

BOOK CLUB SYNOPSIS

*Good Power: Leading Positive Change in
Our Lives, Work, and World*

Ginni Rometty

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INTRODUCTION

What's Possible

When Ginni Rometty and her siblings were young, her father abandoned their family and stopped financially supporting them. Rometty's mother then decided to go back to school in order to get a better job to support her children. "[This] showed me that no matter how desperate a situation gets, we each have within us the power to create opportunity for ourselves as well as others."

Rometty took her mother's lessons to heart, and, in 1981, she began working at IBM. In 2012, she became the first woman in IBM's history to be CEO.

This book is a memoir of sorts, yet while it focuses on the events of Rometty's life, the common thread is generating meaningful change via what Rometty calls "good power." To her, good power is embodied when a person creates positive change that helps people or leads to beneficial outcomes.

By Rometty's definition, good power has five principles: It is about being in service of others, building belief, being able to distinguish between what should change and what shouldn't, stewarding good technology, and being resilient.

Good power isn't only for the rich and powerful—it is accessible to anyone, regardless of who they are.

PART ONE:

The Power of Me: Changing a Life

The first part of the book is focused on the “power of me.” It covers elements of Rometty’s childhood and early career, during which time she developed three core beliefs:

1. Access to opportunities such as education or good jobs can unleash a person’s potential.
2. Constant and consistent learning throughout one’s life is invaluable.
3. Every person is capable of creating positive change.

CHAPTER ONE

Owning My Roots

Rometty's life and family history were full of challenges, as well as models for what to do in the face of these challenges. She recounts the difficult lives of her great-grandmother and grandmother, as well as the struggles her mother faced after her father abandoned the family. Her mother did everything she could to maintain ownership of the family home, taking on multiple jobs and, at times, relying on food stamps to provide for the children.

Over time, the solutions her mother had cobbled together proved to be inadequate, and she realized that she could only earn so much without additional schooling. She enrolled in community college and eventually was able to get a higher-paying job.

Rometty notes that her mother wasn't the only one keeping their nuclear family afloat throughout her childhood. They had different types of support from numerous people, including a range of family members, neighbors, and teachers. Rometty herself also played a central role in the family. As the eldest of four siblings, she often played caretaker, making dinners and helping her siblings study when her mother was at work.

But Rometty's mother never saw herself as a victim, despite the obstacles she faced, and she set a good example for each of her four children. "By observing my mother, I learned to never let anyone define who you are; only you define who you are," Rometty says.

Expanding My World

Rometty grew up with an aunt who was relatively close in age to her and who became a role model of sorts, not least of all because she became the first in their family to go to college. With her aunt as inspiration, Rometty worked hard in school, focusing on doing what she needed to do to get into a good college. “Slowly, I began to see a path between school and the real world, and I believed that I had the power to choose and walk that path.”

After focusing on excelling in school, taking part in numerous extracurriculars, and working summer jobs, Rometty was admitted to Northwestern University. She was offered financial aid that covered a significant portion of her tuition and fees, enabling her to attend. By her second year, Rometty had discovered a love of computing and programming and decided to enter the engineering school.

Rometty was one of a few women in the program and knew she would have to work hard and come to class prepared if she didn’t want to stand out in a negative way. In addition to remembering the pressures she felt as a woman in the program, she also remembers the importance of asking questions. Rometty was aware of what she didn’t know, and asking questions meant that she would be one step closer to finding out or to solving the problem in front of her. “Answers were breadcrumbs that led to knowledge, and knowledge was my path forward. If I wanted to move ahead, I had to ask questions.”

During her second year, Rometty applied for and won a General Motors (GM) scholarship that covered her tuition and fees for the

last two years of her degree. As part of the scholarship, Rometty was also guaranteed a job at GM for two summers at their headquarters in Detroit, Michigan, without any obligation to continue to work for them after graduating.

When Rometty finished college, she had several appealing job offers. She narrowed down the list to roles with Hewlett-Packard and GM and decided to accept the latter's offer, in part because she had met someone while in Detroit.

CHAPTER THREE

Listening to My Heart

While working her summer job at GM while still in college, Rometty met a man named Mark on a blind date. Mark and Rometty had similar backgrounds and upbringings and immediately hit it off. Within seven months of Rometty's graduation, the two were married.

Rometty's first full-time job with GM was in the Chevrolet division in Detroit. Although she liked her job, she felt like something was missing—in part because she simply didn't love or care about the automobile industry as much as many of her colleagues did. Mark encouraged her to explore jobs in the tech industry, and she decided to apply for a job at IBM.

Rometty was drawn to the company because its technologies were used to help a range of businesses in a number of ways. "That was a purpose I felt good about; my work would be a means to an end that engaged me." She was eventually offered a role as an assistant systems engineer in IBM's data processing division, and she accepted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Learning to Learn

Rometty's first boss at IBM, John, was a leader from whom she learned a lot. Most important, unlike many other people in managerial positions at the company, John was not interested in being relocated for other opportunities. As a result, John put an emphasis on building a good team: "[He] hired for character as well as talent" and focused on helping members of his team grow.

A key part of Rometty's role as an assistant systems engineer was to educate prospective buyers. She was responsible for working with marketers to sell IBM's products. In preparation for this role, Rometty received numerous trainings, including on how to communicate and present materials effectively. Rometty found that she didn't take to communication as naturally or easily as she did math or technology, but she decided to approach learning it the same way.

Over time, Rometty grew her skills and became more comfortable with her work. But, she also learned a crucial piece of advice from a mentor of hers, also named John. He taught her that if she ever encountered a situation that she didn't know how to tackle, she should track down someone who could help her. This advice led Rometty to cultivate a network of people she could turn to for help over the course of her career.

Rometty quickly rose through the ranks at IBM, becoming a large systems specialist and then moving into a management position. From her manager Pat, Rometty learned how to manage people: She learned about the importance of listening, how to help people develop, and taking a values-driven approach to work.

“I was learning that business is rife with situations that require us to choose between ethical and fiscal responsibilities; between doing what is right and doing what is simple, or most profitable, or more popular. The right choice is not always obvious, but Pat taught me that it should be.”

Learning to lead also meant working on her own weaknesses. Rometty realized that she had perfectionist tendencies and expectations, which she often put on others, as well. She came to see that, as a leader, she sometimes needed to focus on the positive—not just where people had made mistakes. It was equally important to let go of micromanaging in some instances and cede control to others.

Being Uncomfortable

IBM launched a new consulting arm in 1991, and Rometty was offered a position within the division. While it was an honor to be offered the role, it also introduced a lot of unknowns for Rometty, which scared her. She came to realize that she knew the ins and outs of her existing role and how to navigate that system, but that that skill set wouldn't necessarily translate to other roles: "I needed to cultivate new transferable skills valued by the external market just in case things didn't work out at IBM." She decided to accept the role.

Rometty was energized by the work and acquired new skills in the process, not least of all how to work with and be in service of her clients. She honed her deductive reasoning skills, improved her problem-solving abilities, and learned a more sophisticated language for business. She later moved up the ranks again, eventually overseeing consulting for insurance.

In this role, Rometty began to work with a man named Fred from whom she learned other leadership skills. He taught her about charisma and passion—showing her that passion is something that can be acquired and used at will. Fred gave her significant growth opportunities, ensuring that she got both internal and external exposure. He also fought for her to be appropriately compensated for her work. All of these were lessons that she carried with her and applied throughout her career.

When Fred was offered a promotion and transfer to IBM's office in Tokyo, Japan, he asked Rometty to replace him as the lead of the global insurance unit. Rometty didn't feel ready to take on the role,

but her husband encouraged her to take the job. “My biggest obstacle was not a lack of ability, but self-imposed self-doubt.” Rometty understood that continued success and growth required embracing risks and discomfort.

PART TWO:

The Power of We: Changing Work

None of us exists alone in this world. Because of this, our actions affect those around us. In order to generate the greatest possible impact, then, we need to work with others. This “power of we” is illustrated via five principles: being in service of, building belief, knowing what must change and what must endure, stewarding good tech, and being resilient. The chapters in this section provide further explanation of each of these five principles.

Being in Service Of

Being in service of is about putting other people's needs ahead of our own. It is what Rometty calls the "soul," or the "why," of good power. It is about dignity and respect, empathy, and collaboration—and it can be applied to anyone in our lives.

At work, we are usually acting in service of a client or customer, which is largely about delivering value. To succeed at that, Rometty thought about her work in terms of "think, prepare, rehearse." This meant doing her research, showing up prepared, testing assumptions, and practicing in order to anticipate any curveballs that might come her way. This also entailed listening to others, rather than assuming that she knew everything. Listening not only helped her learn and grow, but it also built credibility and trust with others.

But, being in service of doesn't mean simply being a yes-man or yes-woman. Sometimes it can mean saying no, as well. When the situation calls for it, there's a right way to turn people down, using what Rometty called a "velvet hammer." Using a velvet hammer entails speaking a hard truth—but in a way that people can accept, by providing constructive criticism and including positives and solutions in the message.

Effective communication is something that followed Rometty throughout her career. She saw it as a crucial component of being in service of others and therefore strived to ensure that she communicated information in a way that people with varying degrees of knowledge could understand. She came to rely on analogies and would often structure her messages in groups of

three to facilitate comprehension. This was especially important as Rometty began to take on more of a teaching or coaching role, helping others on her team build their skills.

As Rometty took on bigger and more important roles, she saw that her realm of influence grew. This made her realize that leaders have a responsibility to be not just in service of their clients and customers, but of society, as well. Regardless of our job or place in society, however, Rometty believes that we all have the ability to deliver value to others and create a positive influence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Building Belief

In 2002, IBM was exploring the possibility of acquiring the consulting unit of PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). It would help the company bolster its own consulting business—but only if enough people from PwC stayed on. To be successful, IBM needed to help the PwC employees believe in the future of the combined business so that they would participate willingly in the change.

Building belief is what Rometty calls the “heart,” or the “how,” of good power. It is not about coercion, but instead about getting people to opt in voluntarily. Doing this effectively requires a combination of facts and feelings; it requires emotional connection, information, honesty, and clarity.

Rometty was in favor of the prospective acquisition, and when IBM decided to pursue it, they named her the person in charge of making the merger happen and then leading the new unit if it succeeded. It would potentially be a make-or-break moment in Rometty’s career.

To drive its success, Rometty prioritized building a sense of belonging for the new team. Using an inclusive process, she built a transition team and then continued efforts to keep people happy even after the merger had been completed. The first few quarters following the merger were difficult, and the new team didn’t turn a profit. These challenges made Rometty realize that building belief wasn’t just about the positive side of things—it was also about being honest and not shying from conflict when necessary. Getting through hard times together created intimacy, but the key to its going smoothly was acting humanely. By 2008, IBM’s consulting service had billions in revenue

and was turning a multibillion-dollar profit, and many of the consultants from PwC had remained with IBM.

Navigating and leading the merger helped Rometty hone her leadership skills and develop more confidence in herself. She also learned to balance her “opposing forces: to be nurturing, caring, and supportive while also being analytical, rigorous, and demanding.”

In 2009, Rometty became senior vice president of global sales, and by the end of 2011, she had been chosen to become IBM’s next CEO. Rometty made numerous phone calls to the people who had been critical to her success after the announcement, and then it was time to get to work. The world had changed significantly since IBM’s founding 100 years prior, and the company needed to change with it. The challenge “was to find that balance between being in service of our existing clients and surviving as a business.” With that in mind, Rometty developed a goal for IBM: to “Be Essential.”

Alongside this goal, Rometty put forth three strategic beliefs that would guide IBM forward:

1. IBM needed to play a bigger role in this new era of computing.
2. The types of clients and what they desired were changing.
3. IBM employees needed to change and learn new skills to keep up.

Knowing What Must Change, What Must Endure

IBM's long history is thanks in part to its ability to reinvent itself to keep up with the times. As CEO, Rometty had to make numerous difficult decisions to ensure IBM would be able to continue enduring. That meant divesting costly businesses and doubling down in areas where the company hadn't previously focused.

"Knowing what to change and what must endure asks us to think critically and solve problems as we take something that already exists and bring it to a new state." This is the "brain" of good power. It's about determining what should change and how, as well as determining what is worth holding onto versus what should be discarded.

One of the difficult decisions Rometty had to make as CEO was letting go of part of IBM's semiconductor business, as it was losing the company money. Throughout her tenure, Rometty made a number of tough decisions like this one, yet she always had an eye on helping the company improve, endure, and innovate. A good power approach requires being "willing to muster patience, sit through discomfort, and think through the impossible, holding the tension between two undesirable, incompatible options until the situation can be reframed and a third alternative is found."

A guiding principle for navigating these challenging situations was to strive to create the best IBM they could. To Rometty, that meant being essential—at times reinventing the company and its offerings—but always retaining its core values.

In 2014, for example, this meant moving away from IBM's existing financial road map and opening the company up to investments in new areas such as AI and the cloud. In the case of the former, the company was trying to create a new market, while in the latter, IBM was playing catch-up. To succeed in both, they needed to take into consideration different things. Responding to an existing market required speed, but forging a new market was about readiness. For both, IBM needed to demonstrate the merit of the investments to build trust and momentum, and they also needed to be prepared to change gears as needed.

It wasn't just the "what" that needed to change at IBM. It was also the "how." Rometty recognized that the company's employees could benefit from new ways of working, so she integrated design thinking and agile practices into teams' approach to work. They also focused on reskilling employees, making 40 hours of education mandatory for employees each year and providing recommendations for courses based on each individual's skill set.

Over time, all of these lessons also impacted the way IBM recruited, paid, and promoted people. "We began to hire for, and reward, traits like curiosity and a propensity to learn, as well as defined skills." Skills and knowledge were put on the same level as degrees, if not higher.

Stewarding Good Tech

Stewarding good tech is about “taking responsibility for the creation, application, and disruption of technology by making values-based decisions within a long-term context, addressing technology’s upsides and downsides, and considering all stakeholders.” It is what Rometty calls the “muscle” of good power.

In large part, this means that companies are responsible for not just thinking about short-term rewards, but also about the long-term effects of their decisions and work. At IBM, Rometty focused on building trust with the public, championing diversity and inclusion, and supporting members of society to thrive in the digital era.

As an individual, Rometty strived to forge trust with others by defining and living her values. For IBM, Rometty took a similar approach, creating a statement about trust and transparency.

It contained three principles:

1. The purpose of technology is to augment humanity.
2. Data and insights belong to their creator.
3. Be transparent.

Rometty also used IBM’s position as a major corporation to drive forward diversity and inclusion efforts. The company had long taken a nonpartisan stance, choosing not to make political contributions or endorsements. Although the company doesn’t make contributions to particular politicians, it does still participate when relevant, taking a policy-over-politics approach to engaging with the government. When Texas was considering a transgender

bathroom bill after North Carolina passed a similar one, this policy did not align with IBM's views; Rometty threatened to reduce investments in the state if the bill passed. Not all political engagement looked like this, however, as IBM also engaged in a lot of advocacy work.

Within the company, IBM had long maintained inclusive policies regarding hiring and strived to create a welcoming environment for all. “[I]nclusion is not one thing, but a choice we make again and again.” The company also strived to foster diversity and inclusion by beginning to recruit employees with nontraditional backgrounds. This had the dual benefit of providing jobs and addressing a skills shortage that was being felt within the company. This led to a realization: IBM, and society at large, had a need for what Rometty calls “new collar jobs.” These are jobs that require certain skills but may not require a four-year degree to succeed.

CHAPTER TEN

Being Resilient

In Rometty's experience, resilience is largely the result of relationships and attitude—two things over which we have control. She believes that it's about the choices we make. She calls resilience the “spirit” of good power.

The right relationships are key to building and maintaining resilience. They provide us with perspective, help us approach problems creatively, and keep us grounded. The people Rometty surrounded herself with throughout her career were essential to her success; they helped her unlock the tools she needed to perform at the levels she did. “If relationships with relevance fuel resilience by offering new perspectives and support, the broader and more diverse the array, the better.” We must treat people with respect, empathy, and authenticity. While loyalty is also an important ingredient, it is equally important to not let loyalty “blind us to difficult realities.”

Attitude is about choosing how we respond to the cards we are dealt, taking responsibility where appropriate, and not letting setbacks prevent us from achieving our goals. So much remains outside of our control, but attitude is not. This was important for Rometty to remember throughout her career, helping her more deftly navigate conflict and criticism. Rather than cower from conflict, she chose to see it as an opportunity to improve a situation. When faced with criticism, Rometty learned when to take it as an opportunity to learn and when to ignore it. “Critics may inform me, but they don't define me.”

Conviction is the final piece of resilience. Conviction allowed Rometty to forge ahead in challenging times, giving her the optimism and confidence necessary to succeed.

PART THREE:

The Power of Us: Changing Our World

Making positive change in the world goes beyond thinking about ourselves or those immediately surrounding us. To tackle larger change, Rometty likes to think of these big, pressing problems as systems to be transformed. It's about scaling good power to society at large. In Rometty's case, she has decided to focus her efforts on what she calls the "SkillsFirst" hiring and training movement.

Envisioning a Better Future for More People

When Rometty was young, she saw what a difference getting an education and subsequently a better job made for her mother. It gave her more confidence and provided her with a sense of dignity. “By the time I began working, I understood that lack of access, not aptitude, was a barrier to a better life for a lot of people.” This, in turn, made Rometty realize that there is a correlation between skills and equity—and that this learning does not have to come from formal education alone.

As CEO at IBM, Rometty struggled to fill a number of technology and cybersecurity roles. IBM had already founded P-TECH, a technical school that provided students with both a high school diploma and an associate degree. The school’s curriculum focused on giving students employable skills and offered them paid internships while studying. Rometty realized that IBM could recruit for these roles from P-TECH. This realization opened her eyes to the benefits of recruiting from nontraditional avenues.

Beyond P-TECH, Rometty looked at other nontraditional means of skill-building and recruitment. This included creating professional technological apprenticeships, which IBM started developing in the mid-2010s. They now offer apprenticeships for 24 different roles throughout the company.

She also recognized that a lot of women leave their jobs for a variety of personal reasons, including raising children, but then they often don’t return to work from fear that they no longer have the skills needed to do their jobs. To tackle that, Rometty

started a tech reentry program called “returnships,” in which individuals enrolled in a few courses while working with a team to help them regain the confidence that they needed. While the program doesn’t guarantee a job, it is paid, and individuals can participate for as long as they need. P-TECH, apprenticeships, and returnships are part of Rometty’s broader belief in the value of experiential learning and in building new pathways to good jobs.

Rising income inequality reflects a systemic issue that Rometty believes needs to be solved. The data shows that while higher-earning jobs have seen increased wages, many at the lower end have barely budged—and these are often jobs held by those without college degrees. This has been exacerbated by the fact that many employers have degree requirements for jobs that really don’t require them but are simply being used as a proxy for ability. This includes what Rometty calls middle-skill jobs, such as supervisory, administrative, and sales roles—as well as the “new collar” tech jobs previously explored. Yet, Rometty argues that people don’t really need a four-year degree to succeed in these jobs, just some additional skills and expertise, which can be found outside of a degree program. Quoting David Autor, she says, “The message should not be ‘college for all.’”

Thinking Systemically

In this chapter, Rometty continues to dig into the challenges she faced in recruiting for certain jobs while CEO at IBM, noting that the four-year degree requirement was central to this challenge. This observation led IBM to revisit the criteria they expected for a number of roles and rewrite job descriptions to reflect the actual skills required. This meant, in some cases, that degree requirements or minimum numbers of years of experience were removed from job descriptions. These requirements were replaced with a new emphasis on knowledge, expertise, and abilities needed, and recruiters prioritized soft skills, as well. All of these changes led to IBM interviewing and recruiting far more people than they had previously.

To demonstrate the efficacy of this new approach, IBM measured the performance of hires without degrees. While many of these hires required a bit more time to get up to speed in their roles, they quickly caught up with employees who had degrees—and they often exhibited more curiosity and loyalty than those employees. This experience is what led Rometty to begin thinking about the “SkillsFirst” approach.

“SkillsFirst is a catch-all term that refers to valuing the skills a person has rather than just the degrees they have.” It is an approach not just to hiring, but also to advancement and even learning. SkillsFirst individuals are curious and agile, have a growth mindset, and display a willingness to continually learn. Employers, in turn, are responsible for supporting this, creating more learning opportunities for employees, rather than treating education as “one and done.” Most critically, governments, educators, and talent developers must come together to make a SkillsFirst world a reality.

Rometty is quick to point out that SkillsFirst programs like P-TECH aren't just something to make a company look good—they're also good for business and the economy. This conviction led Rometty to make SkillsFirst central to her work. She began to prioritize bringing it up in numerous engagements and networking opportunities to get people on board.

But she didn't stop there. Rometty also knew that policy reform would be necessary to bring about even bigger change. IBM worked with lawmakers to update outdated bills to more effectively fund community colleges and trade schools. "Putting policy over politics will go a long way toward updating other laws and policies. Driving any systemic change requires examining legislation and regulations from the perspective of what helps and what inhibits in today's reality."

Rometty retired from her work at IBM in 2020, but her work to create a SkillsFirst world is not over. She has continued to focus on increasing access to education and employment opportunities, in part by scaling SkillsFirst.

Creating a Movement

Following the death of George Floyd and the national protests it engendered, then-CEO of Merck Ken Frazier called on businesses to do more to provide jobs to disenfranchised Black communities. Rometty wanted to join Frazier's efforts, believing that her SkillsFirst approach could help bring his vision to life. Together, they formed a working group called the Coalition of Employers for Economic and Racial Justice (CEERJ), which focused on serving those without four-year degrees, businesses that had roles that needed to be filled, and educators and skill developers.

Together, Frazier and Rometty convinced dozens of companies to join their effort and eventually relaunched it as an organization called OneTen. Participating organizations were required to have openings for jobs that met certain criteria: They had to offer a family-sustaining wage, they couldn't require a four-year degree or more than five years of experience, and the role itself couldn't be at risk of automation.

That was just part of it. OneTen also needed to create a pipeline of talent who met the criteria as well, which meant working alongside different education providers, from more traditional educational institutions to training organizations and beyond. OneTen supports these skills providers to address the dual challenges of alignment and fragmentation. Alignment is about ensuring that the skills they're teaching match employer demand, and fragmentation is about the sheer number of providers that exist.

More than 100 skills providers have joined OneTen's efforts. In turn, OneTen is helping them understand what hard and soft skills

are in demand, helping them develop relationships with more employers to increase employment opportunities for learners, and working with them to ensure that the organizations are accountable for outcomes.

Another key ingredient of OneTen's success is creating opportunities for members to share solutions with one another. "OneTen's role is to provide the big tent where members can come together to learn from each other, then customize ideas that fit their organizations. Adapt versus adopt." The organization has communities of practice for CEOs, HR leaders, and others, and member organizations participate in quarterly meetings. To bolster belief in their efforts, OneTen relies on data, research, and storytelling to demonstrate the success of the SkillsFirst approach.

Rometty acknowledges that her desire and effort to create positive change at scale is ambitious—but that doesn't mean it's not worth trying.

To conclude, Rometty expresses three final thoughts:

1. "[N]ever stop looking for opportunities to learn from those around you. None of us ever have all the answers, but if you ask the right questions you'll find that everyone has value to share."
2. "[S]ee yourself in service of multiple stakeholders, not just one or two. Human lives are inevitably intertwined."
3. "[Y]ou can bring about change by bringing people together and bridging differences."

About World 50

Founded in 2004, World 50 consists of private peer communities that enable CEOs and C-level executives at globally respected organizations to discover better ideas, share valuable experiences, and build relationships that make a lasting impact. The busiest officer-level executives and their most promising future leaders trust World 50 to facilitate collaboration, conversation, and counsel on the topics most crucial to leading, transforming, and growing modern enterprises. Membership is by invitation only.

World 50 communities serve every significant enterprise leadership role. World 50 members reside in more than 27 countries on six continents and are leaders at companies that average more than \$30 billion in revenue.

World 50 is a private company that serves no other purpose than to accelerate the success of its members and their organizations. It is composed of highly curious associates who consider it a privilege to help leaders stay ahead.

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