

# Why big companies urgently need to learn “Small Think”

Large companies of today are at risk of becoming the dinosaurs of tomorrow. “Small Think” encapsulates how the best entrepreneurial companies put purpose over process...



In 1844, the Wenham Lake Ice Company opened a store on London’s Strand selling ice. It was an expression of an industry that had grown to be one of the biggest in the world at that time, exporting as far as India, employing over 90,000 people and capitalising at over \$1bn in today’s money. In bars from Birmingham to Bombay you would ask for a ‘gin and Wenham’ such was the strength of the brand. Within a generation it was all gone. A victim of Big Think.

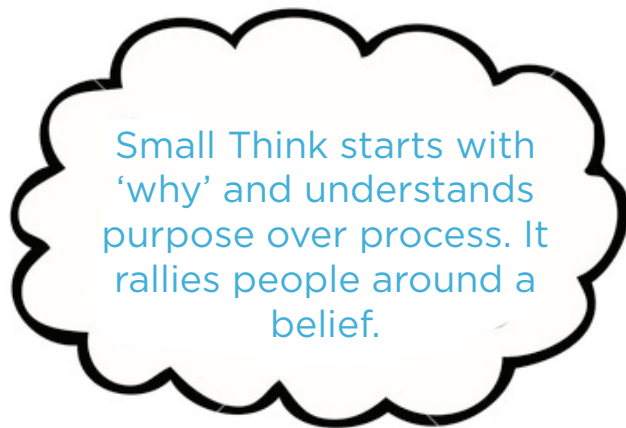
The Wenham Lake Ice Company and others like it were the corporates of their day. What killed them was an inability to see beyond their own product; an inability to innovate. To them early electric refrigeration was a gimmick; unreliable and expensive and, in purely product terms, they were right. But in focusing on the reality of today, they were missing the context that was driving tomorrow. Stifled by its own content Big Think doesn’t allow for the creativity to see opportunities. It does not innovate. When Western Union was offered the global rights to the telephone in 1878 its response was ‘what use could the company make of an electric toy?’

Western Union, of the telephone in 1878: “What use could the company make of an electric toy?”

Today’s large, complex organisations are not much different. Culturally they are unable to ‘think small’. Like the Wenham Lake Ice Company, the focus is on content not context. They think in terms of outcomes and attempt to control and manage these, not to understand the source. They focus on product and not solution. Their language, systems and remuneration systems

all promote 'how' over 'why'. Their structures are hierarchical, stifling and focused on control.

Small Think is exactly the opposite. Small Think is what entrepreneurs do. It starts with 'why' and understands purpose over process. It rallies people around a passionately-held belief. This is most obvious in small companies but is not about scale. It is about an attitude of mind. When Steve Jobs said that he wanted to put a 'ding in the universe' Apple was already a corporation. It just chose not to act like one. It chose Small Think.



Small Think is about understanding context over content. Great entrepreneurs are brilliant at giving their teams a purpose as a framework for decisions and then getting out of the way. It builds agile, fast-moving self-responsible cultures. Reed Hastings of Netflix tells his team 'if someone does something dumb, don't blame them... ask yourself what context you failed to set!' By not understanding context, Big Think creates slow, hierarchical, control cultures with no appetite for responsibility. These cultures simply can't innovate.

Big business thinking is just not fit for purpose in today's fast-paced, agile, relationship-driven world. The large, complex organisations we have chosen to build are culturally simply unable to 'think small'. With their focus on content not context, outcome and not source, product and not solution; their relationships shallow, transactional and short term; and their structures hierarchical, stifling and focused on control they are doomed to eventually follow the Wenham Lake Ice Company into history.

Yet the lessons from the entrepreneurial world are clear. For organisations to learn how to be agile, innovative and welcoming of change they first need to learn how to think small. It's also a lot more fun. Those that learn to think small will be the stars of the coming generation. Those that don't will be the dinosaurs of the last.



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