

Tindell, Kip – Uncontainable, Grand Central Publishing, 2014 [Business], Grade ★★★★★

Only one thing prevents this book from being invited to the same table as “*Straight from the gut*”, “*Good to great*” and other business biography luminaries. And that one thing is, unfortunately, the ultimate success for the employee- and customer satisfaction based business described in the book: The Container Store. I say unfortunately, not because I want to downplay this crucial aspect of business life (there is no scrap value for great intentions) but simply to point towards the immense knowledge to be gained from this book, irrelevant of whether The Container Store makes it out of its current woes or not. “*Uncontainable*” is 2015 in the same way “*Straight from the gut*” illustrated a different time with a different management regime. I for one believe this book will age beautifully, becoming a retailers’ How-To and a Sustainable Capitalism epistle.

This is the story about TCS and its *raison d’être*. The business was founded in Dallas in 1978 “selling empty boxes”. Today the chain has 70 stores and a position as the foremost retailer in America focused on organization and storage products. The book is written by the founder and CEO Kip Tindell, who together with his wife Sharon (Chief Merchandiser) is living proof of the sentiment that the performance and behavior of employees follow the examples set by management. The outline of the book is deceptively simple. Dividing the company’s Seven Foundation Principles into a chapter each makes sense from an outline point-of-view, but as they are very interchangeable and do overlap to a large extent, the chapters are more to be seen as different doors leading into the same room. There can be no Principle #6 (“*Intuition does not come to an untrained mind*”) without Principle #1 (“*1 Great Person=3 Good People*”) and #4 (“*Communication IS leadership*”). Crucial to the book is the fact that these principles are not discardable items on a piece of paper, they are the recipe for making a profit, and known by heart by every single employee.

The book is first and foremost about a more holistic way of doing business, a view of capitalism

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that is not based on zero-sum thinking (if I pay my employees more I will make less profit). “Love” plays a part as well; how to love your employees, how to get customers to love your products and stores and how to love a business rather than the Delaware incorporation. Corporations cannot by any means be human, but they can certainly be *human-like*. Attracting better people with world-class integrity is most certainly a feature of some organizations. But, as Kindell emphasizes “...*don’t let the high premium we place on love and compassion suggest that we’ll ever settle for anything less than the best*”. Becoming the best retailer in America cannot be accomplished without a high and re-investable profit. The book is furthermore a deep-dive into why corporate culture is the Moat to Rule Them All. Throughout TCSs close to forty years in business, they have outcompeted almost everybody. The answer to why that is can certainly be traced back to a corporate culture moat difficult to trespass.

Reading the book, you will realize why paying 2x the salaries actually leads to big savings, what striving for greatness really means and why a store selling empty boxes is really selling a service. But above else, you will get an MBAs worth of knowledge around the topic of profits & purpose (not “vs”!). The Container Store embodies this almost perfectly. They are, in a word, “unashamed” about making a profit. But they do it by focusing on taking care of employees and customers first, not the other way around by having today’s bottom line dictate tomorrow’s service. No breakthrough science here, Peter Drucker opined the same sentiment back in 1973, but businesses today seem to be afraid to embrace it beyond clichéd vision statements.

So, reverting back to where we started; this is really customers-turned employees running a business. Which is ultimately what will decide whether The Container Store keeps thriving for another four decades and beyond; do current customers know what tomorrow’s customer want? Modern capitalism should certainly hope they do.