

# Keys to Success: 50 Secrets from a Business Maverick

By John Timpson

Icon Books, London, 2017, 256 pp, £12.99 ISBN 978-1-78578-199-5.

One of the companies I most admire is Timpson. They specialise in cutting keys, repairing shoes, fixing watches and processing photos. Whenever I go into a Timpson store I'm impressed by the swift, friendly and efficient service. So when I was looking for an easy-to-read business book to while away a long flight to Hong Kong, I landed quickly on company chairman John Timpson's aptly named *Keys to Success*.

The book, as the sub-title suggests, comprises 50 short chapters each offering a tip from the author's experience. This advice ranges from 'Trust your people' and 'Look after the superstars' to 'Check the cash every day' and 'Spend more time with your family'.

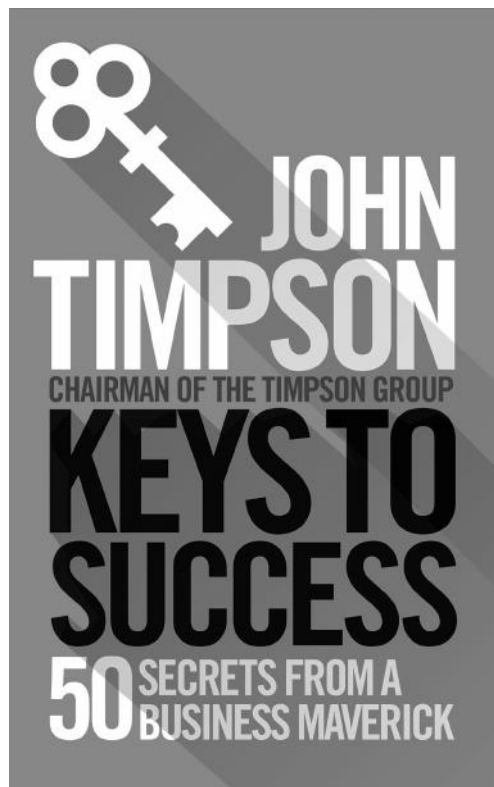
Rather than go through all 50 systematically, I will comment on those I found most distinctive to Timpson's thinking and way of running a company. They are also fairly representative in that they accurately convey the flavour of the book as a whole.

## Upside Down Management

Timpson has become famous for his philosophy of Upside Down Management. By this he means that the people who serve the customers are at the top and the chief executive at the bottom, a way of thinking about organisations sometimes known as the inverted pyramid. For Timpson it means trusting colleagues with the freedom to serve each

individual customer in the best way they can. Stores thus have a considerable degree of autonomy, and are required to follow only two rules: Look the Part (i.e. dress smartly) and Put the Money in the Till (i.e. no financial dishonesty).

can be an invisible leader. Every business is bound to become an extension of the Chief Executive's personality'. Power is still being radiated from the top, and Christian faith encourages us to be honest about that, and not delude ourselves.



## Say Goodbye to Drongos

Our last Faith in Business conference featured an interesting discussion about what to do about unsatisfactory colleagues or employees – in particular staff who pay lip-service to or are not fully committed to corporate values. Timpson tackles this problem head-on with his chapter on weeding out poor performers. He explains something I didn't know, that the origin of the word 'drongo' is an Australian racehorse in the 1920s called Drongo which ran 37 races without ever winning. Timpson expects high standards of all their employees – everyone should be rated either 9 or 10 out of 10. Drongos are people who drag down the average level of performance. His approach is not one of brutally sacking people, rather of giving them the simple message: 'Your best will never be good enough for us, so it is time for you to find your happiness elsewhere.' But he adds 'it is important to remember that we made a mistake by employing the wrong person, so we should be generous in our severance pay and employment advice.' This combines a refreshing honesty with a warm humanity.



John Timpson

Photo: The Independent

### Send handwritten letters

We live in an age when so many companies use automated systems, which often fail when a customer's issue or question isn't covered by the system. Finding a real live person to address the issue can then be frustratingly difficult. Timpson is clearly someone who favours the personal touch. He sends a plethora of handwritten letters to employees who have provided outstanding service, and personally signs over 2500 Christmas cards. Any colleague who gets married is treated to champagne, a wedding car and an extra week off at the company's expense. He seeks always to be polite to customers. The customer is not always right (there are some professional complainers) but 'over 95% of shoppers are genuine, decent and honest'. When a customer does complain 'I always find that the best thing to do is pick up the telephone and talk it through with them'. Refreshingly old-fashioned!

### Trust your intuition


Timpson confesses to being a bit of a maverick who has always relied on

intuition ahead of safe statistical analysis. He is scathing about detailed business plans which don't allow for the unexpected. In many ways his philosophy is the opposite of Michael Hodson, whose article on Intentionality and Intuition in our last issue definitely favoured the former over the latter. But I actually think Timpson exaggerates the extent to which he does rely on intuition. *Keys to Success* is full of wise advice gleaned from experience. He admits to having made mistakes which arguably derived from decisions that were too instinctive, but he has clearly learned from them – notably to stick to areas of business he knows well, rather than dabbling in others like clothes fashion which he doesn't.

### Have a social conscience

Timpson believes that a successful business is in a privileged position, having the resources to support worthy causes that make a difference to the wider community. The company has supported children's charities but is perhaps best known for making a concerted policy of

employing ex-offenders – over 400 former prisoners now work for the company, with many 'star performers' among them. This followed a visit by John's son James, now Chief Executive, to a prison near Warrington in 2002.

Timpson reports that 'someone, hearing about our company culture for the first time, asked whether our family had a faith – I think he assumed we were Quakers or following in the footsteps of Lord Leverhulme'. (I must admit the same question had crossed my mind.) 'But I had to disappoint him. Despite being taken by my mother to Sunday school I have no strong religious faith, but I do believe that having a social conscience is also bloody good business'. Curiously, this is the only place where he resorts to 'industrial' language! So, while it would be comforting to claim John Timpson as one of our own, we must respect his confession that he isn't. What I can say from reading this book is that he is a fellow traveller: a person who shares many values that people with faith in business will readily own. 



**Richard Higginson** was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement earlier in 2018. He is now Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of FIBQ and the author of several books, including *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy* and (with Kina Robertshaw) *A Voice to be Heard*. He is an international speaker on business ethics and the theology of work.