



Bo Burlingham's *Small Giants*

By Trey Wood

BUSINESS READING

Most business books aren't very informative, entertaining or helpful. However, most of them can be read on the average flight between two major U.S. cities. Consequently, they flourish.

Fortunately for frequent-fliers and non-flyers alike, Bo Burlingham, editor-at-large at Inc. magazine, has written a thoroughly insightful and enjoyable read with *Small Giants: Companies That Choose to Be Great Instead of Big*. In fact, in its own way, Burlingham's new book deserves mention with three other popular business texts of the last several years – *In Search of Excellence* by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, *Good to Great* by Jim Collins and *Built to Last*, by Collins and Jerry Porras.

All of these books present a number of important ideas about a truly modern concept – the corporation. While the books by Peters, Waterman and Collins have become new classics, if there are such things in this publishing category, Burlingham's text can claim to be at least as entertaining as the others and, in many ways, more important because it addresses characteristics in the enormous and underreported area known as “small, private business.” However, it's likely to get excellent reviews and be forgotten shortly afterward because of two facts.

First, unlike these other writers, Burlingham has relied almost exclusively on qualitative analysis when selecting the subjects of his books. He recognizes this problem and comments on it:

“To begin with, there are no reliable financial yardsticks available [to compare small businesses.] One of the benefits of being private is that you don't have to share your numbers with outsiders other than tax collectors, bankers, and any investors you may have.”

So, from the outset, the author as much as admits that his book is one of anecdotal information. Great stuff to be sure. But it does make certain types of follow-up research by Burlingham or others more difficult.

Second, the fact that Burlingham has chosen the world of small business to investigate also limits the media coverage he and his book will receive. Let's face it. While the majority of U.S. citizens work for small businesses, it's easier to reach a broad audience with a book referencing business names everyone recognizes (GE, for example) and business leaders everyone knows (Donald Trump, for instance).

But with all those marketing problems put aside, every businessperson I know would benefit from reading *Small Giants*, if only to understand what makes the best small business people tick. Burlingham writes:

“The shareholders who own the businesses in this book have other, non-financial priorities in addition to their financial objectives. Not that they don't want to earn a good return on their investment, but it's not their only goal, or even necessarily their paramount goal. They're also interested in being great at what they do, creating a great place to work, providing great service to customers, having great relationships with their suppliers, making great contributions to the communities they live and work in, and finding great ways to lead their lives. They've learned, moreover, that to excel in all those things, they have to keep ownership and control inside the company and, in many cases, place significant limits on how much and how fast they grow.”

In short, for the 14 small companies profiled here, success comes by getting richer, not by getting bigger. But “richer” doesn't simply mean more financial rewards, but rather more rewards of many stripes. Burlingham's central idea, that these are companies that excel in generating “mojo,” may seem a bit simplistic, but through the many chapters he slices this concept finely enough to explain his meaning. He starts with this:

“I had the same reaction to all the companies on my list There was a quality they exuded that was real and recognizable but also frustratingly difficult to define. I could sense it as I walked around the business. I could see it in the contents of the bulletin boards and on the faces of the people. I could hear it in their voices. I could feel it in the way they interacted with one another, with customers, and with total strangers. But I found the ‘it’ awfully hard to put my finger on.”

These 14 companies include Anchor Brewing, CitiStorage, Clif Bar Inc., ECCO, Hammerhead Productions, O.C. Tanner Company, Reell Precision Manufacturing, Rhythm & Hues Studios, Righteous Babe Records, Selima Inc., The Goltz Group, Union Square Hospitality Group, W. L. Butler Construction, Inc. and Zingerman's Community of Businesses. The founders and leaders of these enterprises have passion and soul, according to Burlingham. And they simply built different kinds of workplaces. Again, Burlingham writes:

“[The] companies also had what struck me as unusually intimate workplaces. They were, in effect, functional little societies that strove to address a broad range of their employees' needs as human beings – creative, emotional, spiritual, and social needs as well as economic ones. Southwest Airlines' Herb Kelleher once observed that his company's famously vibrant culture was built around the principle of caring for people in the totality of their lives. That's what the companies I was looking at were doing.”

If only the big giants of the corporate world could get these concepts like the fine organizations described in this book. Burlingham has done us all a terrific favor with his newest work. It's the unusual business read – informative, entertaining and helpful. And you can read it on one lengthy business flight.