

Book Review

Gina Vega

Thomas Petzinger, Jr., The New Pioneers: The Men and Women Who Are Transforming the Workplace and Marketplace, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

This book promised to be an exciting look at innovations in entrepreneurship by a talented journalist. Billed on its cover as "a brilliant blend of microscopic reporting and 'macroscopic' insight," the book delivers admirably on half the promise.

Mr. Petzinger has assembled a delicious melange of rags-to-riches stories in industries that range from grease by-products to satellite tracking. His successful entrepreneurs share some characteristics that he considers "innovative." These include concern for employees, willingness to take risks, respect for adding value, desire to please the customer, and general recognition of the importance of building relationships. He presents an idealized version of the small, agile business and evokes a biological image that combines, in my mind, the fleetness of foot of a deer, the ferocity of tooth and tenacity of a fox terrier, and the adaptability and flexibility of a chameleon. This new pioneer is a hybrid of astonishing talents.

Nearly every story concludes with a handy hint. For example:

- Richard Ost, a pharmacist who labels his products in three languages to suit the needs of his clientele, "succeeded in his challenging surroundings because he responded smoothly to everything that surrounded him."
- Pat Anderson, a used book dealer, "...realized that day-to-day management required tracking information instead of controlling people."
- June Holley, founder of the Community Kitchen Incubator, was delighted when "it struck her that free-forming and constantly changing relationships seemed to provide the foundation for growth."

Lest we are unable to find the moral of the story ourselves, it is spelled out for us in each tale, along with a spoonful of management history.

In fact, we are treated to a simplistic invocation of every past trend or identified movement in a century of business theory in an attempt to shore up a fuzzy argument that states that business is life and "...life creates unlimited possibilities from (such) finite resources." This concept is called emergence, and will result in the creation of synergies.

Organizational learning, systems theory, complexity, economizing, biology, self-organization, chaos, the value of group work, evolution, trust, total quality management, multitasking—all these and more are called on to describe the action of entrepreneurship in today's economy. We are treated to the happy, disingenuous picture of Mr. Petzinger rejoicing in his "discoveries" of accepted management theories.

Some of the inconsistencies that result are disturbing. How do we reconcile the concept of "adding value" with the willingness to "give it away" as a marketing method? That is the marketing approach that entrepreneur Paul Graziani took. He distributed, at no charge, compact disks of a satellite tracking product that had originally sold for \$3 million. In a similar vein, why would local distributors not be distressed when a manufacturer responds directly to retail customers and ships products at a deep discount, bypassing "normal" channels? This was the experience of Penny Nirider, designer and manufacturer of a new kind of snow shovel, who responded to telephone inquiries about her product by shipping to interested callers. A third inconsistency involved products that "sell themselves" when designed to meet the needs of the customer. When engineer and customer work together on the design of a product, that product is presold, as has been every customized product throughout history. But when the leaders at Anadigics took the interim step of consulting with their potential customers prior to the design process, then responded to requests by the customer for refinement, and finally "sold" the finished computer chip design, Mr. Petzinger claims that this is a novel way of selling. None of these ways doing business is new, nor innovative or particularly creative. What they are is just plain old SOP business-as-usual.

But the stories are great! I read about industries that I never even knew existed. I marveled at the creativity of some entrepreneurs as they established their niche through collaborative competition, or co-opetition. I enjoyed the focus on relationships rather than transactions, one of the current trends that promises a more civilized economic growth environment. I admire Mr. Petzinger's endurance, as evidenced by his crisscrossing of the United States in search of good guys finishing first. I like his emphasis on sharing, on integrity, on collaboration. I like his celebration of interdependence and humanism.

I don't like his combination of conflicting theories, his teaspoon of this and pinch of that approach to management success. I don't like his demonization of the large and

lionizing of the small. I don't like his "first, we kill the lawyers," overly idealistic philosophy that suggests that contracts are not relevant in business dealings. I don't like his conclusion that planning is a waste of time, nor his error in equating planning with control.

Of course, taken to extremes, as Mr. Petzinger does, any statement is ludicrous. In particular, suggesting that the "spontaneous exploration of the present" has more "value" than planning for the future is objectionable in the extreme. If you have no goals and don't care where you

and your company are going, then you don't have to plan. If you have some idea of your vision, it makes sense that you would design a general framework for action. Plans are meant to be changed, adapted, and flexible. That is why they are revisited on a regular basis. Let's not throw out the baby with the bath water as we seek to honor our entrepreneurial spirit.

This book is deficient in establishing a theoretical base, but is chock-full of interesting Horatio Alger anecdotes. Read it for the stories, not for the theory.



Dr. Gina Vega, assistant professor of management at Merrimack College, teaches the theory and practice of management, organizational behavior, and business ethics. She has published articles in *The Journal of Business Ethics*, *The Small Business Forum*, *Social Policy*, and other journals and manuals. Her research interests focus on leadership, small business transitions, and human relations/communications issues.