

Copy This!

I've just finished reading "Copy This!" by Paul Orfalea and Ann Marsh. Orfalea, of course, is the founder of Kinko's, and Marsh is a freelancer who first met and wrote about him as a staff writer for *Forbes* magazine back in 1997. It's an interesting story, containing "lessons from a hyperactive dyslexic who turned a bright idea into one of America's best companies."

You probably have your own opinion about whether Kinko's is a great company, and I'll share mine with you a little farther along. Like 'em or not, though, there are lessons to be learned from Paul Orfalea and Kinko's, and here are a few that I think are particularly important.

Anyone Else Can Do It Better

From the moment he opened the first Kinko's in Santa Barbara, CA, Orfalea knew that he didn't want to operate the copy machine. Part of that is related to another of the key "lessons" in this book—the idea that you should work *on* your business, not *in* it. Another part, though, was a combination of objective reality and personal preference. As a hyperactive dyslexic, Orfalea was not very well suited to the job of key operator. Beyond that, it's just not what he wanted to do. "I knew that, as soon as I could, I had to turn these tedious tasks over to others and pay them well for doing them," he said. "I could not let myself get swept under by all the monotonous busywork that comes along with starting a company."

It's been my experience that most quick printers are *in* their business far more than they're *on* their business. It's also been my experience that most quick printers do a poor job at the "monotonous busywork" that comes along with operating a small business. The result seems to be quick printing companies that don't run especially well, and quick printers who aren't having a whole lot of fun owning their businesses! The prevalent attitude seems to be "this is something only I can do." I think a better attitude would be "hire good people, train them well, pay them well, and profit from their performance."

The Goal Of Management Is To Remove Obstacles

One of the things you'll see more clearly when you work *on* your business in addition to *in* it is what's working and what isn't. It's pretty obvious, I think, that you should continue to do the things that are working. Equally obvious, I hope, is that you should stop doing things that aren't working, and remove as many of the obstacles to success as you can. I agree completely with Orfalea that this is the ultimate goal of management.

I've heard more than a few quick printers claim that it's impossible to hire good help these days. One of my own clients once told me that the key to success is to get "B level performance" from "C level people." If that's true, the idea of removing the obstacles to success is even more critical.

I don't think it's true, though. I think there are plenty of good people out there who can give you "A level" performance. The secret, as noted earlier, is to hire good people and train them well and pay them well, and of course to remove the obstacles to your shared success. Orfalea says that people rise to the level of trust you give them. Ronald Reagan, speaking about nuclear disarmament, said "trust but verify." I say train then verify and then trust but verify. In other words, if you give your people the training and tools they need and remove most of the obstacles to success, you can probably trust them to do a good job for you and to help you to make money. Don't assume, though. Verify!

Find Your Philosophy

By 1983, Kinko's was at just over 120 stores and approximately \$70 million in sales. Those stores were owned by a collection of 30 individual partners, all motivated, as Orfalea says, "by our own value systems, ideals and ambitions." Orfalea was a part owner of every store, but not an active participant in their management. "With scant input from the head office," he says, "each (partner) made his or her own decisions, whether they ran a single store or a string of them." Kinko's was not so much a company as a collection of individual companies.

At about that point, Orfalea enrolled in the Owner/President Management Program at Harvard Business School, and took the first steps toward defining the "Kinko's Philosophy." Ultimately, this Philosophy became a guiding tenet which brought some control and consistency to Kinko's operations.

The Kinko's Philosophy might also be called a *mission statement*, and I'm a strong believer in the concept by whatever name you call it. I've heard quick printers talking about "getting everybody on the same page," and the way to do that starts with a clear philosophy or mission statement. Of course, having a philosophy is no guarantee of success, and Orfalea goes into more detail on "living it" in the book. He admits that the execution wasn't perfect, but it's worth noting that "learning from our mistakes" is itself a part of the Kinko's Philosophy.

The Mere Fact That Competition Exists Means They're Doing Something Right

I think it's fair to say that Kinko's under Paul Orfalea had more respect for the average quick printer than the average quick printer even now has for Kinko's. I bet I've heard a thousand variations of this theme from quick printers over the years: "Lot's of people try Kinko's but they never stay with them because the service is so terrible. We hear 'Kinko's Horror Stories' from our customers all the time. We send all the customers we don't want there!"

If all that's true, how do you explain 1100 stores and more than \$2 billion in sales volume? I think the mere fact that Kinko's exists means they're doing something right, and I think the fact of 1100 stores and \$2 billion in sales volume means they've done a lot right over the years. Sure, there are horror stories, but there must have been a lot more success stories and satisfied customers!

My Opinion

That takes us to my promise to share my opinion of Kinko's with you. Yes, they are one of America's great companies, made even stronger by the acquisition by FedEx, another of America's great companies. But that doesn't mean that they're unbeatable. All through Kinko's history, "average" quick printing companies have controlled at least a share of every market that Kinko's has been in. Unfortunately, we've seen a reduction in the number of "average" quick printing companies over the years, and I have to believe that much of Kinko's growth has come at those "average" quick printing companies' expense.

"Above-average" quick printing companies still do pretty well in competition with Kinko's, and by that I mean well-managed and well-equipped printing companies. If that doesn't describe your company, you're pretty vulnerable—to Kinko's or to any other competitor who's better managed and better equipped than you are. If that's your situation, Paul Orfalea might tell you to get *on* your business right now. I think that would be pretty good advice.