

New Work needs Inner Work

Breidenbach / Rollow

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New Work needs Inner Work

A handbook for companies on the
way to self-organisation

by

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Bettina Rollow develops organisational and leadership forms, e.g. with betterplace lab and Ashoka Germany.


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Foreword by *Ashoka Germany*

Why social change needs inner work, what New Work feels like, and why you should read this book.

We wholeheartedly endorse this book. Its core ideas, its tools, and its two authors, Joana and Bettina, have had a profound impact on us. They have helped us to better understand our own mission and guided us through the most impossible transformation.

Ashoka Germany is the German team of *Ashoka*, the world's largest network and support organisation for social entrepreneurs. *Ashoka* works with more than 3,500 women and men in 90 countries who have founded social organisations, social movements and social businesses with innovative solutions to the world's most critical social problems. Members of our network are called Ashoka Fellows.

Three years ago, in the Summer of 2016, *Ashoka Germany* embarked on a journey towards a self-organised team culture. Today, we no longer have formal leaders and hierarchical titles. Instead, everyone in the team is a leader of equal status. Everyone equally shares the responsibility for *Ashoka Germany*. And everyone has the autonomy to make all decisions in their programs and functions, including those of a financial and strategic nature.

We felt it was time to fully transition from top-down hierarchy to competency-based self-organisation and agile partnership. We wanted to implement a form of leadership based on trust and maximal alignment between our personal values and our organisational culture, structure and policies. This is exactly where Joana's example and Bettina's expertise came into play.

Why did we feel we had to change the way we organise and how we build our team culture? We had three main reasons:

- First, we faced a problem that so many organisations face today: our work and our environment had become dramatically faster, more complex, and was constantly changing.

When *Ashoka* started its operations in Germany in 2003, it consisted of two people doing exactly one thing: finding and electing new Ashoka Fellows. In 2016, *Ashoka Germany* had grown to a – still small – team of around 15 employees. But we had (and wanted) to work on more issues at the same time: finding new Ashoka

Fellows, working with the 60 Fellows in Germany, building infrastructure for system-changing social innovation with dozens of stakeholders, fundraising, political advocacy, and of course close collaboration with other *Ashoka* teams across Europe and the world.

The issues were (and are) so complex and change so fast that our centralised leadership model, oriented around two or three leadership figures, felt more and more insufficient for the task. We urgently needed to distribute decision-making authority (and also responsibility, accountability and ownership) across the organisation to become faster and more professional with our external stakeholders.

- Second, we were fascinated and inspired by concrete examples of social entrepreneurs, especially Ashoka Fellows, that showed us what was possible.

Just like the two authors of this book, many in the German *Ashoka* team had read Frédéric Laloux' seminal *Reinventing Organizations* from 2014. Laloux describes a small number of exemplary cases of self-managed (or “teal”) organisations that have done away completely with hierarchical leadership. Among them were the two Ashoka Fellows Margret Rasfeld, founder of ESBZ, a paradigm-changing reform school in the centre of Berlin, and Jos de Blok, founder of *Buurtzorg*, the largest neighbourhood nursing organisation in the Netherlands with more than 10,000 employees.

Around the same time, the think tank arm of *betterplace.org*, Germany's largest online donation platform co-founded by Ashoka Fellow Till Behnke, had just transformed itself into a self-managed organisation. Its change process had been driven by the two authors of this book: Joana, the *betterplace lab*'s founder, and Bettina, their organisational developer. Many of the examples in this book are from this process.

We had always thought that *Ashoka Germany* was innovative. But we were struck by what we observed in all these cases right under our noses. And we understood how much more there is to explore.

- The third and last reason for our decision was that *Ashoka* itself stands for new ways of self-organising, empowerment and participation. *Ashoka*'s vision is “Everyone a Changemaker”: we strive to give everyone the tools, opportunities and courage to contribute to social change in the world. We are convinced that this is

only possible with new models for leadership and organisation: decentralised models that allow for open collaboration and co-creation, for entrepreneurial freedom and risk-taking, for fluidity in forming teams within our organisation and across its bounds, for empathy and seeing the whole person in every colleague and individual we work with.

Not only do Ashoka Fellows embody this spirit in the way they build their organisations, lead their teams and engage thousands of volunteers and allies, *Ashoka* also works with many partners to implement principles that are at the core of this book:

- In our corporate partnerships, we collaborate with large businesses to build a “changemaker culture” in their workforce – unleashing their intrapreneurial, empathetic and collaborative talent.
- In our changemaker education programs, we work with schools and leaders in education and youth empowerment and support them in building open ecosystems to rethink education around these principles.
- We have published in the *Social Innovations Journal* and elsewhere on the kind of new and open leadership style needed for system-changing, transformational solutions.

How to lead the change of tomorrow is at the heart of *Ashoka*'s mission. In this sense, there is no distinction between what *Ashoka* wants to achieve and how it wants to organise itself. It was imperative for us that we explore these ideas as much as possible – to walk the talk and try to live up to our own aspirations.

Our transformation as a team – which we started calling the “New Work process” – lasted more than two years. By far the most important decision we made in this process, and right at its beginning, was to listen to Joana’s advice and reach out to Bettina as an experienced organisational developer. She helped us understand that the most important thing is to get the sequence right: without inner work and personal development first, there would never be stable “outer” structural change in our processes and in our team.

For 18 months we concentrated on the most important ingredient for the transition to a collective leadership model: developing conversational ability and the ability for “meta-reflection”. Unbundling and distributing all leadership functions across the team means: every colleague must be able to step out of their concrete project role,

look at things from a bird's-eye view, and come up with a diagnosis. What is systemically wrong about the current situation? What kind of intervention might the organisation need? For us, this ability has become the essence of co-leading.

In practice, this meant that we spent a series of team retreats facing the taboo topics we tend to avoid in conversation: individual power dynamics, egotism, personal needs for appreciation, our fear of missing out impeding our focus, wellbeing vs performance-orientation, inconsistencies of mission and organisational reality, tensions between “let’s start a new thing!” and “I need more stability and routine right now!”, etc. We started to develop the trust, as well as the vocabulary, to talk about these things openly. We trained ourselves to name them and bring them up when they threatened to cloud our decision-making or focus in daily work.

Along the way, we often felt lost. We wondered: “Why is this so confusing? Why are we discussing this again? Why isn’t there a book that maps out our next steps?” Or we became impatient: “I think I kind of get this now, so when do we finally get to the results? To clear role descriptions? Why do we have to spend so much time on this?”

Only after this long, intense and demanding phase were we ready to start working on the outer manifestations of our culture. We distributed leadership and responsibility in a new way, established decision and conflict mechanisms, established full transparency, agreed on changes to our meeting and feedback rituals, and eliminated external titles for ourselves. Quite literally, all of our business cards with our old titles went into the trash. We compiled many of our new principles into a “code of conduct” that serves both as a constitution and team handbook.

Our most important insight: after intense inner work, most of the visible structural changes come naturally and just fall into place.

Today we can see how much this transformation has paid off in all the ways we anticipated – and beyond: around trust and wellbeing, understanding how our colleagues tick and why they react the way they do, coordination around day-to-day decisions, powerful individual growth, assuming more responsibility, and creative experimentation. In particular, our transformation has freed up the former leadership team to tackle more projects or international responsibility than before. As you will see in the two *Ashoka* interviews in this book, different people found different parts of this process to be most valuable.

Externally, we felt the uptake of the “New Work” movement. We receive invitations to “New Work” conferences. The media contacted us to know more and write about us – Germany’s leading weekly newspaper “Die Zeit” portrayed us in a cover story on the future of work and artificial intelligence in May 2018. For many of our funders and partners, our transformation confirmed *Ashoka*’s reputation as a pioneer in the field. Several other *Ashoka* teams in Europe and beyond now work together with us to develop their own versions of distributed leadership. *Ashoka* Fellows and other organisations were intrigued and approached us to work with similar concepts or share best practices. In fact, we have created specific training programs in our European Fellowship program to support Fellows and others to do so.

After three years, our transformation is far from complete. Many things remain challenging. Feedback sometimes hurts. Developing and maintaining trust needs time and money, for workshops or retreats. The team must be willing to make that investment. Onboarding new staff into our new culture is not trivial. It requires new formats. If we don’t talk straight and make expectations explicit, diffusion of responsibility comes back to bite us.

All in all, we are extremely happy about where we are, and we never want to go back. Our transformation has opened a door not only to personal enrichment, but also to fulfilling *Ashoka*’s mission better. We feel better equipped now to empower all social innovators and changemakers out there.

It has also taught us that there is an inner dimension to social transformation. That we have to know and transform ourselves in order to transform the world around us.

This is why you should read this book. It is the manual we did not have. But it exists now, to inspire and guide your own inner and outer journey to shared leadership, authentic co-creation and, eventually, an ‘Everyone a Changemaker’ world.

Thank you, Joana, for your courage and for being such a wonderful role model.

Thank you, Bettina, for your incredible advice, supervision, patience and friendship.

Rainer Höll
on behalf of the *Ashoka* Germany Team

July, 2019

Preface

This book will help you find out which leadership styles and forms of cooperation best suit you and your company. At a time of widespread discussion about new forms of work and changing company cultures, we see the need for more precise and differentiated research into which organisational forms are suitable for which teams, tasks and markets. By “New Work” we mean a transformation of the world of work that puts the employee and her abilities at the centre, in which hierarchies are flattened or even completely abolished and replaced by collective leadership or self-organisation. But should every company change its hierarchical structures and be self-organised? And what prerequisites and steps are necessary for new forms of work to become successful? These are the questions we want to explore in this book.

Our handbook is practice-oriented and follows the working process of organisational development. Many steps can be taken by teams on their own, even without external support. For some further developments, especially when it comes to identifying and dealing with areas of conflict, we consider external support in the form of a coach to be necessary. But the handbook is also useful here, as it provides the reader with a guide to assess the quality of the coach or organisational developer. In our experience, there are many concepts and tools that are too general and superficial. As a result, change processes fail and leave management and teams frustrated.

One major reason for the failure of organisational developments is that they concentrate on the external, visible dimension of change. This problem lies at the centre of our interest. Every external change in structures and processes must be accompanied by an inner transformation. Therefore, we dedicate this book in particular to the “inner innovation” of teams. By this we mean the way in which employees and teams can mature and grow, so that they can design their increasingly complex and fluid outside world more competently and fulfillingly. As the title says: New Work needs Inner Work.

Coming from the startup world, we see this book as an MVP (Minimum Viable Product). We want to succinctly share our own insights from five years of New Work and self-organisation with people who are just starting out on their own journey towards new forms of work and leadership. That’s why this book is also an invitation: to

exchange ideas with us and to promote the topic of New Work co-creatively. We are curious about your knowledge. This is because our own experience is based on working with small and medium-sized companies (between 12 and 120 employees) in Germany and Europe, and we do not yet know whether this experience can be transferred to much larger transnational corporations. A collaborative approach is necessary if we are to better understand the potentials and limitations of new forms of work. Our interest in knowledge is not limited to the world of work alone. We are convinced that new, more flexible forms of organisation and the associated principles and competencies, will play an important role in the next phase of human development. As Peter F. Drucker wrote: “Only a few changes have such a lasting effect on civilisation as a change in the principle on which the organisation of work is based” (Drucker, 2002). The skills described in this book are necessary to master the great social and environmental challenges of our time.

As you may have already noticed, we employ an informal style of writing. This corresponds to the kind of relationship we want to build in this book. Improving the (working) world is only possible if we open up to each other and build real relationships. For the sake of better readability, we have also decided against a strict gender-neutral form and instead intermix feminine, masculine and neutral pronouns. Every pronoun refers to all of our readers.

In order to make the book as useful as possible, we have integrated a selection of practical exercises at the end, which should serve you and your company to easily test what you have read. All of the exercises come from Bettina’s repertoire and can be freely adopted and adapted à la Creative Commons.

Acknowledgement

This handbook stands on many shoulders, and we would like to thank those who helped us in the process. First and foremost, the companies that we work with in our various functions and from which we were able to learn. For those who think they recognise themselves in it: the descriptions are based on our subjective perceptions and make no claim to objectivity.

Joana thanks all former and present employees of *betterplace lab* for their enthusiasm and courage, their perseverance and their constant dedication to finding new ways of working. Without you – Nadine Brömme, Dennis Buchmann, Barbara Djassi, Moritz Eckert, Isabel Gahren, Hanna Gleiss, Nora Hauptmann, Katja Jäger, Franziska Kreische, Yannick Lebert, Gesa Lüdecke, Ben Mason, Stephan Peters, Medje Prahm, Sebastian Schwiecker, Carolin Silbernagl, Lavinia Schwerdersky, Michael Tuchen, Angela Ullrich, Kathleen Ziemann and our student interns – this book would not exist! Special thanks go to Dennis, who first told Joana about *Reinventing Organizations* in 2014 and thus set the impulse for the *betterplace lab* development process, internally called “Team Transformer”.

Bettina also thanks the *betterplace lab* for its pioneering spirit. Her further thanks go to all the other companies that have trusted her and engaged in an experimental development process. These include in particular the teams from *Ashoka Germany* and *Ashoka Europe* around Rainer Höll, Oda Heister, Marie Ringler and Matthias Scheffelmeier as well as the European Forum. Our joint experiences around New Work have been incorporated into this book to a great extent. A special thank you also goes to Nadjeschda Taranczewski, who introduced Bettina to many of the tools and exercises described here.

We owe our approach to describing New Work, in the form of certain principles fruitful for organisational development, to Thomas Hübl. Thomas is a spiritual teacher whose work deals with mystical principles, i. e. the fundamental modes of life and creation, innovation and development. Much of what we write about Inner Work we have learned and experienced in his groups. However, the book does not presume that you share this mystical view of the world; it addresses everyone.

Finally, we thank each other. Without Joana, Bettina would never have co-authored this book. And without Bettina, Joana would never have explored and understood New Work and self-organisation so thoroughly.



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