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WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

All our working lives, we have been hearing that the business we are in is about to go under. Internet will be the death knell for traditional news media outlets. We know better by now. The brands we work for – which include *De Telegraaf*, *NRC*, and *Noordhollands Dagblad* – now have a greater reach than ever before and are simply flourishing. However, the road to get here has had its share of twists, turns, and bumps along the way; as have the departments we are responsible for as managers.

Our previous book, *The Relationship Economy*, is about how we adapted our marketing strategy by the clever use of data and by engaging in long-term relationships with our customers. At presentations for that book, we found an unexpected response from professionals in other businesses who confessed to being envious of the media: ‘We know we are on the eve of a disruption storm, but we haven’t even got a clue which questions to ask yet. You guys are so much farther ahead.’ Banks, chemical producers, and NGOs alike: they are all concerned by the pace and intensity of technological developments. Familiar safeties are evaporating as snow on a sunny day; fear emerges in

its place, fear of the new market entrants who are bound to be better equipped for adapting to the rapid changes. Nokia and Kodak are on everyone's mind as nightmare scenarios: from hero to zero. All established brands are terrified of being next.

No one is more sympathetic to that fear than we are. We have lived through that feeling of wariness and angst, we have breathed it. What we would love to share with people from every possible business is that the answer to disruption goes far, far beyond using data and embracing what technology has to offer. It all starts with a stronger commitment to your organization's mission and a more profound connection with your employees and your customers. Using new technology is the step after that.

This book deals with the human side of organizations, and how to influence that. Agile and resilient organizations have an amazing company culture, amazing employees, and amazing customers – but how do you get all of those? We are more than happy to share our struggles and insights with you, so that your learning curve will be faster than ours.

In this book, you will find out more about:

- creating long-term value with a culture that focuses on connection.
- starting and scaling up cultural development.
- using your mission as a foundation, and putting that into practice.
- selecting and motivating the right employees.

- increasing team commitment by deciding on priorities together.
- letting teams flourish through psychological safety and trust.
- reinventing how people work together in a team.
- finding the right customers.
- examining and using customer needs.
- creating a cultural development and innovation continuum.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT THE MEDIA BUSINESS CAN TEACH YOU ABOUT DISRUPTION

Our lives and our work are changing at an ever-increasing pace. The phones in our pockets contain more personal data than was ever collected in the whole course of our great-grandparents' lives. Companies that have been around a mere twenty years know more about us than our family does. Besides, regardless of how essential they seem today, it is anyone's guess if they will still be around in a decade.

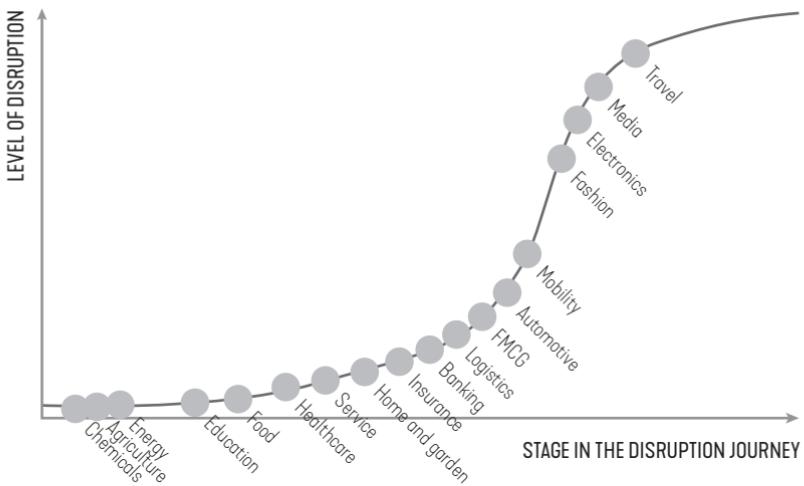
Human contact is no longer a daily necessity. Keeping in touch in app groups is more efficient than one-to-one interactions. You order groceries on your screen and they are delivered to your doorstep. You can work on your phone while you stand waiting at the gate to board a plane.

The ones conquering all these developments are the new companies with young and well-educated employees who grew up in a society where individualism and the availability of data both are a given, and where automation is a sure path to success. Traditional companies with their roots in the centuries before ours are often struggling

to keep up with the speed. They are weighty with the cumbersome baggage of the past, operate on outdated systems, and often have employees who were trained for a world that has almost disappeared. Left and right, they are being overtaken. They are undergoing disruption.¹ The media business, where we work, has been dealing with its own share of disruption, too. Classic media companies watched their prime source of income, advertising, disappear before their very eyes, thanks to a shift to online players from other business sectors. Desperate attempts to become important on the digital playing field did pay off sometimes, though they certainly fell short of making up for the losses of advertising revenue in print versions.

Since the invention of the book press with typesetters by Johannes Gutenberg, it had been up to publishers to make information available and disseminate it on a large scale. Later, radio and television joined in, with their business models based on selling adverts to reach consumers. Not so, not now, not anymore. Internet has increased the competition at a staggering rate; so too have the possible ways for advertisers to reach their audience. As the media market fell apart into a thousand pieces, three powerful titans in the Western world have emerged from the rubble, channelling the stream of information in exquisitely clever ways: Amazon, Facebook, and Google. Their might has become so immense that over 70 percent of all ad sales ends up in the hands of these three companies.² Until the twentieth century the traditional media companies were

the ones who could count on those euros and dollars. It is a brave new world for media products, too. Reading printed newspapers every day is a habit that younger generations associate with their grandparents' behavior. Cell phones have become the main carriers of information. Consultancy SparkOptimus³ has concluded that the media business is heading the disruption curve, as is the travel sector.



Media and travel are the businesses which teach us the most about disruption;
source: Jankovich, 2019.

By now, we can carefully look back over our shoulders and determine that many of the traditional media brands are still around. Although the force of disruption has injured

news organizations, regional ones in particular, there are also a lot of classic media brands – dating back to steam engine days – who have successfully adapted to the digital twenty-first century reality and are doing better than ever before. In 2019 *The New York Times* reported its highest ever subscription figures, citing some 5 million paying subscribers.⁴ Several news brands are now extremely profitable, and are reaching more people than they ever did by adapting to the new reality. This is a story of success which is not necessarily common knowledge.

We were working at newspaper publishers in these tumultuous and interesting times, on the same team at first at *NRC* and later as co-workers at *Mediahuis*, where Matthijs works at *NRC* and Xavier at *De Telegraaf*. We were right there from the turn of the millennium when everything was rolling along smoothly, through the time of turmoil when disruption picked up speed, to the present day in which we think we have steadied the ship and are back on the right course. At first we were surprised by our experiences at *NRC* and *De Telegraaf*, though we started to see a pattern later. We found that an intense connection to our roots, our staff and our customers were paramount, if we were to have a proper response to the changing circumstances. Technological innovation did not prove to be the driving force of success, but a mere instrument instead. The people who started innovation and the customers who embraced it: they are the true winners of the future. We will describe best practices in this book and detail scientific studies that helped us along the way, as we tackled

the many challenges of the digitization of our business. We will also provide a host of practical ideas, for managers and employees alike, to make their organizations agile and resilient. Maybe they are organizations on the cusp of an upheaval, or maybe they are organizations keen to boost the speed of their innovation and take it to the next level. No matter if you have dozens or thousands of customers or none yet, the principles in this book will apply and be scalable to all.

At the same time, we must be humble. What may have worked for us will not automatically be of use to you. We will share our experiences, our approach, and further reading that will show you how to focus on the human touch in an organization and prove to you that this has been effective in other companies, too. Use what you can and find your own path. We certainly hope that this book will be a valuable step on your journey through this rapidly changing world.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In this book, we move from broad strokes to the finest of finesse. Part I demonstrates that organizations are more successful when they have a culture where people are driven by a mission and where they pay attention to the needs of all the stakeholders. You will learn more about how to formulate a mission statement, how to strengthen or mend relationships, and about connective leadership. Part II describes the relevance of finding, developing, and involving the right people. This part is full of practical tools for building a good team that can formulate a response to change, together. Part III is about how important it is to find the right customers, and provides instruments to be more connected to customers, by delving into customer needs – using qualitative methods and data analysis. You then translate these into better products and processes.

Throughout the book, you will find case studies, personal experiences, practical tools and further reading. In part I the focus is on the theoretical, whereas parts II and III are more geared towards everyday business practice. You should read the book from front to back, because the parts each build on the previous ones. However, you could just as easily jump right into the bits that are most relevant to you right now.