Rework's Rules for Builders

Idea In Short

Skip the detailed plan and start experimenting cheaply. Treat outside money as plan Z, commit rather than plot an exit and build half a product instead of a half-hearted one. Say no often, out-teach your competition and hire the better writer. Rework compresses these rules into readable form.

A Skeptic's Case for One Book

Healthy skepticism toward business books is warranted, since roughly 8,000 appear every year and most are banal, reductionist or derivative, a fancy way of saying boring. Rework, published in 2010, is the exception that became a classic, easy to read and solid enough to send copies to friends. Authors Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson run the company behind the Basecamp software, a firm with more than 50 employees and 25 million dollars in revenue that has declined over 100 investment offers.1 Forbes captured the philosophy in one line:

> "Fried prefers slow, consistent and profitable growth of at least 5% a year -- 'so we can enjoy the culture of a small business.'"

The book delivers more than 80 chapters, each about a page and a half, with direct, unconventional titles. Eleven of the best ideas follow.

Planning Is Guessing

Detailed models with tracked assumptions have their place, yet you learn the most by doing. Find ways to experiment cheaply and accept being a little wrong temporarily. Jim Collins called the same discipline firing bullets before cannonballs, calibrating with small bets before committing big resources.2 Strategy professor Henry Mintzberg, author of Managers, Not MBAs, made the academic version of the argument through his work on emergent strategy, and Honda's celebrated entry into the American motorcycle market remains the classic case study. Plans inform. Action teaches.

Draw a Line in the Sand

Know what you stand for and hold a point of view. Strong opinions, loosely held, only work when you have done the work and earned the confidence through deliberate practice. Best practices offer a starting point, and copying others guarantees you never stand out. The authors put the payoff plainly:

> "When you don't know what you believe, everything becomes an argument. Everything is debatable. But when you stand for something, decisions are obvious."

Have something to say. Pick a fight with an incumbent and advocate loudly for customers. Conviction is a productivity tool disguised as a personality trait.

Outside Money Is Plan Z

Cheap capital tempts every founder, especially when liquidity floods the system and the ten-year treasury yields under 2 percent. The authors list six downsides. You give up control. Cashing out begins to trump building a business. Spending other people's money is addictive, as WeWork demonstrated at scale. Early-stage terms are usually a bad deal because you have no leverage. Customers move down the totem pole once investors' needs take priority. Raising money is incredibly distracting. The alternative is doing more with less. Avoid unnecessary fixed costs such as long-term leases, inventory, fancy office furniture and technology, along with frivolities like meetings, politics and permanent decisions. Less outside capital means more equity and more flexibility.

Commitment Beats Exit Strategy

Too many people and businesses hunt for the easy out. The authors ask the disarming question: would you start a relationship planning the breakup? Launching a successful business takes thought, heart and sweat, and the eye belongs on the ball rather than the exit. Buyers can smell a company built to flip, and so can employees.

Build Half a Product

Strategy is about trade-offs, and nobody can do everything. A laundry list of product features is a roadmap to confusion. Figure out what is critical to quality, meaning what clients will actually pay for, and create something simple and great. The authors compress the method into five words: trim it down, then polish. Throw less at the problem and solve a customer's simple problem well. Half a product ships and delights. A half-hearted product does neither.

Protect the Alone Zone

Interruption is the enemy of productivity. Peter Drucker said it best: "Meetings are a symptom of bad organization." Cal Newport's book Deep Work adds the arithmetic, arguing that recovering from a 15-minute interruption takes more than 15 minutes.3 Everyone needs stretches of unbroken focus, the alone zone where real work happens. Calendars fill by default, so focus must be defended by design.

Don't Copy, Say No, Out-Teach

Three rules form a natural cluster. First, don't copy. Imitating the competition targets a fat B-minus, while excellence demands the tough work of honing what makes your product genuinely great. Be a great you. Second, practice saying no. Saying yes to every customer request feels generous and creates trouble, since the line in the sand only means something when defended. Enzo Ferrari said the customers are not always right, and the competitors are not always right either. Third, out-teach your competition. Business-to-business marketing is education selling, helping clients scope their problem and evaluate choices. No client regrets taking calls from consultants who make them smarter, and the days of selling through client ignorance are mercifully gone.

Marketing Is Not a Department

Everything a company does is marketing. Anything giving prospects a glimpse of what working with you looks like counts: the website, the parking lot, the ex-employees, the reviews and the packaging. The formula is be, do, say, in that order. Most companies spend their marketing budget saying how great they are, when the saying should be the smallest part. Reality advertises louder than copywriting.

Hire the Better Writer

The closing rule doubles as a call to action. When choosing between candidates, hire the better writer, because writing is organized thinking. The same logic applies to your own career. Put thoughts on paper or online and build intellectual equity that belongs permanently to you. A body of written work compounds like capital, and unlike most assets, nobody can take it away.

- 1Basecamp
- 2Fire Bullets, Then Cannonballs
- 3Rework

Summary

Rework endures because its rules are contrarian and testable. Plans are guesses, outside money costs control and simplicity beats feature lists. Protect deep work, refuse to copy, teach your market and write constantly. Profitable, deliberate growth remains a strategy most businesses never seriously try.