

Foreword

by *Francesco Frugiuele**

“They are really doing it.”

This book is the story of the journey of a leader who—as a rarity in the small club of CEOs—is really doing what she said she would do. A journey that is paradigmatic of all organizations that wish to move into the future. Francesca tells us, in the direct and unfiltered voice that I now know so well, what drove her to dismantle the traditional business model piece by piece and replace it with something that few have yet had the courage to build. It is therefore the story of the connection between Francesca’s constant need for personal transformation and the search for antifragility for her company.

The first time Francesca told me what she wanted to do at Var Group I thought: “This woman is crazy. There is no way she is aware of what she is getting into, yet she is determined to do it anyway.” I was sure that the CEO of a company of that size did not really want to make happen what from experience I knew would happen by following her vision in a radical way.

In 2022, in Italy, we were a handful of professionals working in non-hierarchical organizations. At our first meeting with Francesca, we were asked to transform an already very large and fast-growing company into an “open” organization, i.e. a company where responsibility is distributed, information is transparent, and bureaucracy is absent. And to transform it all, immediately. “We have already been working on this for more than two years; now we need to speed up and make it really work, this distributed leadership!” she told me.

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There, on the horizon, Francesca saw a new, dynamic, open company, where people would be able to make decisions independently and coordinate among themselves without the need for bosses and rigid hierarchy; thus, a company capable of generating innovation and value exponentially higher than any traditional company. But I knew—as I told her—that to get there, on a path of “progress over perfection,” she, above all, would be forced to walk on the precipice of the loss of control, with a class of managers that would somehow hinder this transition; with a centuries-old organizational culture that would try to protect itself; with a whole system of beliefs, habits, incentives and invisible structures designed to do exactly the opposite of what she intended to do. I expected that in the face of this barrage—as many other CEOs before and after her have told me—she would respond “let’s think about it” or even “let’s start with something small,” as I had suggested. Instead, she said, “OK, got it. Let’s start.” I thought she would gradually realize that it was more difficult than she thought, and that she would slow down. Instead, with each difficulty she asked me to step up my energy, to put in even more effort. Several times I said to a colleague, “these guys are really serious about doing it.”

Francesca speaks about self-management, distributed responsibility, platform organization and how to overcome command-and-control management; and she speaks about it from her own history and in her own language; a language that expresses a dynamic balance between the mad courage of those who throw themselves into the void and the rigorous logic of those who see the connection between things that are happening now and things that do not yet exist. But most of all, she speaks about people, real dynamics, obstacles, fear and trust. Because if there is one thing this journey teaches us, it is that it is never just about structures, methods, or processes. It is about us. About who we are, how we work together and what we are willing to put on the line to build something better.

As you read this book, you will realize that it is not a manual, it is not a theory, it is not a case study. It is a story. A story that has within it the weight of transformation, resistance, and radical experimentation. And like all stories of true transformation, it does not have a happy ending. Because it is not over. And if all goes as it should, it will never end.