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Epigrams from the original modern guru

Review by Stefan Stern

The Little Big Things
163 ways to pursue excellence
By Tom Peters

When [Tom Peters had lunch with the Financial Times](#) about 18 months ago, he was asked if he planned to write another book. “God, I hope not!” he answered. So what explains the publication of a 500-page hardback by one T Peters? Perhaps it merely confirms that, as Peters has long argued, the world can be a crazy place.

In fairness, the book seems to have come as a bit of a surprise to its author, too. It is a web 2.0 phenomenon. In the summer of 2004, [Peters began blogging](#). Five years later, he had produced more than enough material to publish a book. After some extensive editing and rewriting, this new tome is the result.

It is a tribute to the adaptability of Peters, the original modern management guru, that almost 30 years after his groundbreaking *In Search Of Excellence* (co-authored with Robert Waterman), he has been able to embrace new media and stay productive. More recently he has become fluent in Twitter’s 140-character format. He tweets prolifically.

These short-form media are an ideal home for his epigrammatic wit. The book has the feel of a Peters presentation: a mix of bold and occasionally large type, sometimes in capitals, recalling the garish PowerPoint slides he uses to dazzle and entertain audiences round the world.

His 163 separate mini-chapters, consisting of insights and observations, are grouped under thematic headings: attitude, performance, customers, leadership and so on. But almost all can stand alone, to be read as an individual thought for the day. Indeed, trying to absorb all the contents, cover to cover, would be an exhausting mistake – like being trapped in a 72-hour long Peters presentation.

The overarching theme is that, after three decades on the road advising and cajoling managers, Peters still has some simple, pointed messages. Too many people at work are stymied by overbearing bureaucracy, tolerated mediocrity, lifeless tedium and sheer bad manners. If we are serious about achieving high standards – excellence – we still have a lot to do.

The good news is that a few small steps can take us a long way in the right direction. Consider the simple task of “over-communicating” – that is, bothering to stay in touch with people a bit more than necessary. Peters quotes Hank Paulson approvingly. “If it is something significant,” Paulson said, describing his time as US Treasury secretary in the depths of financial crisis, “I would just pick up the phone and call Ben [Bernanke].” Frequent, brief contacts can stimulate much greater collaboration within organisations.

Then there is the need for gratitude. Peters quotes the US psychologist William James (for possibly the fifth time in one of his books, as he readily concedes): “The deepest human need is the need to be appreciated.” How many times today have you said “thank you” to a colleague, Peters asks.

Then there are the traps into which bosses can fall. “Beware underlings who laugh at your jokes,” Peters writes. “Fact is, and an important one: once you become a boss you will never hear the unadulterated truth again!”

Peters-lovers will enjoy this book and its characteristic humour and tone. “Pretty much everything about business schools pisses me off,” he declares at one point. Peters-haters will be irritated by the at-times Dr Seuss-style language: “This is not right. This is wrong,” he writes, of medical accidents. (Then again, AG Lafley, the former boss of Procter & Gamble, did advise his colleagues to keep messages “Sesame-Street simple”.)

But in the end, this “wizard of wow!”, this “emperor of excellence” wins you over with his irrepressible energy and verve. Modestly, Peters claims to have only ever really had one idea throughout his career – that the person who tries doing the most stuff will win out.

“Forty-four years. One idea. Not bad,” he writes. No indeed. Not bad. Not bad at all.