaplan, Citibank, Edelman, Ford Motor Co. and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He also serves on the digital-advisory boards for General Electric, American Express and PepsiCo, as well as the board of directors for Smashburger. This is his second book; the first being “Game Frame: Using Games as a Strategy for Success,” which was published in 2011.

In the final analysis, Dignan is guardedly optimistic that what we are already seeing in many cutting-edge companies and agencies that “get it” can be successfully reproduced in most organizations: “The message has been clear for decades,” he concludes in the final chapter. “We have to move from a model of eternal consumption (a chart that goes up and to the right forever) to a model that is regenerative and distributive. That doesn’t mean regressive socialism or state-controlled enterprise; it means embodying new goals. The problem isn’t free markets; it’s what we value. It’s the stories we tell ourselves. And unfortunately, we’re stuck in a loop with our economic, educational and social operating systems. They shape us. And we make (and remake) them in our own image. To break free we need new structures and platforms built to nurture and sustain evolutionary organizations. Luckily, they are starting to emerge.”

I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.