



Book The Natural Advantage

Renew Yourself

Alan Heeks
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Recommendation

Work smarter, not harder has become a management cliché. While this mantra is vague at best, author Alan Heeks provides some useful advice on achieving this kind of balance. Heeks compares the stressed-out worker to formerly traditional farms that have gone organic. This premise could have been hokey, but Heeks pulls off the analogy with aplomb. As a consultant who works with large companies, the author is rooted enough in the real world that his advice is feasible. He offers helpful examples of people who have overcome work problems by using his principles. The book occasionally repeats itself and goes on a bit longer than necessary. Nonetheless, it provides a unique and healthy way of handling work-related stress. *BooksInShort.com* recommends this book to any manager or employee looking for an unconventional way to improve efficiency, by using the organic approach to life.

Take-Aways

- Our economic culture convinces you to treat yourself like a machine that can run indefinitely with little attention.
- Unlike machines, people are natural systems, prone to ebbs and flows.
- To achieve maximum productivity, people need periods of rest and replenishment.
- The tension that results from ambiguity offers an opportunity for creativity.
- Sustainability means satisfying current needs without sacrificing future potential.
- Organic farms provide a model for people seeking sustainability.
- Organic farmers, like successful workers in general, must be able to cope with uncertainty.
- Like farms, people need a conversion period to take on more sustainable work habits.
- Conversion requires planning to reach the goals you really want.
- In nature and in people, energy doesn't disappear but merely takes on a new form.

Summary

Renewing Yourself

The high-stress, fast-paced world of work is full of unrealistic expectations. The result is dissatisfaction, poor performance and burnout. Our culture encourages you to treat yourself like a machine. But you aren't like a refrigerator; you are more like an organic farm.

“A human being is a natural system, but many of us treat ourselves like machines.”

The environmental downside of these traditions is obvious: Natural resources are being polluted and exhausted. Many employers call the people in their work force their most important resource, yet - like the resources of nature - human resources also are being polluted and depleted.

You can increase your productivity to sustainable levels by acknowledging that everyone has a natural capacity to grow and to adapt. This Natural Advantage comes from working within nature's bounds. Sustainability means satisfying current needs without sacrificing future potential. The organic approach isn't about abandoning hard work and order; instead, it focuses on harnessing and shaping natural resources and processes to create quality.

Seven Principles of Organic Farming

Organic farming is a difficult task, because the farmer must cede significant control to nature. Seven key factors in organic farming provide parallel lessons for your search for balance:

1. **Soil quality** - This is the key to sustainable output for organic farmers. Traditional farming, on the other hand, depletes the soil, which therefore must be artificially stimulated with fertilizer and suppressed with pesticide. Similarly, by cultivating your personal fertility, you can maintain sustainable levels of productivity. This translates to physical, mental, emotional and inspirational resources and reserves.
2. **Natural energy** - Organic farmers rely on sunlight, water, air and organic waste, but not fossil fuels. In the same way, a productive workplace must rely on energizing workers without resorting to tactics that create pollution. In human terms, this translates to motivating people either by fear, which is negative, or by enthusiasm, which is positive. Artificial fertilizers include fear of being fired, competing for power or prestige, or pressure from supervisors or aggressive bonus schemes. Natural fertilizers include inspiration and a sense of purpose.
3. **Composting** - In this process, messy waste is recycled. At work, negative energy can be harnessed to provide new ways of understanding old problems. Anxiety, setbacks and conflict can be turned into sources of growth and improvement.
4. **Meeting uncertainty with creativity** - Organic farmers accomplish a great deal with little control over their environments. Meeting this uncertainty is critical to their survival. Similarly, workers who can adapt to uncertainty and ambiguity can improve their output. Are your work processes inflexible or highly flexible? Uncertainty leads to creative pressure, which you can exploit positively if you are flexible. The co-creative response to ambiguity is to explore and accept the tension.
5. **Natural cycles** - Organic farmers use cycles, such as crop rotation and the four seasons, to increase output. Workers likewise should picture their jobs as occupying a full cycle that accommodates hard effort followed by an easier task or rest. Are you constantly working at full effort, or do you have time to rest and reflect? For instance, the cultivation cycle of four seasons can be applied to work. Spring equals seeding, summer is for growth, autumn is for harvesting and winter is for rest and analysis. In another cycle, the renewal rotation, crops are changed. This can be translated to work, if you can follow a demanding task with a less challenging one.
6. **Diversity** - Organic farms boast a range of crops and enterprises, so that if one fails, the business survives. Diversity also helps to reduce weeds and insects. Similarly, workers who work at a wide range of tasks are more creative. Is your work repetitive and or varied?
7. **Quality** - Organic produce might look irregular, but it delivers taste and nutrition. Forced farming, on the other hand, produces consistent but mediocre results. In workplace terms, does your work satisfy you?

Natural vs. Mechanical Systems

Systems can be divided into two groups. Manmade objects, such as computers and appliances, are mechanical systems. Ecosystems, such as rain forests, are natural systems. There are significant differences.

“Every company says its people are its greatest resource, but human resources are exhausted and polluted in the production process, just like the natural environment.”

The inputs into a mechanical system are easily measured and controlled, while the inputs into a natural system are numerous and difficult to measure or control. The process inside a mechanical system is routine and predictable; the process in a natural system is difficult to forecast. The outputs of a mechanical system are easily measured and controlled; the outputs of a natural system are difficult to quantify and hard to control. If you are a manager, these are important distinctions. Your employees are natural systems, yet the culture of work can promote an effort to run people like machines. Sometimes you can feel this impact internally, as work pressures make you try to run yourself like a machine, as well.

Soil Types, Personality Types

The organic farmer must know what type of earth his farm has. Likewise, as a manager, you must know what sort of person you are trying to motivate. Categories include:

- Sand is not very fertile, but adding organic matter can boost it - A sandy personality type is potentially inspired and creative, yet lacks stamina. Stephen, for instance, was smart but burned out. Heavy-handed management just made Stephen dry up further. But cultivating Stephen in a less confrontational, more appreciative way helped him become a creative and valued employee. A manager who imposes his will on employees doesn't necessarily get the best results.
- Silt is fertile but quite dense and unstructured - A silty personality type is quite intelligent yet not practical. Phil, for instance, had a strong vision for his publishing company, and he was smart, ambitious and hard working. However, Phil's employees depended too heavily on him to make every decision and to resolve every dispute, particularly because Phil tended to give directives rather than seek input. When he learned to seek more consensus, Phil could move his firm to more stable ground.
- Clay is dense and heavy and must be cultivated and drained - In human terms, this translates to someone who is serious, but finds it difficult to deal with emotions. Alison, for instance, was stressed out, smoking, drinking and taking anti-depressants. Negative feelings built up in her psyche like water in clay. By expressing her feelings rather than letting them build, she was able to achieve emotional stability.
- Loam is a mix of sand, silt and clay - Loam is quite fertile but it still needs attention. In people, this equates to someone who is complex, productive and versatile.
- Chalk is dry but somewhat fertile - Someone with a chalky temperament might be dour or unemotional, but also a maverick. Salim, for instance, ran the software development division of his company. Because his division also had to deal with customers' requests for technical assistance, his department couldn't meet its development goals. Yet Salim never raised the issue, because his boss hated conflict. Once he finally complained to his boss about the problem, the level of understanding between the two improved.
- Peat is well structured and naturally attains ideal moisture levels, yet it is highly acidic - In human terms, this translates to an intelligent, talented person who is prone to bitterness or disaffection.

Changing Styles

The process of shifting a farm from traditional farming methods to organic methods is called conversion. This is a difficult but necessary step toward attaining sustainability. A farm needs several years of natural cycles and organic cultivation before the ground condition regains its formerly fecund state. The first two or three years of conversion often prove difficult, and productivity typically drops for a time. Similarly, humans need a conversion period to take on more sustainable work habits. Unlike farms, however, people can adapt quickly.

“Both the mechanistic mindset and the culture of the hero-achiever may make you think that the only way to get progress is to push.”

Conversion requires planning. Consider what category of soil type you are, and what types of tasks most deplete your fertility. Think about what you really want to do. Make a financial budget, preferably one that accounts for the lower income you'll realize as you begin to balance your work life and personal life. Conversion also requires flexibility, because unanticipated situations will arise. Use these tips to ease your conversion process.

- Do it now - Don't wait for a crisis to develop before you take a saner approach.
- Seek help - You don't have to convert alone; organizations and like-minded people can offer support. Colleagues might even prove receptive.
- Trust your feelings - If you feel that your work is depleting you, act. Don't wait for facts to support your feelings.
- When in doubt, exaggerate - This is a form of composting. By feeling more intensely about an issue, you can delve more deeply into your creative side.
- Go with the flow - Don't fight the system; it's bigger than you are. Accept that the profit motive is here to stay and align your needs with that of a capitalist economy.
- Stick to your principles - Conversion will be challenging, but the principle of sustainability provides a compass.
- Don't be afraid of risk - You can't remove the risk from a major life change, so accept that there could be a downside.
- Find a way to measure your progress - These measurements can be subjective rather than objective; the point is to gauge your progress.
- Work smarter, not harder - This is a cliché, but it's a useful one. By using your natural cycles, you can maximize your energy levels and productivity.
- Determine your market - Some customers will value the true quality that your conversion will bring. Find them and cultivate them.
- Celebrate your successes - This will make conversion seem more rewarding.
- Rest - You can't always push. Sometimes you need to recover and contemplate.

Principles of Sustainability

Several tenets of science apply to human sustainability:

- Matter and energy cannot be created nor destroyed - Energy never disappears, it just takes on a different form. Gasoline burned in a car simply turns into heat absorbed into the ecosystem. Likewise, human energy moves around but doesn't go away. If a boss treats an employee brusquely, the employee might be rude to a customer. The energy hasn't disappeared; rather it turned into resentment stored in the employee and customer.
- Matter and energy disperse spontaneously - In the case of gasoline, the result is pollution. Human energy also can turn into pollution if it's not used properly.
- Quality is the concentration and structuring of matter - Value is the result of using energy to bring matter to a higher level of concentration or usefulness. Earth, for instance, yields raw fruits and vegetables. A human contains a high level of innate quality, and a human being can bring varying levels of quality to his work.
- Green cells create quality - Through photosynthesis, the green cell turns energy from the sun into air, water, plants, food and fossil fuel. In human terms, a person is a green cell. The human's version of sunlight varies, but for many this external energy is created by a sense of purpose, by the love of family and friends, and by job satisfaction.

About the Author

Alan Heeks is founder of the Wessex Foundation, an educational charity and 132-acre organic farm in England. He attended Oxford University and earned an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School. His consulting firm's clients include 3M, Glaxo and BP.
