

My Life and Work

Henry Ford

Management Classics

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What Is the Idea?	5
The Beginning of Business	19
What I Learned About Business	27
Starting the Real Business	37
The Secret of Manufacturing and Serving	51
Getting into Production	61
Machines and Men	71
The Terror of the Machine	81
Wages	91
Why Not Always Have Good Business?	103
How Cheaply Can Things Be Made?	111
Money and Goods	123
Money-Master or Servant?	133
Why Be Poor?	145
The Tractor and Power Farming	153
Why Charity?	163
The Railroads	175
Things in General	183
Democracy and Industry	197
What We May Expect	207

What Is the Idea?

We have only started on our development of our country—we have not as yet, with all our talk of wonderful progress, done more than scratch the surface. The progress has been wonderful enough—but when we compare what we have done with what there is to do, then our past accomplishments are as nothing. When we consider that more power is used merely in ploughing the soil than is used in all the industrial establishments of the country put together, an inkling comes of how much opportunity there is ahead. And now, with so many countries of the world in ferment and with so much unrest every where, is an excellent time to suggest something of the things that may be done in the light of what has been done.

When one speaks of increasing power, machinery, and industry there comes up a picture of a cold, metallic sort of world in which great factories will drive away the trees, the flowers, the birds, and the green fields. And that then we shall have a world composed of metal machines and human machines. With all of that I do not agree. I think that unless we know more about machines and their use, unless we better understand the mechanical portion of life, we cannot have the time to enjoy the trees, and the birds, and the flowers, and the green fields.

I think that we have already done too much toward banishing the pleasant things from life by thinking that there is some opposition between living and providing the means of living. We waste so much time and energy that we have little left over in which to enjoy ourselves.

Power and machinery, money and goods, are useful only as they set us free to live. They are but means to an end. For instance, I do not consider the machines which bear my name simply as machines. If that was all there was to it I would do something else. I take them as concrete evidence of the working out of a theory of business, which I hope is something more than a theory of business—a theory that looks toward making this world a better place in which to live. The fact that the commercial success of the Ford Motor Company has been most unusual is important only because it serves to demonstrate, in a way which no one can fail to understand, that the theory to date is right. Considered solely in this light I can criticize the prevailing system of industry and the organization of money and society from the standpoint of one who has not been beaten by them. As things are now organized, I could, were I thinking only selfishly, ask for no change. If I merely want money the present system is all right; it gives money

in plenty to me. But I am thinking of service. The present system does not permit of the best service because it encourages every kind of waste—it keeps many men from getting the full return from service. And it is going nowhere. It is all a matter of better planning and adjustment.

I have no quarrel with the general attitude of scoffing at new ideas. It is better to be skeptical of all new ideas and to insist upon being shown rather than to rush around in a continuous brainstorm after every new idea. Skepticism, if by that we mean cautiousness, is the balance wheel of civilization. Most of the present acute troubles of the world arise out of taking on new ideas without first carefully investigating to discover if they are good ideas. An idea is not necessarily good because it is old, or necessarily bad because it is new, but if an old idea works, then the weight of the evidence is all in its favor. Ideas are of themselves extraordinarily valuable, but an idea is just an idea. Almost any one can think up an idea. The thing that counts is developing it into a practical product.

I am now most interested in fully demonstrating that the ideas we have put into practice are capable of the largest application—that they have nothing peculiarly to do with motor cars or tractors but form something in the nature of a universal code. I am quite certain that it is the natural code and I want to demonstrate it so thoroughly that it will be accepted, not as a new idea, but as a natural code.

The natural thing to do is to work—to recognize that prosperity and happiness can be obtained only through honest effort. Human ills flow largely from attempting to escape from this natural course. I have no suggestion which goes beyond accepting in its fullest this principle of nature. I take it for granted that we must work. All that we have done comes as the result of a certain insistence that since we must work it is better to work intelligently and forehandedly; that the better we do our work the better off we shall be. All of which I conceive to be merely elemental common sense.

I am not a reformer. I think there is entirely too much attempt at reforming in the world and that we pay too much attention to reformers. We have two kinds of reformers. Both are nuisances. The man who calls himself a reformer wants to smash things. He is the sort of man who would tear up a whole shirt because the collar button did not fit the buttonhole. It would never occur to him to enlarge the buttonhole. This sort of reformer never under any circumstances knows what he is doing. Experience and reform do not go together. A reformer cannot

keep his zeal at white heat in the presence of a fact. He must discard all facts.

Since 1914 a great many persons have received brand-new intellectual outfits. Many are beginning to think for the first time. They opened their eyes and realized that they were in the world. Then, with a thrill of independence, they realized that they could look at the world critically. They did so and found it faulty. The intoxication of assuming the masterful position of a critic of the social system—which it is every man's right to assume—is unbalancing at first. The very young critic is very much unbalanced. He is strongly in favor of wiping out the old order and starting a new one. They actually managed to start a new world in Russia. It is there that the work of the world makers can best be studied. We learn from Russia that it is the minority and not the majority who determine destructive action. We learn also that while men may decree social laws in conflict with natural laws, Nature vetoes those laws more ruthlessly than did the Czars. Nature has vetoed the whole Soviet Republic. For it sought to deny nature. It denied above all else the right to the fruits of labour. Some people say, "Russia will have to go to work," but that does not describe the case. The fact is that poor Russia is at work, but her work counts for nothing. It is not free work. In the United States a workman works eight hours a day; in Russia, he works twelve to fourteen. In the United States, if a workman wishes to lay off a day or a week, and is able to afford it, there is nothing to prevent him. In Russia, under Sovietism, the workman goes to work whether he wants to or not. The freedom of the citizen has disappeared in the discipline of a prison-like monotony in which all are treated alike. That is slavery. Freedom is the right to work a decent length of time and to get a decent living for doing so; to be able to arrange the little personal details of one's own life. It is the aggregate of these and many other items of freedom which makes up the great idealistic Freedom. The minor forms of Freedom lubricate the everyday life of all of us.

Russia could not get along without intelligence and experience. As soon as she began to run her factories by committees, they went to rack and ruin; there was more debate than production. As soon as they threw out the skilled man, thousands of tons of precious materials were spoiled. The fanatics talked the people into starvation. The Soviets are now offering the engineers, the administrators, the foremen and superintendents, whom at first they drove out, large sums of money if only they will come back. Bolshevism is now crying for the brains and experience which it yesterday treated so ruthlessly. All that "reform" did to Russia was to block production.

There is in this country a sinister element that desires to creep in between the men who work with their hands and the men who think and plan for the men who work with their hands. The same influence that drove the brains, experience, and ability out of Russia is busily engaged in raising prejudice here. We must not suffer the stranger, the destroyer, the hater of happy humanity, to divide our people. In unity is American strength—and freedom. On the other hand, we have a different kind of reformer who never calls himself one. He is singularly like the radical reformer. The radical has had no experience and does not want it. The other class of reformer has had plenty of experience but it does him no good. I refer to the reactionary—who will be surprised to find himself put in exactly the same class as the Bolshevik. He wants to go back to some previous condition, not because it was the best condition, but because he thinks he knows about that condition.

The one crowd wants to smash up the whole world in order to make a better one. The other holds the world as so good that it might well be let stand as it is—and decay. The second notion arises as does the first—out of not using the eyes to see with. It is perfectly possible to smash this world, but it is not possible to build a new one. It is possible to prevent the world from going forward, but it is not possible then to prevent it from going back—from decaying. It is foolish to expect that, if everything be overturned, everyone will thereby get three meals a day. Or, should everything be petrified, that thereby six per cent, interest may be paid. The trouble is that reformers and reactionaries alike get away from the realities—from the primary functions.

One of the counsels of caution is to be very certain that we do not mistake a reactionary turn for a return of common sense. We have passed through a period of fireworks of every description, and the making of a great many idealistic maps of progress. We did not get anywhere. It was a convention, not a march. Lovely things were said, but when we got home we found the furnace out. Reactionaries have frequently taken advantage of the recoil from such a period, and they have promised "the good old times"—which usually means the bad old abuses—and because they are perfectly void of vision they are sometimes regarded as "practical men." Their return to power is often hailed as the return of common sense.

The primary functions are agriculture, manufacture, and transportation. Community life is impossible without them. They hold the world together. Raising things, making things, and earning things are as primitive as human need and yet as modern as anything can

be. They are of the essence of physical life. When they cease, community life ceases. Things do get out of shape in this present world under the present system, but we may hope for a betterment if the foundations stand sure. The great delusion is that one may change the foundation—usurp the part of destiny in the social process. The foundations of society are the men and means to grow things, to make things, and to carry things. As long as agriculture, manufacture, and transportation survive, the world can survive any economic or social change. As we serve our jobs we serve the world.

There is plenty of work to do. Business is merely work. Speculation in things already produced—that is not business. It is just more or less respectable graft. But it cannot be legislated out of existence. Laws can do very little. Law never does anything constructive. It can never be more than a policeman, and so it is a waste of time to look to our state capitals or to Washington to do that which law was not designed to do. As long as we look to legislation to cure poverty or to abolish special privilege we are going to see poverty spread and special privilege grow. We have had enough of looking to Washington and we have had enough of legislators—not so much, however, in this as in other countries—promising laws to do that which laws cannot do.

When you get a whole country—as did ours—thinking that Washington is a sort of heaven and behind its clouds dwell omniscience and omnipotence, you are educating that country into a dependent state of mind which augurs ill for the future. Our help does not come from Washington, but from ourselves; our help may, however, go to Washington as a sort of central distribution point where all our efforts are coordinated for the general good. We may help the Government; the Government cannot help us. The slogan of "less government in business and more business in government" is a very good one, not mainly on account of business or government, but on account of the people. Business is not the reason why the United States was founded. The Declaration of Independence is not a business charter, nor is the Constitution of the United States a commercial schedule. The United States—its land, people, government, and business—are but methods by which the life of the people is made worth while. The Government is a servant and never should be anything but a servant. The moment the people become adjuncts to government, then the law of retribution begins to work, for such a relation is unnatural, immoral, and inhuman. We cannot live without business and we cannot live without government. Business and government are necessary as servants, like water and grain; as masters they overturn the natural order.

The welfare of the country is squarely up to us as individuals. That is where it should be and that is where it is safest. Governments can promise something for nothing but they cannot deliver. They can juggle the currencies as they did in Europe (and as bankers the world over do, as long as they can get the benefit of the juggling) with a patter of solemn nonsense. But it is work and work alone that can continue to deliver the goods—and that, down in his heart, is what every man knows.

There is little chance of an intelligent people, such as ours, ruining the fundamental processes of economic life. Most men know they cannot get something for nothing. Most men feel—even if they do not know—that money is not wealth. The ordinary theories which promise everything to everybody, and demand nothing from anybody, are promptly denied by the instincts of the ordinary man, even when he does not find reasons against them. He knows they are wrong. That is enough. The present order, always clumsy, often stupid, and in many ways imperfect, has this advantage over any other—it works.

Doubtless our order will merge by degrees into another, and the new one will also work—but not so much by reason of what it is as by reason of what men will bring into it. The reason why Bolshevism did not work, and cannot work, is not economic. It does not matter whether industry is privately managed or socially controlled; it does not matter whether you call the workers' share "wages" or "dividends"; it does not matter whether you regimentalize the people as to food, clothing, and shelter, or whether you allow them to eat, dress, and live as they like. Those are mere matters of detail. The incapacity of the Bolshevik leaders is indicated by the fuss they made over such details. Bolshevism failed because it was both unnatural and immoral. Our system stands. Is it wrong? Of course it is wrong, at a thousand points! Is it clumsy? Of course it is clumsy. By all right and reason it ought to break down. But it does not—because it is instinct with certain economic and moral fundamentals.

The economic fundamental is labour. Labour is the human element which makes the fruitful seasons of the earth useful to men. It is men's labour that makes the harvest what it is. That is the economic fundamental: every one of us is working with material which we did not and could not create, but which was presented to us by Nature.

The moral fundamental is man's right in his labour. This is variously stated. It is sometimes called "the right of property." It is sometimes masked in the command, "Thou shalt not steal." It is the other man's

right in his property that makes stealing a crime. When a man has earned his bread, he has a right to that bread. If another steals it, he does more than steal bread; he invades a sacred human right. If we cannot produce we cannot have—but some say if we produce it is only for the capitalists. Capitalists who become such because they provide better means of production are of the foundation of society. They have really nothing of their own. They merely manage property for the benefit of others. Capitalists who become such through trading in money are a temporarily necessary evil. They may not be evil at all if their money goes to production. If their money goes to complicating distribution—to raising barriers between the producer and the consumer—then they are evil capitalists and they will pass away when money is better adjusted to work; and money will become better adjusted to work when it is fully realized that through work and work alone may health, wealth, and happiness inevitably be secured.

There is no reason why a man who is willing to work should not be able to work and to receive the full value of his work. There is equally no reason why a man who can but will not work should not receive the full value of his services to the community. He should most certainly be permitted to take away from the community an equivalent of what he contributes to it. If he contributes nothing he should take away nothing. He should have the freedom of starvation. We are not getting anywhere when we insist that every man ought to have more than he deserves to have—just because some do get more than they deserve to have.

There can be no greater absurdity and no greater disservice to humanity in general than to insist that all men are equal. Most certainly all men are not equal, and any democratic conception which strives to make men equal is only an effort to block progress. Men cannot be of equal service. The men of larger ability are less numerous than the men of smaller ability; it is possible for a mass of the smaller men to pull the larger ones down—but in so doing they pull themselves down. It is the larger men who give the leadership to the community and enable the smaller men to live with less effort.

The conception of democracy which names a leveling-down of ability makes for waste. No two things in nature are alike. We build our cars absolutely interchangeable. All parts are as nearly alike as chemical analysis, the finest machinery, and the finest workmanship can make them. No fitting of any kind is required, and it would certainly seem that two Fords standing side by side, looking exactly alike and made so exactly alike that any part could be taken out of one and put into the other, would be alike. But they are not. They will have different

road habits. We have men who have driven hundreds, and in some cases thousands of Fords and they say that no two ever act precisely the same—that, if they should drive a new car for an hour or even less and then the car were mixed with a bunch of other new ones, also each driven for a single hour and under the same conditions, that although they could not recognize the car they had been driving merely by looking at it, they could do so by driving it.

I have been speaking in general terms. Let us be more concrete. A man ought to be able to live on a scale commensurate with the service that he renders. This is rather a good time to talk about this point, for we have recently been through a period when the rendering of service was the last thing that most people thought of. We were getting to a place where no one cared about costs or service. Orders came without effort. Whereas once it was the customer who favored the merchant by dealing with him, conditions changed until it was the merchant who favored the customer by selling to him. That is bad for business. Monopoly is bad for business. Profiteering is bad for business. The lack of necessity to hustle is bad for business. Business is never as healthy as when, like a chicken, it must do a certain amount of scratching for what it gets. Things were coming too easily. There was a let-down of the principle that an honest relation ought to obtain between values and prices. The public no longer had to be "catered to." There was even a "public be damned" attitude in many places. It was intensely bad for business. Some men called that abnormal condition "prosperity." It was not prosperity—it was just a needless money chase. Money chasing is not business.

It is very easy, unless one keeps a plan thoroughly in mind, to get burdened with money and then, in an effort to make more money, to forget all about selling to the people what they want. Business on a money-making basis is most insecure. It is a touch-and-go affair, moving irregularly and rarely over a term of years amounting to much. It is the function of business to produce for consumption and not for money or speculation. Producing for consumption implies that the quality of the article produced will be high and that the price will be low—that the article be one which serves the people and not merely the producer. If the money feature is twisted out of its proper perspective, then the production will be twisted to serve the producer.

The producer depends for his prosperity upon serving the people. He may get by for a while serving himself, but if he does, it will be purely accidental, and when the people wake up to the fact that they are not being served, the end of that producer is in sight. During the