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CHAPTER · ONE

Freedom *From* or
Freedom *To*

Most humans' lives are no longer "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short," as Thomas Hobbes had it in *Leviathan* in 1651. But surprisingly, given centuries of escalating innovations, we are not doing all that well when it comes to personal fulfillment. Moreover, things are not improving. Studies of the workplace find time and again that only a minority of people are satisfied with their working lives. The most recent Gallup (2014) survey of 350,000 employees found that only 30 percent of them saw themselves as engaged in the workplace. In a parallel study of 200,000 employees from more than five hundred organizations, 64 percent did not feel that they had a strong work culture, and 66 percent said that the opportunity for growth on the job was limited (TINYpulse, 2014). Ron Friedman (2014) finds similar low engagement of employees in the vast majority of organizations; he also reports that "the best companies to work for" (the minority) outperform the market by a factor of two to one (p. xiii). The percentage of disengaged workers has not changed for decades. This situation to me is a "freedom from" problem. There are factors keeping things the way they are, to no one's benefit, and nobody seems to be doing anything about it.

In my own field of education, as you go up the grade levels, higher percentages of students say that they are bored; teacher satisfaction has declined dramatically from 62 percent in 2008 to 38 percent in the present; and among principals, 75 percent say that their job has become too complicated. The trend is similar for school principals; since 2008, satisfaction has dropped from 68 percent to 59 percent (Metropolitan Life Insurance, 2013).

How do we change dreary daily working lives? “Freedom from” concerns what you can do to get rid of obstacles or other constraints.

What Do We Really Want?

The key question is, What will make people more fulfilled? There is growing evidence that there are a small number of factors at the heart of what motivates people to become engaged in worthwhile endeavors. Let’s start with best-selling author Daniel Pink’s book *Drive*. The research that Pink amasses is quite clear. For routine or rudimentary tasks that are more mechanical, extrinsic rewards such as money and punishment can motivate people to put in the effort to get results, but for any task that requires making independent decisions or problem solving, extrinsic rewards actually demotivate people. According to Pink’s research, what is motivating are three factors: *a degree of self-directed autonomy*, *a sense of purpose*, and *mastery*. In my own work, I have added a fourth factor: *collaboration with peers to do something of value*. These are the intrinsic motivators: a feeling that you have a degree of autonomy in what you do and how you do it; a sense of purpose, that you are helping make your part of the world a better place; a growing mastery or expertise, meaning that you are becoming increasingly capable in your line of work; and a strong identity with colleagues, which gives you the sense that you are making a difference together.

Employees note these “drivers” when they are asked about what motivates their working lives. In the TINYpulse survey cited earlier, workers were asked to select among twelve factors the most important motivators for themselves. The top

five in their estimation were camaraderie/peer motivation, intrinsic desire to do a good job, feeling encouraged and recognized, having a real impact, and growing professionally. Money was number seven. As Pink argues, you do have to pay people enough money to get the topic off the table. For “freedom to” people, money is a by-product of good work. It is not that money doesn’t matter but rather that it is not the main driver. When the work itself is not satisfying, that is when money looms large as a factor. Money works in strange ways. The more that money is deployed as the main motivator, the more that intrinsic factors fall off the table, the less productive people become, and the less money is made. When the intrinsic factors are in play, people are more engaged and more productive, and more money is made.

The subject of this book is how to put intrinsic motivation factors into play for yourself and with others.

Motivational Drivers

- Some degree of self-directed autonomy
- Sense of purpose
- Mastery
- The rewards of collaborating with peers to do something of value

In a fundamental way, individual fulfillment and the evolution of humanity are intertwined. People are at their best when they are making a contribution in their own corner of the patch,

leading both to personal satisfaction and to improvement in the world around them. We see from the surveys that most of us do not experience these motivators. But we could.

The starting point is to realize that the ball is in your court. The pursuit of fulfillment begins with you. It needs to be your own agenda. This book will guide you on this journey. To be successful, you will need to understand and engage in the dynamics of moving from “freedom from” to “freedom to.”

If you had a magic wand that would remove all obstacles to change that you face, would you be better off? It may surprise you, but the evidence—both surface and deep—points in the opposite direction: you would find yourself facing new and more difficult challenges! The short answer to why this is so is that human beings are uncomfortable with pure freedom, and we unknowingly adapt by gravitating to worse alternatives. So the first matter—the subject of the rest of this chapter—is to get to the bottom of the paradox of freedom.

As you will see, in this book I have deliberately set out to advise individuals and the organization as a whole. Rather than focus on “leaders” in the most formal sense (something I have written about in my five previous books for Jossey-Bass), I have expanded the notion of leaders to include anyone who can and should take initiative. If these people happen to be formal leaders in an organization, all the better, because they can affect the lives of many. But I want to look at how *any* of us as individuals can work toward being free to change, while creating conditions that enable us to take advantage of this greater sense of freedom.

I start from the premise that being a leader and being a member of an organization have something in common or, perhaps more accurately, that both types should recognize that

they have areas of converging interest, albeit often in tension. Any organization or system will benefit from the ideas, insights, and energy of all its members. And any individual will gain from being in an organization that is designed to draw on all its members in a social change process relative to a goal for the greater good. Seeking individuality—the fulfillment of humankind—in a social context is incredibly complex. The end game is not to be free and alone, but to be free with others. What makes humankind wonderful is the prospect of continuous realization of self, and human evolution through and with others.

A Double-Barreled Freedom

I was first stimulated to tackle these matters when I came across *The Freedom Report* from LRN (2014), a business management consultancy that “helps people and companies navigate complex legal and regulatory environments, foster ethical winning cultures, and inspire principled performance” (p. 19). This report of a study contains a framework that distinguished between “freedom from” and “freedom to” factors. The phrases reminded me of Eric Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom* (1969) from my graduate school days as a sociologist in the making, so I went back and reread Fromm’s book closely. Doing so opened a whole new line of thinking that was implicit in my current work, but had not been drawn out. (I will be discussing Fromm’s work further in this chapter.)

LRN’s main premise is that “when relationships are overly regulated and constrained, employees under-contribute, customers seek alternatives, and partnerships crumble” (2014, p. 3). The LRN study was based on a small sample (834 executives

and professionals from large U.S.-based companies). LRN used a “freedom from/freedom to” framework to generate a Freedom Index, whereby executives rated the degree of constraint or freedom relative to four groups in their organizations: employees, customers, supply chain partners, and community groups. These executives were asked to rate what they thought their employees found constraining (in other words, those elements having to do with the “freedom from” problem). This list included hierarchical decision making, needless approvals, micromanagement, and the like. The main “freedom to” factors the executives identified included a culture based on shared values, and whether employees had the autonomy to structure their work and were encouraged to try new ideas. The organizations that scored higher on the index (meaning both greater “freedom from” and more “freedom to”) performed much better on three key outcomes: financial performance (ten times higher than low-freedom companies), innovation, and long-term success.

But the LRN study did not go further into what exactly was going on in these successful organizations, how they had gotten to where they were, how applicable the ideas were to a range of situations, and especially how individuals—leaders or otherwise—could understand and learn to establish “freedom to” environments. This book is my attempt to go further with LRN’s double-barreled “freedom from/freedom to” approach, to get inside these intriguing dynamics. Because my colleagues and I work in the fields of education and educational leadership—highly constrained systems, laden with fundamental “freedom from” limits—I pursue the issues mainly in that context, with forays into other fields, such as business, that have much in common with my own.

The Emptiness of “Freedom From”

Even if you are not of my generation, you may recognize the refrain of Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster’s song “Me and Bobby McGee,” made famous by Janis Joplin:

Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,
And nothing don’t mean nothing honey if it ain’t free

It may be no accident that the lyrics in this song suited Janis Joplin and her brief life so well. “Freedom from,” if we are not careful, can plunge us into despair and questions about the meaning of life. As Kristofferson seemed to know, “freedom from” may be happily intoxicating, but it’s also a trap.

It may surprise you that the idea that freedom can turn out to be empty has a long psychoanalytic history, expressed most conspicuously in Eric Fromm’s book. Fromm was a social psychologist, psychoanalyst, and sociologist who was born in 1900 in Germany to Orthodox Jewish parents and emigrated in 1933 as Nazism took over there. Meditating on these events, he saw that seeking individual freedom was a natural but false goal that inevitably got hijacked (and even hijacked itself) for worse alternatives. He sought to unravel this phenomenon, and concluded that freedom from constraints, what he called negative freedom, led to new deep problems. According to *Escape from Freedom*,

Modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society [medieval times], which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not gained freedom in the positive sense of realization of his individual self . . . Freedom, though it has

brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated, and thereby anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based on the uniqueness and individuality of man. (Fromm, 1969, p. x)

It turns out that “freedom from” is a hell of a lot easier to achieve than “freedom to.” The evidence is that it is easier (and worse) to slip into new dependencies than it is to discover new individuality. Freedom from everything is to be isolated and anxious. Initially then, escaping from imposition is “to be alone and free, yet powerless and afraid” (Fromm, 1969, p. 34). In other words, attaining freedom is a subtle challenge, and our human vulnerabilities make us likely to mishandle the opportunity.

We do need to be free from constraints that channel us into dependency or lives of thoughtless repetition. But by itself, “freedom from” gives one “an increased feeling of strength, and at the same an increased isolation, doubt, skepticism—and resulting from all these—anxiety” (Fromm, 1969, p. 48). This natural anxiety can serve productive or destructive ends. The destructive or less-than-fulfilling alternatives are more common—a kind of human inertia. To be free in the negative sense is to be alone with oneself, “confronting an alienated, hostile world” (p. 150). Or, more conclusively, “Negative freedom by itself makes the individual an isolated being, whose relationship to the world is distant and distrustful and whose self is weak and constantly threatened” (p. 259).

Fromm states that the anxiety of negative freedom is fundamentally intolerable and results in at least three negative

outcomes, which he discusses at some length: authoritarianism, destructiveness or self-destruction, and conformity.

Fromm wanted to understand authoritarianism as a mechanism that contributed to the rise of Nazism in Germany. In his view, succumbing to authority resolves the psychological problem of negative freedom. Likewise, in daily life we submit to lesser forms of authoritarianism—for example, when we stay in destructive relationships. Destructiveness or self-destruction refers to personal breakdowns, suicide being the ultimate example. The anxieties of freedom that Fromm describes help explain why even people who seem to have it all engage in self-destructive actions. In short, gaining greater freedom is fraught with new difficulties.

Much of what we want to do requires us to operate within the contexts of hierarchical organizations. Ironically, the more the performance of the organization comes into question, the more that leaders lay on additional requirements. The field of education is a prime example. Higher authorities, perverse mandatory testing, bad leadership, unions, sheer workload, bureaucracy, annoying peers—the list goes on—all of these limit what we (think) we can do and grind many of us to a halt.

This need not be. The first positive step we can take is to realize that we may not be as stuck as we think. My favorite example (and I got it from the horse's mouth) comes from a superintendent of education whom I know very well. Let's call her "Rebel with a Cause." She and her senior team in the district found that they were constantly called on to respond to mindless compliance requirements from the state department of education, filing report after report that they were pretty sure no one read.

One June in the press of year-end chores, they received a major request from the state that required compiling reams of data. The staff was under huge duress as they contemplated how to meet the target. Hating to see needless anxiety, this is what Rebel did: She asked two staff members to write the beginning and end sections of the report—a few pages—and said she would take care of the rest. Then, between the two sections, she inserted a copy of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (one of the longest novels ever written).

The staff begged Rebel not to submit the document (“We’ll get in trouble,” “You’ll get fired,” and so on). She reassured them that it was highly unlikely that there would be repercussions and said that if the latter happened, she would buy the team a dinner. They then submitted the report electronically (which caused the system to shut down temporarily—a frequent occurrence). She never heard back from the state department, and bought her staff dinner anyway!

As I discussed this incident with her she said,

The reason I did this was not to annoy the state or to shut down their system. I did it only to try to make a point with some of my staff who worried themselves sick and spent far too many hours to comply with the endless and often repetitive requests from multiple siloed departments in the state department.

However, please don't begin to think that arbitrary defiance is the answer to your own bureaucratic harassments. We will return to Rebel later; but let me just mention here that, as we shall see, the reason she was so confident was that she had a

strong set of “freedom to” guideposts; she had a strong moral compass and knew what she wanted to accomplish with powers of flexibility.

Another example from education of the limits of “freedom from” comes from my work in understanding “school autonomy.” Several jurisdictions have responded to the constant complaints from school principals that they have limited freedom to act given all the bureaucratic requirements laid on by the hierarchy. In Australia, for example, some states have passed new policies whereby individual schools can apply for “independent public schools” status, which gives them more freedom. There has not yet been systematic documentation of the consequences, but some of the various educators with whom I have discussed this change refer to “learned helplessness”; that is, people are so used to being directed that they find it difficult to take advantage of the new flexibility. In other cases, schools go off on their own, failing to remain “connected” to the system. (I will discuss what I call “connected autonomy” in chapter 3, “Autonomy and Cooperation.”)

As I prepared for this book, I asked some leading educators I know (teachers, principals, superintendents, and others) to draw on their experiences to respond to certain questions. From time to time I will quote members this group, whom I refer to as “the select dozen.” One question I asked was whether they had ever experienced obtaining new freedoms only to find new concerns. Most had. For example:

I recall being freed from a demanding and at times vindictive immediate supervisor who got transferred. The ensuing year was filled with initial relief. At the same time, the freedom

created uncertainty for me and doubt about whether I was doing “the right things.”

—*Secondary school principal*

The school district had always controlled the technology put into our schools with great authority. As students’ use of technology grew in demand, teachers’ use increased, and as the world became more connected through the Internet and person-to-person networks, I wanted the constraints that the school board placed on Internet access, technology purchase, and allowing technology to be reduced, so that we could make those decisions at the school level. I thought student learning and teaching would take off, and everyone would be on board with these changes. Initially, students, teachers, and parents were all scared of the change. We had to move from an anxious and isolated place to a place where people came together to make new practices work.

—*Elementary principal*

Two respondents gave more personal examples:

When my mother passed away, I thought I would feel a sense of freedom because I had been so absorbed in her care. I expected to devote all of the free time to doing things for myself. Instead I felt at loose ends and unsettled.

—*District supervisor*

I was adopted. When I finally found my birth mother, I was free from the wondering that had regularly occupied me in the past, wondering about where and whom I had come from. Who was I? It was a constant wonder in my life. At age thirty-one, I did get to meet my birth mother. I finally had a few of the answers to many questions I’d had over the course of my

life, but rather than feel comfort or liberation, I instead felt deflated and disappointed. I realized that my story could no longer be left entirely to my imagination. Instead of being “anybody,” I was somebody, and this little four-foot-nothing, bubbly, white-haired, chatty woman was my mother.

—*District supervisor*

All four respondents said that they had to figure out how to handle the new freedom. Stated another way, being rid of the burden of constraints is followed by new challenges.

Constraints Don't Need to Stop Us

Before crossing the bridge to “freedom to,” let’s develop a mindset that constraints are not action stoppers. Ryan Holiday, a media strategist and prominent writer on strategy and business, lays the foundation in his book *The Obstacle Is the Way* (2014). He catalogues the constraints:

Systemic: decaying institutions, rising unemployment, sky-rocketing costs of education, and technological disruption. Individuals: too short, too old, too scared, too poor, too stressed, no backers, no confidence . . . [And] the responses they elicit: Frustration. Confusion. Helplessness, Depression. Anger. (p. 1)

But obstacles, like mountains, are there to be crossed. Overcoming obstacles, says Holiday, begins with how we look at specific problems. Just like our superintendent Rebel, people on the move from “freedom from” see obstacles for what they are: things to be broken down, understood, and overcome. It

is their attitude, philosophy, and ingenuity (ability and confidence) to solve a problem that makes the difference. People with this orientation tend to see obstacles as problems to be solved; and with practice they get better and better at dealing with what stands in their way, including handling difficulty and defeat.

Most of us do not even try Plan A, which should be refusal to be stymied by obstacles; rather, we tend to see them as more fixed than they are. Before proceeding, take stock of your current situation by addressing the following points:

- List the main obstacles standing in your way with respect to your personal and/or organizational goals.
- How could you minimize or overcome some of these obstacles by breaking them down and taking creative action?

As you get better at addressing constraints, you will then need Plan B, so to speak, when “freedom from” by itself is not enough because it does not consider the changes that liberation is likely to require for success. If Fromm is correct, newfound freedoms leave us consciously or subconsciously too alone in a hostile world. Subsequent chapters in this book are largely about the details of developing your own Plan B—what you will need to know to live productively in the “freedom to” world that you will help create.

A Direction for Freedom *to* Change

Fromm was mainly concerned with identifying the vulnerability of detached freedom, which in his analysis could lead to psychological breakdown or succumbing to authoritarian domination. He only hinted at the positive solution, which he discussed

under the heading of “Character and the Social Process,” relegated to an appendix of his book. Here are some hints:

Man’s inalienable rights of freedom and happiness are founded in inherent human qualities: his striving to live, to expand and express the potentialities that have developed in him in the process of historical evolution . . .

The fundamental approach to human personality is the understanding of man’s relation to the world, to others, to nature and to himself. We believe that man is *primarily* a social being. (1969, pp. 287–288, italics in the original)

Thus the fundamental problem and solution for Fromm was wrapped up in the psychology of interpersonal relationships. This is the point of departure for our perspective on “freedom to.” The gist of the solution is to pursue meaningful goals and values through complex autonomous-connected relationships with others.

Take Action

Look back at your responses to the two bulleted suggestions listed earlier. As a further prelude to your pursuit of better outcomes, try spelling out what you would do with more freedom:

- Identify one or more goals—even small ones—that you would like to tackle in your workplace or personal life.
- How would you initially go about pursuing these goals?

Next

The rest of this book is a guide to maintaining and mining a “freedom to” existence. Chapter 2 will say more about simplicity—distinguishing it from strategy, for example. Chapters 3 through 6 will pursue the four core factors essential for reconciling the “freedom from/freedom to” conundrum:

- Autonomy *and* cooperation
- Feedback
- Accountability
- Diffusion (by interacting more widely)

These four themes are guideposts for maximizing “freedom to change.” To be clear, you find your best freedom *through* continuously navigating your way within and among the four. In brief then, my theory of action addresses how you can come to understand and engage in this quartet of factors and their interactions.

The processes for mastering any one of the four—not to mention figuring out how to orchestrate them—are complex. I admit we are talking about difficult change processes. But be assured that my colleagues and I know a fair amount about the practical dos and don’ts of change. It is time to figure out how to put your inner drive into overdrive.

'FREEDOM FROM' OR 'FREEDOM TO'?

Understand the dynamics between 'freedom from' constraints that hinder happiness and productivity, and 'freedom to' pursue more satisfying alternatives.

'FREEDOM TO'
Not as easy as it seems!

What would you do if you faced fewer barriers?

'FREEDOM FROM'

How to change dreary daily working lives.

What can you do to get rid of obstacles or other constraints?

Only 30% of people see themselves as engaged in the workplace.

(Gallup survey of 350,000 employees, 2014)

Most people believe that if all their obstacles to change were removed, they'd be better off.

Surprisingly, evidence suggests that you would have new and more difficult challenges to face!

WHAT DO WE REALLY WANT?

- >> some degree of self-directed autonomy
- >> sense of purpose
- >> sense of mastery
- >> rewards of collaborating with peers to do something of value

THE DECEPTION OF FREEDOM

'freedom from' may be alluring but it's also a trap.

Freedom from everything is to be isolated and anxious.

'freedom from' by itself does not consider the changes that liberation requires for success.

We need to know what to do with these new freedoms.

Constraints are not action stoppers.

Obstacles, like mountains, are there to be surmounted.

Freedom is a subtle challenge. Our human vulnerabilities make us likely to mishandle the opportunity.

'Freedom to' goalposts

Autonomy and cooperation

Feedback

Accountability

Diffusion by interacting more widely.

The first positive step we can take: Realize that we may not be as stuck as we think.

The end game is not to be free and alone, but to be free with others.

