

How to have fun, do good and make money

Richard Branson

Ricky's schemes

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THE phrase "business as usual" has probably never been used to describe anything Sir Richard Branson has done. So there was a danger that a book called "Screw Business As Usual" would contain nothing new. This is a man who has been a larger-than-life advertisement for entrepreneurship and adventurous living ever since the first of what his mother called "Ricky's schemes" back in the 1960s. He launched a student magazine and a sex-advice centre, then signed the Sex Pistols to his Virgin music label and started an airline. Yet Sir Richard has provided a tantalising glimpse into the workings of the global elite that some say now run the world, as well as plenty of food for thought for the new generation of business leaders who say they want to make the world a better place as well as turn a profit.

Sir Richard's main goal is to begin what he describes as a new, caring approach to business called Capitalism 24902 (because that in miles is the circumference of the Earth). He says it "will lead to more fulfilling lives for all of us and a much more fair, more equitable and healthy global village." The author has updated his old creed of "have fun and the money will come" to "do good, have fun and the money will come." Those familiar with his career will not be surprised that there is nothing selfless about his brand of philanthrocapitalism.

Sir Richard's "new" approach eschews profit maximisation (investors in his schemes over the years may feel that making them a profit has never been a high priority for him) and champions getting involved in solving thorny social problems, often by going into partnership with non-profits. The main vehicle for this good work is Virgin Unite, a philanthropic body that he designed to be far more entrepreneurial than the typical charitable foundation. Sir Richard rightly argues the case for rejecting the "golden cheque" approach to grant making in favour of "becoming a true partner for frontline organisations and leveraging absolutely everything we possessed in order to drive change."

The subplot of the book is about the growing influence in tackling the world's problems of a small group of wealthy philanthropists and business leaders, and how Sir Richard has become a catalyst among them. He provides plenty of detail about the good work done by C.K. Prahalad, the bottom-of-the-pyramid business guru, Jeff Skoll, the philanthropic first boss of eBay, Peter Gabriel, a rock star turned human-rights activist, and Jane Hewson, founder of Comic Relief and Pilotlight Australia, which finds jobs for ex-prisoners.

The book starts and ends with the fire that recently gutted his house on Necker Island, a luxury Caribbean retreat where so much of Sir Richard's good work is done, by tempting saintly folk to have some fun in the tropics and hatch virtuous plans while they are at it. Archbishop Desmond Tutu learnt to swim there, and ideas have been dreamed up such as The Elders, a troubleshooting group of retired politicians selected by Sir Richard's pal, Nelson Mandela, and the Carbon War Room, which is plotting strategies to reduce carbon emissions in several industries. Sir Richard also makes a convincing case for businesses to back entrepreneurs in Africa and to campaign against the unwinnable "War on Drugs".