

Business education**An anarchist's guide to doing good business**

Ari Weinzweig's unusual management courses attract executives from across the world



Ari Weinzweig leads sessions that explore how businesses can benefit from the same anarchist thinking he has applied to running his Zingerman's group
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Susie Measure 15 HOURS AGO

Not many business school executives would turn a student passion for anarchism into a management philosophy. But when Ari Weinzweig realised anarchistic principles had underpinned the creation of the small food empire — [Zingerman's](#) — he co-founded in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1982, the revelation spawned a series of books and executive training courses.

Every year, thousands of business leaders — representing sectors from medical equipment manufacturers to catering — convene in a couple of rooms on a trading estate on the outskirts of Ann Arbor, a short drive from Detroit Metro Airport. They are there to visit ZingTrain, a training centre-cum-quasi business school that evolved from the creation of Mr Weinzweig's delicatessen in central Ann Arbor.

ZingTrain, which has run public seminars and courses since 1994 on a range of business-related topics, is one of the Zingerman's Community of Businesses. These now include a farm, a bakery, a creamery, a Korean restaurant, and the original deli.

Mr Weinzweig, a spry 63-year-old who only swaps his customary vintage leather jacket for his running gear, did not set out to create a company along anarchist principles. It took rereading the anarchist book collection amassed during his student days at Ann Arbor's University of Michigan — titles by Emma Goldman and Joseph Ishill, among others — at the same time as reading more traditional business books, for him to spot the similarities.

“They're not really overlapping audiences,” he says. “So I was really shocked at a) how much anarchism was aligned with progressive business and b) how much people are raised to think hierarchically, and how destructive that is.”

To him, anarchism is “not about politics but a belief system about how we live our everyday lives”. One of ZingTrain's most popular courses is a two-day workshop called Managing Ourselves, where Mr Weinzweig leads sessions that explore how businesses can benefit when leaders apply the same anarchist thinking that he has applied to running Zingerman's.

“One thing I like about anarchism is that the means you use must be congruent with the ends you want to achieve. If you yell at people to get them to calm down, it won't work,” he tells participants, who range from a New York-based executive at the music streaming service Spotify to three employees from a made-to-order online women's clothing business, [Elizabeth Suzann](#), from Nashville, Tennessee.

For those who prefer not to travel to ZingTrain, Mr Weinzweig criss-crosses the US — and the globe — giving talks. He also writes books: the most recent, [A Lapsed Anarchist's Approach To The Power of Beliefs In Business](#), expands his ideas on hierarchy. “The belief that someone is a better person or smarter because of their rank, or income level, or age is never helpful,” he adds.

Patti Poppe heads CMS Energy, a public utility that provides electricity and natural gas to more than half of Michigan's residents. After inviting Mr Weinzweig to talk to 300 employees, she rated his approachability as his top management attribute. “[Being] in direct contact with his customers and his team helps his vision for his organisation to be internalised”, Ms Poppe tells me via email.

Mr Weinzweig helped staff during one busy evening at Zingerman's Roadhouse, the group's American restaurant, by refilling customers' water glasses. Now he swears by his “managing by pouring water” strategy and can be found there every evening, criss-crossing the tables, proving to fellow employees he doesn't consider himself superior to them, while keeping on top of all aspects of the business.

Listening to Mr Weinzweig made Ms Poppe realise how some of her own management beliefs also chimed with anarchist philosophy. “I agree 100 per cent with Ari on the benefit to a business when a leader can embrace . . . every team member's talents,” she adds.

The Elizabeth Suzann team returned for a second ZingTrain course and also booked Mr Weinzweig

to fly to Nashville to talk to the entire company. Carissa Shapiro, who works with company founder Liz Pape, says that implementing the ZingTrain idea of “bottom-line change, which allows anyone to introduce an idea for change, has given team members of all levels an opportunity for ownership and leadership”.

One idea Mr Weinzweig has resisted enacting in his own business is expanding beyond Ann Arbor — something his co-founder, Paul Saginaw, has advocated — despite approaches from companies including Walt Disney World. “It’s just not how I want to do business. I think you lose a lot. For me, doing business in the place that you’re in is really different to doing business in a place that you’re not in.”

[Behfar Jahanshahi](#), whose professional services company Interworks employs 230 people around the world, first met Mr Weinzweig at an Inc magazine event for America’s 500 fastest-growing companies. “He stood up and talked about anarchy and how he’s not here to rule the world but to have fun. He wasn’t what everyone else wanted him to be and that resonated with me.”

In Zingerman’s, Mr Jahanshahi found a company that mirrored his passion for providing great service and increasing profits “without maximising return on investment to infinity”. He adds: “It’s not about being risk adverse but knowing they have something great going on already.” Executives return from ZingTrain courses with a “different perspective” on how to serve customers.

Ultimately, Mr Jahanshahi says, “Zingerman’s is run according to eight guiding principles [from making solid profits to being a great place to work]. Every single one is something we believe in even though we’re not in the food business.”

Eight principles of a local hero

Ari Weinzweig and Paul Saginaw created Zingerman’s as a delicatessen in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1982 to sell what Barack Obama would later call a “killer” Reuben sandwich.

Today the Zingerman’s Community of Businesses includes 14 different companies that make \$65m in annual sales and employ 700 people. The business has 190 staff owners and 20 managing partners.

Its eight principles are about providing/building: great food, great service, a great place to shop and eat, solid profits, a great place to work, strong relationships, a place to learn, an active part of our community.

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