

## Foreword

There is more than one kind of small business and more than one kind of small-business owner. That is why this book by Ron and Judy Parks is so valuable. That may seem, once you read *Manager's Mentor*, an ironic statement because this book is about a particular kind of small business and a particular kind of small-business owner. I make it because Ron Parks is the kind of small-business owner-manager often ignored in books and articles about small business, whether they are popular or academic. And yet, small-business owners in the mold of Ron Parks are the kind that build solid companies, provide dependable employment, and are the foundation of good communities.

Two kinds of small-business owners are focused on in public policy. The most often talked about are those engaged in attempting to build a large business. They are lionized as creative risk takers who are the champions of capitalism. The most successful become darlings of the media – Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, for example. Most who attempt such ventures are unsuccessful, but that only serves to make more attractive those who are. The other kind of small business, commonly understood, is the self-employment business – often called the “Mom and Pop business.” This kind may have a handful of employees, especially part-time employees, but does not grow. Self-employment businesses are viewed as benefiting from rather than contributing to economic growth. And subject to pressures from larger and more sophisticated companies, their survival becomes questionable.

Such a dichotomous view of small business obscures the kind discussed in this book. Yet, such businesses exist in virtually every substantial community. They are the small businesses that find and exploit profitable markets, obtain modest but sustained growth, and employ people in substantial jobs. They are often successful over a long period of time. Thus, they provide stable employment. And

many of them engage in “primary” industries. That is, their customer base is largely outside the community they reside in, so their sales bring money into the community. Theirs is the kind of business that means economic vitality. Such a situation is different from that of “secondary” businesses (usually retail), which circulate money within a community.

Academic study of small businesses is only about forty years old. Most of the early research focused on what characteristics were common among those bold enough to start their own business. That research has been spectacularly unsuccessful. That is not to say that individuals do not possess certain characteristics that help them perform better as entrepreneurs than other individuals. It is to say that entrepreneurship is a process and that learning the process is as important as natural ability. It is like saying there are no great baseball players in Finland. It isn't that no one in Finland has the natural ability to play baseball. It is that baseball is a game foreign to Finland. There are no baseball heroes to emulate or coaches to teach you the game.

In the game of entrepreneurship, Ron Parks is a major league player. By reading this book you will get insights and examples available few other places. In reading his stories about life on the farm while growing up, I am reminded of the television commercials for an investment banking firm. Each of them shows a common enough event watching a foreign movie or playing a bagpipe – and then asks the question “What lessons can we learn?” It then draws from the event a lesson about life and investment. It ends with the tagline, “Wisdom is everywhere. Uncommon wisdom is knowing where to find it.” It is that kind of uncommon wisdom you will find in the lessons Ron Parks draws from his experiences as a boy.

Some things stand out in this book, at least to me. Some stand out because they confirm things most small-business consultants have always thought about entrepreneurship. Others stand out because they run counter to accepted wisdom.

You will find here the story of a man who grew up loving machinery and who worked for others before striking out on his own. This confirms the idea that an entrepreneur should do that which he knows and loves. Someone who begins a business only with the idea

of making money risks failing to stay with the business long enough and with enough commitment to make it a success. After all, there isn't any sense in making for yourself a job you won't like.

To make for yourself a job also implies you are the boss, and that is a significant lure of small-business ownership. What you will learn in this book is that it isn't enough to want to be your own boss if you do not bring to the task a strong set of values. Ron Parks expresses very strong values in this book about high standards, community involvement, selection and treatment of customers, selection and treatment of employees, training of employees, investment in capital equipment, and many other aspects of small-business management. I liked especially his spirited defense of the time card as an equitable and just system for both employer and employee. More important than the specific recommendations themselves is the reasoned conviction with which Ron Parks reached his positions on business management. No one wants to work for someone who is arbitrary and capricious, even if that person is yourself.

Through the sound presentation of ideas steeped in experience and reason, Ron Parks presents himself as he claims in the title – a mentor. If you are a small-business owner or you have aspirations of small-business ownership and are looking for a successful hero and model to emulate, you have picked the right book.

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