

In June 1996, Berkshire's Chairman, Warren E. Buffett, issued a booklet entitled "**An Owner's Manual**"* to Berkshire's Class A and Class B shareholders. The purpose of the manual was to explain Berkshire's broad economic principles of operation. An updated version is reproduced on this and the following pages.

OWNER-RELATED BUSINESS PRINCIPLES

At the time of the Blue Chip merger in 1983, I set down 13 owner-related business principles that I thought would help new shareholders understand our managerial approach. As is appropriate for "principles," all 13 remain alive and well today, and they are stated here in italics.

1. *Although our form is corporate, our attitude is partnership. Charlie Munger and I think of our shareholders as owner-partners, and of ourselves as managing partners. (Because of the size of our shareholdings we are also, for better or worse, controlling partners.) We do not view the company itself as the ultimate owner of our business assets but instead view the company as a conduit through which our shareholders own the assets.*

Charlie and I hope that you do not think of yourself as merely owning a piece of paper whose price wiggles around daily and that is a candidate for sale when some economic or political event makes you nervous. We hope you instead visualize yourself as a part owner of a business that you expect to stay with indefinitely, much as you might if you owned a farm or apartment house in partnership with members of your family. For our part, we do not view Berkshire shareholders as faceless members of an ever-shifting crowd, but rather as co-venturers who have entrusted their funds to us for what may well turn out to be the remainder of their lives.

The evidence suggests that most Berkshire shareholders have indeed embraced this long-term partnership concept. The annual percentage turnover in Berkshire's shares is a fraction of that occurring in the stocks of other major American corporations, even when the shares I own are excluded from the calculation.

In effect, our shareholders behave in respect to their Berkshire stock much as Berkshire itself behaves in respect to companies in which it has an investment. As owners of, say, Coca-Cola or American Express shares, we think of Berkshire as being a non-managing partner in two extraordinary businesses, in which we measure our success by the long-term progress of the companies rather than by the month-to-month movements of their stocks. In fact, we would not care in the least if several years went by in which there was no trading, or quotation of prices, in the stocks of those companies. If we have good long-term expectations, short-term price changes are meaningless for us except to the extent they offer us an opportunity to increase our ownership at an attractive price.

2. *In line with Berkshire's owner-orientation, most of our directors have a significant portion of their net worth invested in the company. We eat our own cooking.*

Charlie's family has the majority of its net worth in Berkshire shares; I have more than 98%. In addition, many of my relatives – my sisters and cousins, for example – keep a huge portion of their net worth in Berkshire stock.

Charlie and I feel totally comfortable with this eggs-in-one-basket situation because Berkshire itself owns a wide variety of truly extraordinary businesses. Indeed, we believe that Berkshire is close to being unique in the quality and diversity of the businesses in which it owns either a controlling interest or a minority interest of significance.

Charlie and I cannot promise you results. But we can guarantee that your financial fortunes will move in lockstep with ours for whatever period of time you elect to be our partner. We have no interest in large salaries or options or other means of gaining an "edge" over you. We want to make money only when our partners do and in exactly the same proportion. Moreover, when I do something dumb, I want you to be able to derive some solace from the fact that my financial suffering is proportional to yours.

3. *Our long-term economic goal (subject to some qualifications mentioned later) is to maximize Berkshire's average annual rate of gain in intrinsic business value on a per-share basis. We do not measure the economic significance or performance of Berkshire by its size; we measure by per-share progress. We are certain that the rate of per-share progress will diminish in the future – a greatly enlarged capital base will see to that. But we will be disappointed if our rate does not exceed that of the average large American corporation.*
4. *Our preference would be to reach our goal by directly owning a diversified group of businesses that generate cash and consistently earn above-average returns on capital. Our second choice is to own parts of similar businesses, attained primarily through purchases of marketable common stocks by our insurance subsidiaries. The price and availability of businesses and the need for insurance capital determine any given year's capital allocation.*

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In recent years we have made a number of acquisitions. Though there will be dry years, we expect to make many more in the decades to come, and our hope is that they will be large. If these purchases approach the quality of those we have made in the past, Berkshire will be well served.

The challenge for us is to generate ideas as rapidly as we generate cash. In this respect, a depressed stock market is likely to present us with significant advantages. For one thing, it tends to reduce the prices at which entire companies become available for purchase. Second, a depressed market makes it easier for our insurance companies to buy small pieces of wonderful businesses – including additional pieces of businesses we already own – at attractive prices. And third, some of those same wonderful businesses are consistent buyers of their own shares, which means that they, and we, gain from the cheaper prices at which they can buy.

Overall, Berkshire and its long-term shareholders benefit from a sinking stock market much as a regular purchaser of food benefits from declining food prices. So when the market plummets – as it will from time to time – neither panic nor mourn. It's good news for Berkshire.

5. *Because of our two-pronged approach to business ownership and because of the limitations of conventional accounting, consolidated reported earnings may reveal relatively little about our true economic performance. Charlie and I, both as owners and managers, virtually ignore such consolidated numbers. However, we will also report to you the earnings of each major business we control, numbers we consider of great importance. These figures, along with other information we will supply about the individual businesses, should generally aid you in making judgments about them.*

To state things simply, we try to give you in the annual report the numbers and other information that really matter. Charlie and I pay a great deal of attention to how well our businesses are doing, and we also work to understand the environment in which each business is operating. For example, is one of our businesses enjoying an industry tailwind or is it facing a headwind? Charlie and I need to know exactly which situation prevails and to adjust our expectations accordingly. We will also pass along our conclusions to you.

Over time, the large majority of our businesses have exceeded our expectations. But sometimes we have disappointments, and we will try to be as candid in informing you about those as we are in describing the happier experiences. When we use unconventional measures to chart our progress – for instance, you will be reading in our annual reports about insurance “float” – we will try to explain these concepts and why we regard them as important. In other words, we believe in telling you how we think so that you can evaluate not only Berkshire's businesses but also assess our approach to management and capital allocation.

6. *Accounting consequences do not influence our operating or capital-allocation decisions. When acquisition costs are similar, we much prefer to purchase \$2 of earnings that is not reportable by us under standard accounting principles than to purchase \$1 of earnings that is reportable. This is precisely the choice that often faces us since entire businesses (whose earnings will be fully reportable) frequently sell for double the pro-rata price of small portions (whose earnings will be largely unreportable). In aggregate and over time, we expect the unreported earnings to be fully reflected in our intrinsic business value through capital gains.*

We have found over time that the undistributed earnings of our investees, in aggregate, have been fully as beneficial to Berkshire as if they had been distributed to us (and therefore had been included in the earnings we officially report). This pleasant result has occurred because most of our investees are engaged in truly outstanding businesses that can often employ incremental capital to great advantage, either by putting it to work in their businesses or by repurchasing their shares. Obviously, every capital decision that our investees have made has not benefitted us as shareholders, but overall we have garnered far more than a dollar of value for each dollar they have retained. We consequently regard look-through earnings as realistically portraying our yearly gain from operations.

7. *We use debt sparingly. We will reject interesting opportunities rather than over-leverage our balance sheet. This conservatism has penalized our results but it is the only behavior that leaves us comfortable, considering our fiduciary obligations to policyholders, lenders and the many equity holders who have committed unusually large portions of their net worth to our care. (As one of the Indianapolis “500” winners said: “To finish first, you must first finish.”)*

The financial calculus that Charlie and I employ would never permit our trading a good night's sleep for a shot at a few extra percentage points of return. I've never believed in risking what my family and friends have and need in order to pursue what they don't have and don't need.

Besides, Berkshire has access to two low-cost, non-perilous sources of leverage that allow us to safely own far more assets than our equity capital alone would permit: deferred taxes and “float,” the funds of others that our insurance business holds because it receives premiums before needing to pay out losses. Both of these funding sources have grown rapidly and now total about \$170 billion.

Better yet, this funding to date has often been cost-free. Deferred tax liabilities bear no interest. And as long as we can break even in our insurance underwriting the cost of the float developed from that operation is zero. Neither item, of course, is equity; these are real liabilities. But they are liabilities without covenants or due dates attached to them. In effect, they give us the benefit of debt – an ability to have more assets working for us – but saddle us with none of its drawbacks.

Of course, there is no guarantee that we can obtain our float in the future at no cost. But we feel our chances of attaining that goal are as good as those of anyone in the insurance business. Not only have we reached the goal in the past (despite a number of important mistakes by your Chairman), our 1996 acquisition of GEICO, materially improved our prospects for getting there in the future.

In our present configuration we expect additional borrowings to be concentrated in our utilities and railroad businesses, loans that are non-recourse to Berkshire. Here, we will favor long-term, fixed-rate loans.

8. *A managerial “wish list” will not be filled at shareholder expense. We will not diversify by purchasing entire businesses at control prices that ignore long-term economic consequences to our shareholders. We will only do with your money what we would do with our own, weighing fully the values you can obtain by diversifying your own portfolios through direct purchases in the stock market.*

Charlie and I are interested only in acquisitions that we believe will raise the *per-share* intrinsic value of Berkshire’s stock. The size of our paychecks or our offices will never be related to the size of Berkshire’s balance sheet.

9. *We feel noble intentions should be checked periodically against results. We test the wisdom of retaining earnings by assessing whether retention, over time, delivers shareholders at least \$1 of market value for each \$1 retained. To date, this test has been met. We will continue to apply it on a five-year rolling basis. As our net worth grows, it is more difficult to use retained earnings wisely.*

I should have written the “five-year rolling basis” sentence differently, an error I didn’t realize until I received a question about this subject at the 2009 annual meeting.

When the stock market has declined sharply over a five-year stretch, our market-price premium to book value has sometimes shrunk. And when that happens, we fail the test as I improperly formulated it. In fact, we fell far short as early as 1971-75, well before I wrote this principle in 1983.

The five-year test should be: (1) during the period did our book-value gain exceed the performance of the S&P; and (2) did our stock consistently sell at a premium to book, meaning that every \$1 of retained earnings was always worth more than \$1? If these tests are met, retaining earnings has made sense.

10. *We will issue common stock only when we receive as much in business value as we give. This rule applies to all forms of issuance – not only mergers or public stock offerings, but stock-for-debt swaps, stock options, and convertible securities as well. We will not sell small portions of your company – and that is what the issuance of shares amounts to – on a basis inconsistent with the value of the entire enterprise.*

When we sold the Class B shares in 1996, we stated that Berkshire stock was not undervalued – and some people found that shocking. That reaction was not well-founded. Shock should have registered instead had we issued shares when our stock *was* undervalued. Managements that say or imply during a public offering that their stock is undervalued are usually being economical with the truth or uneconomical with their existing shareholders’ money: Owners unfairly lose if their managers deliberately sell assets for 80¢ that in fact are worth \$1. We didn’t commit that kind of crime in our offering of Class B shares and we never will. (We did *not*, however, say at the time of the sale that our stock was overvalued, though many media have reported that we did.)

11. *You should be fully aware of one attitude Charlie and I share that hurts our financial performance: Regardless of price, we have no interest at all in selling any good businesses that Berkshire owns. We are also very reluctant to sell sub-par businesses as long as we expect them to generate at least some cash and as long as we feel good about their managers and labor relations. We hope not to repeat the capital-allocation mistakes that led us into such sub-par businesses. And we react with great caution to suggestions that our poor businesses can be restored to satisfactory profitability by major capital expenditures. (The projections will be dazzling and the advocates sincere, but, in the end, major additional investment in a terrible industry usually is about as rewarding as struggling in quicksand.) Nevertheless, gin rummy managerial behavior (discard your least promising business at each turn) is not our style. We would rather have our overall results penalized a bit than engage in that kind of behavior.*

We continue to avoid gin rummy behavior. True, we closed our textile business in the mid-1980's after 20 years of struggling with it, but only because we felt it was doomed to run never-ending operating losses. We have not, however, given thought to selling operations that would command very fancy prices nor have we dumped our laggards, though we focus hard on curing the problems that cause them to lag. To clean up some confusion voiced in 2016, we emphasize that the comments here refer to businesses we control, not to marketable securities.

12. *We will be candid in our reporting to you, emphasizing the pluses and minuses important in appraising business value. Our guideline is to tell you the business facts that we would want to know if our positions were reversed. We owe you no less. Moreover, as a company with a major communications business, it would be inexcusable for us to apply lesser standards of accuracy, balance and incisiveness when reporting on ourselves than we would expect our news people to apply when reporting on others. We also believe candor benefits us as managers: The CEO who misleads others in public may eventually mislead himself in private.*

At Berkshire you will find no “big bath” accounting maneuvers or restructurings nor any “smoothing” of quarterly or annual results. We will always tell you how many strokes we have taken on each hole and never play around with the scorecard. When the numbers are a very rough “guesstimate,” as they necessarily must be in insurance reserving, we will try to be both consistent and conservative in our approach.

We will be communicating with you in several ways. Through the annual report, I try to give all shareholders as much value-defining information as can be conveyed in a document kept to reasonable length. We also try to convey a liberal quantity of condensed but important information in the quarterly reports we post on the internet, though I don't write those (one recital a year is enough). Still another important occasion for communication is our Annual Meeting, at which Charlie and I are delighted to spend five hours or more answering questions about Berkshire. But there is one way we *can't* communicate: on a one-on-one basis. That isn't feasible given Berkshire's many thousands of owners.

In all of our communications, we try to make sure that no single shareholder gets an edge: We do not follow the usual practice of giving earnings “guidance” or other information of value to analysts or large shareholders. Our goal is to have all of our owners updated at the same time.

13. *Despite our policy of candor, we will discuss our activities in marketable securities only to the extent legally required. Good investment ideas are rare, valuable and subject to competitive appropriation just as good product or business acquisition ideas are. Therefore we normally will not talk about our investment ideas. This ban extends even to securities we have sold (because we may purchase them again) and to stocks we are incorrectly rumored to be buying. If we deny those reports but say “no comment” on other occasions, the no-comments become confirmation.*

Though we continue to be unwilling to talk about specific stocks, we freely discuss our business and investment philosophy. I benefitted enormously from the intellectual generosity of Ben Graham, the greatest teacher in the history of finance, and I believe it appropriate to pass along what I learned from him, even if that creates new and able investment competitors for Berkshire just as Ben's teachings did for him.

TWO ADDED PRINCIPLES

14. *To the extent possible, we would like each Berkshire shareholder to record a gain or loss in market value during his period of ownership that is proportional to the gain or loss in per-share intrinsic value recorded by the company during that holding period. For this to come about, the relationship between the intrinsic value and the market price of a Berkshire share would need to remain constant, and by our preferences at 1-to-1. As that implies, we would rather see Berkshire's stock price at a **fair** level than a **high** level. Obviously, Charlie and I can't control Berkshire's price. But by our policies and communications, we can encourage informed, rational behavior by owners that, in turn, will tend to produce a stock price that is also rational. Our it's-as-bad-to-be-overvalued-as-to-be-undervalued approach may disappoint some shareholders. We believe, however, that it affords Berkshire the best prospect of attracting long-term investors who seek to profit from the progress of the company rather than from the investment mistakes of their partners.*
15. *We regularly compare the gain in Berkshire's per-share book value to the performance of the S&P 500. Over time, we hope to outpace this yardstick. Otherwise, why do our investors need us? The measurement, however, has certain shortcomings that are described in the next section. Moreover, it now is less meaningful on a year-to-year basis than was formerly the case. That is because our equity holdings, whose value tends to move with the S&P 500, are a far smaller portion of our net worth than they were in earlier years. Additionally, gains in the S&P stocks are counted in full in calculating that index, whereas gains in Berkshire's equity holdings are counted at 79% because of the federal tax we incur. We, therefore, expect to outperform the S&P in lackluster years for the stock market and underperform when the market has a strong year.*