

Armchair Adventures

By Sherry McKillop

You might expect a man who lives life on his own terms to break the rules of traditional business. You might not expect to learn that in doing so his business not only still works, but works better.

In his book, *Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman*, (Penguin Press, 272 pages), Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, Inc., highlights the path that has allowed him to live a life of adventure while creating an industry defining \$230 million outdoor clothing company, one that in business circles is as well known for its environmental and social consciousness as its high-end products.

The need for better climbing equipment is what led Chouinard into business originally. The son of a French Canadian blacksmith, Chouinard picked up rock climbing as a teenager growing up in Southern California. “It was just a way to pay the bills so we could go off on climbing trips,” he writes of the early years of his predecessor company, Chouinard Equipment, which got started in a tin shed in Ventura.

As the company grew to become a major supplier of climbing hardware, Chouinard realized it had also started down the path to becoming an environmental villain. The growing popularity of climbing and the repeated placement and removal of steel pitons, a mainstay of his business in the ‘60s, were contributing to the destruction of “the very rocks we loved.”

Chouinard and his partners made the decision to phase out of the piton business and focus on removable, “clean-climbing” hardware. It was the first of many risky business decisions that he would make later with Patagonia, decisions which hinged more on reducing environmental impacts than the bottom line. (After a couple accidental death lawsuits torpedoed Chouinard Equipment in the 1980s, employees reincarnated the company as Black Diamond Equipment, based in Salt Lake City.)

From initiating internal recycling programs to using recycled polyester for Patagonia’s popular fleece jackets to reducing waste by packaging their underwear with a rubber band, Chouinard and team implemented a number of potentially profit-killing decisions based on a framework of values that most mainstream business leaders would discount as high-minded folly. They strived to limit harm to the environment and to build quality products exhibiting durability, multi-functionalism and non-obsolescence. They instituted a self-imposed tax to help mitigate any negative environmental consequences of their business activity. (Patagonia gives 1 % of its net annual sales to environmental groups.)

Let My People Go Surfing is a fascinating autobiography, a business management book, and a sustainable life philosophy rolled into one. The book is a refreshing look at the factors leading to the development of the philosophies which guide Patagonia in designing, manufacturing and selling its sought after products. It also serves to create an awareness of how the purchase decisions we make as business owners and consumers either perpetuate destructive business practices or endorse progressive philosophies of environmental and social responsibility.

Filled with personal anecdotes, *Let My People Go Surfing* communicates the motivations of a man who has strived to bring a philosophy of “doing good while having a grand adventure” to the business world. To this day, Chouinard continues to think of himself more of “a climber, a surfer, a kayaker, a skier and a blacksmith” than a CEO.

With so much corporate fraud in the headlines, it makes for a refreshing read. We can only hope that his message reaches beyond the choir and penetrates the ears and consciousness of more current and future business leaders.