

I have entitled this talk: Thomas Jefferson,
Employee Ownership, and Education

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Standing here on the grounds of Mr. Thomas Jefferson's university, I'm reminded of Thomas Jefferson's towering legacy as a statesman, philosopher, and champion of liberty. During the last part of this first module of the day and the class, I want to explore an intriguing intersection: the ways Jefferson's thoughts and policies resonate with the ideals of modern advocates for employee ownership.

Most of the class is going to be based on PowerPoints, cases, discussions, and interviews. But, for these next few minutes, I am going to give you a speech about Jefferson.

Thomas Jefferson believed deeply in the concept of self-reliance, the dignity of work, and the necessity of widespread economic independence to sustain a healthy democracy. These ideas, though born in the 18th century, find surprising alignment with the principles of employee ownership today.

Let's start with Jefferson's views on property and economic independence. Jefferson famously advocated for a nation of small farmers, envisioning a republic where land ownership would provide citizens with the stability and self-sufficiency necessary to participate fully in democratic governance. To Jefferson, economic independence was not merely a personal benefit but a cornerstone of political freedom. He feared that reliance on wage labor or monopolistic powers would erode the liberties of individuals.

Now consider the central tenet of employee ownership: that workers should have a stake in the enterprise where they labor. As you demonstrate, through structures like ESOPs, employees become beneficial owners of their companies, sharing in growth, profits and decision-making. This model, your model, aligns beautifully with Jefferson's belief in decentralizing economic power and enabling individuals to control their own destinies. Just as Jefferson saw land ownership as a means to secure independence, employee ownership offers

modern workers a way to achieve economic stability and agency in an era dominated by large corporations.

Jefferson was also deeply skeptical of concentrated power, whether in the form of monarchy, aristocracy, or monopolistic economic forces. He once wrote, “I hope we shall... crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations.” While he could not have foreseen today’s global economic landscape, his concern about the dangers of concentrated wealth and power remains strikingly relevant.

As you know, employee ownership directly addresses this issue by redistributing wealth more equitably. Instead of profits accumulating solely in the hands of a few shareholders or executives, employee-owned businesses spread wealth across a very broad base. This democratization of capital echoes Jefferson’s vision of an economy that serves the many rather than the few.

Education was another cornerstone of Jefferson’s philosophy. He believed that an informed and educated citizenry was essential for the

functioning of a republic. Similarly, employee ownership thrives in environments where workers are empowered not only financially but also intellectually. As you know, and you are experiencing, many employee-owned companies invest heavily in training their workers, ensuring they understand the business's operations and finances. This focus on education fosters a culture of collaboration and accountability—a modern reflection of Jefferson's ideals.

We are here at the university that Mr. Jefferson built. Thomas Jefferson was instrumental in founding and shaping the University of Virginia (UVA), one of his proudest achievements. His contributions include the following:

Jefferson created the founding vision for the university. He envisioned UVA as a secular, publicly funded institution focused on educating future leaders in a variety of fields, such as law, government, and science.

Jefferson personally designed the layout of the university, which he referred to as the "Academical Village." This unique architectural

plan included a central lawn surrounded by pavilions (housing classrooms and faculty residences) and student dormitories, all of which you will see. At the head of the lawn stood the Rotunda, modeled after the Roman Pantheon, symbolizing the library and the importance of knowledge.

Jefferson also developed a curriculum emphasizing practical and advanced knowledge in subjects like science, law, medicine, and philosophy, which were less commonly emphasized in traditional colleges. He also advocated for academic freedom.

He furthermore worked tirelessly to secure funding for the university through the Virginia General Assembly, as part of his broader belief in the importance of public education for a functioning democracy. Jefferson personally recruited faculty members from Europe and other parts of the US, seeking experts in various fields. His aim was to ensure the university had the best possible educators, who were well-versed in modern ideas.

One of Jefferson's main goals of education at UVA was to create better citizens, individuals who could participate fully in civic society. I realize that many of you do not think of yourselves as preparing better citizens through what you do in your workplaces. But that is exactly what you are doing. Through your focus on developing broader skills for your employee owners, and deeper financial understanding, you are doing exactly as Jefferson would have hoped, if he could have thought ahead to this extent.

One of the feelings I want you to go home with, on Friday, is that Thomas Jefferson would have been proud of you.

The University of Virginia officially opened in 1825, a year before Jefferson's death. And, even in his last days, he remained closely involved with its operations and planning. As you will see, it is 16 miles from UVA to Monticello, the beautiful home that he designed and had built.

Carved on Jefferson's tombstone here at Monticello are what Jefferson considered the founding of UVA to be his three greatest

achievements, alongside drafting the Declaration of Independence and The Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. His educational philosophy, focus on economic liberty, and emphasis on intellectual exploration continue to influence higher education in the United States and around the world.

Something else that is similar both about the way Jefferson thought and the way employee ownership works has to do with short-term thinking versus long-term planning. Jefferson emphasized the importance of sustainable practices, particularly in agriculture, to ensure the prosperity of future generations. He believed that society should be structured in a way that balances the needs of the present with those of the future.

Employee ownership is often advocated as a sustainable economic model, creating companies that are more resilient and oriented toward long-term growth. Firms with employee ownership are less likely to engage in short-term decision-

making, focusing instead on the enduring health of the business and its employee owners.

Before I close, I want to say a few things about how Jefferson valued self-reliance and believed that individuals who had a direct stake in their work and the land they owned were more likely to contribute to society and uphold democratic values.

Employee ownership aligns with this principle by giving workers a tangible stake in the success of their companies. This fosters a sense of accountability, pride, and investment in their work and the overall success of the enterprise.

Finally, I want to talk about Jefferson's emphasis on the "pursuit of happiness" and how it resonates with the human-centered approach of employee ownership. When workers have a stake in their companies, their jobs often become more than just a paycheck; they find purpose, pride, and fulfillment in their work. This holistic approach to well-being aligns with Jefferson's belief in creating a society where individuals can flourish both economically and personally.

Of course, we must also acknowledge Jefferson's contradictions. While he championed liberty and equality, he was a slaveholder, and his economic vision excluded many groups. These historical realities remind us that no philosophy is without its flaws. Yet, his core principles of decentralizing power, fostering independence, and promoting education remain profoundly relevant and can inspire us to address today's challenges.

In conclusion, standing here before the memorial of one of America's founding thinkers, we see how Jefferson's ideals echo through time. The principles of self-reliance, economic independence, and shared prosperity that Jefferson championed are not relics of the past but living ideas that continue to evolve. Employee ownership embodies these values in the modern era, offering a path toward a more equitable and participatory economy.

While Jefferson lived during a time of agricultural dominance in the US, his thoughts and philosophies were abundantly prescient about the future of the country he loved.

As we reflect on Jefferson's legacy, let us also imagine a future where his principles guide us toward solutions that empower individuals, strengthen communities, and preserve the democratic ideals we cherish. You are, as daunting as this may sound, at the vanguard of this future and I hope, over these next five days you enjoy our time together and feel that you have learned in the ways that Thomas Jefferson would have wanted you to learn. Thank you.

I would be interested in your questions and comments.