

*"If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that the ability to adapt and respond quickly when plans go awry is fundamental to business sustainability."*



# New rules for good business

Unpredictability. It's certainly a word we've all become more familiar with recently. More comfortable even, as we've flexed between home-schooling, queuing for groceries and brainstorming via Zoom over the past year. This unpredictability is problematic for the world of business that has historically been built on systems, structure, order and predictability in order to be able to plan ahead. But if 2020 has taught us anything, it's that the ability to adapt and respond quickly when plans go awry is fundamental to business sustainability. While the COVID pandemic might be most top of mind at the moment, there is evidence all around that increasingly rapid change is a part of everyday business reality. Who could have predicted that a 15yr old with a placard could influence the agenda of global politics? Or that the convergence of distrust in big business and the rise of e-Commerce would see start-ups challenging the dominance of industry giants from beauty to banking. There are disruptions reshaping our economy and society every day and modern organisations are being forced to recalibrate as technologies, markets, and people's behaviours rapidly evolve. Against this backdrop, business sustainability takes on new meaning.

While the temptation might be to instil more structure and order in times of uncertainty, in fact the opposite is true and what is needed is more flexibility. Good business in the future means designing a culture that recognises the interdependence of three not new, but increasingly important ways of doing business:

- Embracing chaos - the agility to adapt and be comfortable with unpredictability
- Being playful – encouraging flexibility, exploration and individual creativity in adapting to change

- Showing care – displaying a business 'heart' that steers all this adaptability in the right direction; one that recognises a business' success must be tied to the societies and economies in which it operates.

## EMBRACING CHAOS

Many companies would say that they embrace change, but often they are really just reacting to external forces. What if we are able to create organisations that don't simply manage the crisis when it occurs, but instead, are capable of rapidly changing as conditions require? Such businesses would gain from a crisis rather than be broken by it. To do so we need to embrace the idea of chaos as a natural part of business.

In everyday language, 'chaos' carries negative connotations as a response to unpredictable or random behaviour. In science though, this behaviour isn't necessarily undesirable. In fact, chaos is understood as a fundamental natural force. In nature, a system that thrives in chaos is dynamic and vital. It absorbs information from its environment. It adapts and evolves. On the other hand, a 'stable' system is closest to death because of its inability to adapt.

Chaos theory is well documented in management – it suggests that organisations should place more emphasis on adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurial creativity to cope with a future that is largely unknowable. If we accept that chaos is inevitable, then the linear, vertically structured organisations that we've become accustomed to don't work, as they don't respond well to the non-linear nature of their environments. In a chaotic business environment where priorities can change unpredictably we need

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organisations with the ability to flex, move and resource differently. Henry Adams said that, “Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit” – if this is so then embracing chaos may be exactly what business needs to meet the changing demands of society.

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*Engaging in playful behaviours as adults can positively impact cognitive function, encourage risk-taking, increase optimism, and relieve anxiety.*

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#### BEING PLAYFUL

Consider the idea that (in a business world where adaptability and creativity are our greatest allies) our current system of management destroys what’s best about our people and stifles our natural skills. People are born with an intrinsic motivation, a curiosity to learn and explore and a joy in learning<sup>1</sup>. Yet for many, work is a place where boundaries are drawn, structures are put in place and order prevails. In the unpredictable world we’ve described we could do with a little more flexibility, more room for exploration, and more time to play. When Plato said, “Life must be lived as play”, he may as well have been talking about the skills required to navigate much of the complex problems we are challenged to solve today: unstructured, ambiguous, messy and interconnected. Problems that are best solved in a state of mind of being playful.

The benefits of playfulness amongst children have been covered extensively and over time these theories have evolved to make the case for why ‘growing-up’ (and with that, abandoning play) may actually be making adults less happy and less productive. Engaging in playful behaviours as adults can positively impact cognitive function, encourage risk-taking, increase optimism, and relieve anxiety. Thinking outside the box and coming up with new solutions flows naturally from this state of mind. Think of Google’s slides and LEGO’s open plan play areas – these are companies known for their creative thinking and entrepreneurial outlook. There is growing evidence that intentionally embracing play in the workplace not only benefits individuals and teams, but also boosts the productivity and success of organisations.

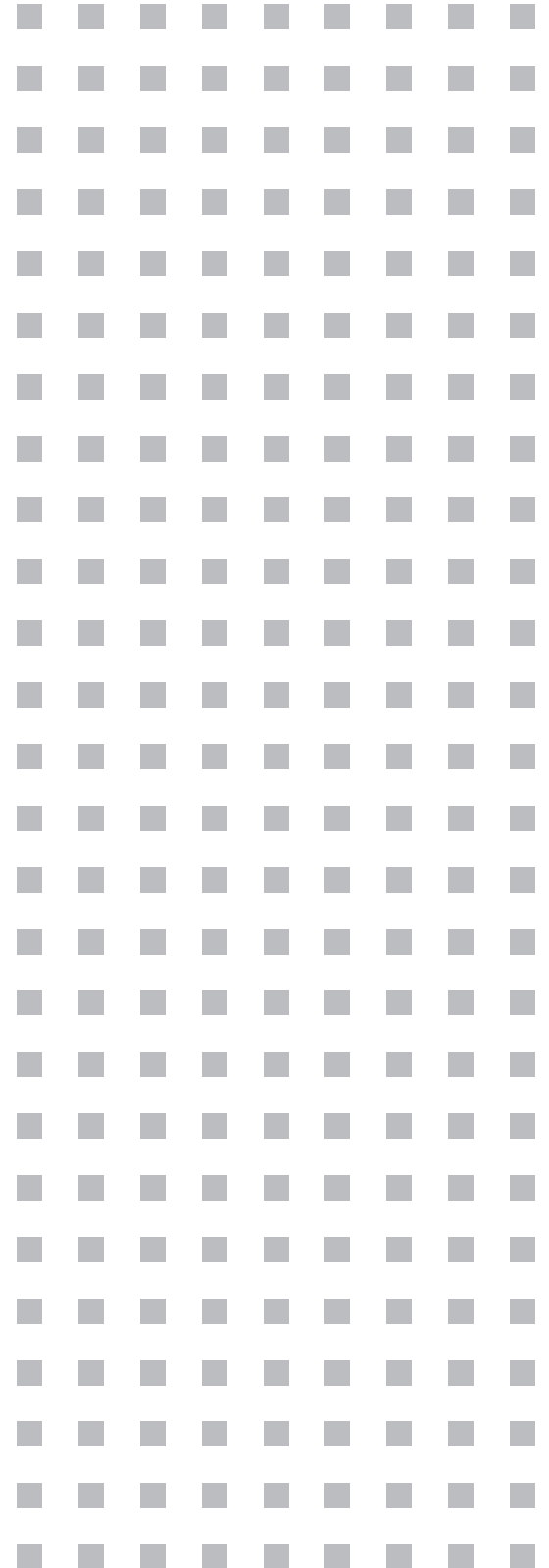
#### SHOWING CARE

In the face of unpredictability its helpful to have an anchor, one that directs and gives purpose to the decisions being made. This is where a culture of care comes into play. The idea of business needing to become more purpose-driven is not new. People are demanding a more conscientious change in how businesses and governments respond to the challenges facing our societies. Consumers want safety, ethics and environmental responsibility. Employees want a stronger sense of meaning in their day to day lives. One could argue that purpose and a genuine culture of care is no longer a choice, but a business imperative, and a key way to think about the sustainability of your business over the long term.

Importantly, we’re not talking about a superficial statement of purpose here, but instead a re-orientation of how we do business that places value on our collective humanness and on empathy for staff, customers and the communities we’re part of. One where business doesn’t operate separately from those it serves, but instead takes active steps to participate in the progress of those societies. This kind of progress takes dedication and involves equal measures of creativity, adaptability and practicality when social and financial goals come into conflict. But when creating mutually beneficial value this way becomes a business discipline, purpose does more than set a business apart amongst competitors, it lights a path for how it can evolve and grow. It drives direction, innovation and is more energising for staff. And it shows in results. There is now enough evidence to prove that those businesses that are more embracing of their impact in their business and societal ecosystems and embed purpose into everything they do, perform better over the long term.

In summary, chaos needs agility. Agility needs flexibility, innovation and creativity. And it all needs to be done with purpose that places the needs of employees, customers and society on par with those of business.

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<sup>1</sup> The Fifth Discipline (Senge, 2006)