

Episode 1: Brompton Bicycle – Will Butler-Adams

Hunter Ruthven, senior content manager, Be the Business

You'll probably have seen them whizzing around cities and towns throughout the UK. But Brompton Bicycle was not always a household name. We kick off season two of it's the small things by going behind the scenes at a business building more than 50,000 bicycles a year from scratch, all inside the M25 motorway. Find out how managing director Will Butler Adams took over a business with an incredible product, but very little in the way of structure and process. His attention to detail and belief in the power of small changes, has taken the purchase brand into 45 different export countries with a workforce approaching 300 people. to make hundreds of bikes a day and one of 16,000 different permutations. Every single bit needs to be in the right place at the right time.

We'll discuss the effects simple but practical technological applications have had on the manufacturing line, his obsession with wastage and why it's vital to have a decide upon ambition for your company, in this case, not to produce the world's best folding bicycle, but to fundamentally change the way in which we move around urban areas. This is It's The Small Things with me, Hunter Ruthven. Welcome to series two.

Will, thank you very much for having us into Brompton HQ to record this episode of It's The Small Things, we've had a little bit of a factory tour, it's been incredible to walk around to see how you and the business are constructing on such a big scale, all in Britain, some incredible craft and display some credible automation, things like that. So got a load of questions. I'm going to start by with a fact which I think really kind of catalyses the position where you guys have got on the opportunity you have. You're making 45,000 bikes a year right now, which has come a long way since you joined the business. For those who don't know about Brompton, give us an idea of scale of operations away from that 45,000 a year bike production.

Will Butler-Adams, MD, Brompton Bikes

Well, I mean, if I'm being technically accurate, we've grown a bit since you got your statistics. So we should have about 55,000 this year with a fair wind. But you know, I'm touching my head as I speak. So we have about 1,200 parts in the average Brompton, not all of those are different, some of those are the same, but it's a far more complex than people might imagine. That's springs, washers, injection moulded parts, bits of metal, tyres, nipples, spokes, there's just so much stuff. And to get one bike out of the door, and we're making about 320 a day, every single bit needs to be in the right place at the right time. Add to that that we have 16m combinations or permutations of bite that the customer could, at any one time decide to order.

So they will have to rock up at the same place in the same time in the right order to make a bike, then they get packaged. And then we ship our bikes, we export about 70 per cent to 47 countries around the world through 1,500 shops. So we need to send this little precious bike to the right place to get to the customer so they can enjoy it for the next 20 or so years. And we need to make sure that the shop is trained to look after that bike so that if it's any problems or needs maintaining the journey begins when the customer gets the bikes, we need to look after it

for a long time. So, sort of managing that and trying to communicate and customer service and websites and all the other stuff. I mean, it's a flipping laugh, but it's just non stop.

HR

A lot of moving parts if you'll excuse the pun!

So, you joined 17 years ago yeah took over the reins 12 years ago as kind of MD/CEO. Take us back to 17 years ago to that situation you walked in – what did Brompton it like back then and what were the things you're really looking at going, that's not going to work.

WB-A

So when I walked in and first met Andrew, I was 27. And of course I knew everything was we know full of beans. And initially I didn't even see the bike really, I just saw the factory and I knew that Andrew was making a bike, he couldn't make enough of them. And all I could see in his factory was just stock just just just row after row of pallets of stuff in his factory and then squished into the sides was the value add stuff. And I'm not a genius but it struck me is it was pretty damn obvious that there was opportunity to make this operation leaner to remove some of the stock there was no way a business needed a stock turn of one which is basically a ludicrously high stock level. And I just thought my god there's so much potentially he can't make enough bikes. God this is gonna be a laugh and it was in London where all the cool people are because I was living up north. So I just thought I'd do it for a couple of years and what fun it would be and what fun it has been but it's been seven 17 years, not two.

HR

And you're not going anywhere anytime soon? As a business, which still manufactures most of what it does in the UK, yeah. And you can give us the numbers around that. Is it hard to keep finding people with the right skills and the right attitude who wants to be part of this kind of business?

WB-A

It's funny because people think that our business, because we manufacture, is all about sort of, I don't know, design engineers or production engineers or, but it is so diverse, you need a tremendously rich diversity of people to make a business run in all of its from raw material to a shop that you sell it through. And some elements in the early days were quite tricky. When we were an unknown brand. It was hard to persuade and find engineers of all description. And we employ many different types of engineer, software engineers, design engineers, production engineers, you know, electronics engineers, FAA engineers, it goes on and on and on. But as we've become more well known, it's become easier to recruit people, because people have heard of us and they and they think, well, it'd be fun to go work for Brompton.

And there are problems being in London. It isn't the engineering hub of the UK. But it has these other fantastic advantages of having fantastic marketing, fantastic innovation, fantastic artistic skills, the diversity, our ability to communicate and reach. And you get very a lot of very young

people because they move to London as part of their sort of life journey. So we were able to get people from all over the world quite young, coming in helping our business on its way. So for me, I actually think finding the people isn't the biggest challenge in a business, I think the biggest challenge in the business is principally having ambition, really believing you're going to do something – setting yourself a lofty ambition. And if you believe in it strong enough, people will follow it.

HR

Coming onto that word ambition, which I know you put a lot of credence behind. The business that you came into was was run by an inventor, a founder, what was the impact of the lack of kind of leadership and management in not so much his conventional way of literally just this is leisure management, but as a business, which was run by the ideas person, what was missing from what was going on that needed to be needed to be brought in?

WB-A

So the founder of Brompton and the inventor of Brompton was Andrew Ritchie. And Andrew is a sort of design genius. His conceptual design in 3D in his head is just spectacular. And he's obsessed with detail. He's obsessed with design. And without his determination, and that obsession, we wouldn't have the product. But where he struggled, was then scaling that. And articulating the vision.

Delegating was nearly impossible for him. When I joined the company, he signed every cheque, he controlled everything, he was the eye of the needle, and as the company grew, so he became more tired, he did more hours because everything had to go via him. And he found allowing people to make mistakes, just completely impalatable.

So I think the main challenge was that vision and ambition. And when I joined, we had no meeting rooms, we had no strategic plan, we had no budgetary control. I mean, it was proper old school stuff. And I knew we couldn't make enough bikes. So that at the time was the biggest risk to the business. Because if you can't supply the customer, the customer goes somewhere else. And then the door's locked, when you come back in two years time say, hey, I can now say, sorry, we've jumped in with this other company, and we're selling their product.

So I set up this meeting called 25k, which was going to be a meeting to how do we get to the output from sort of 7,000 to 8,000 bikes, we were up to 25,000. And before we even had the first meeting, there was complete uproar. There was meltdown there was like, well, you know, we can hardly make seven and a half thousand bikes, there's no way we can do 25,000. Now that is impossible. So the first and most important step was to get the team to believe it was even possible. Once that belief is there. And it's a consensus across the company, then everyone starts going, Well, how do we do it? We think we can do it, but then how? And then you're off, then you're starting to think of the tools what's in the way? What's the immediate issue, what things going to come down the track.

And it's funny I after I joined Brompton, after two years, we had some guys from Rolls-Royce, who came to the factory and did a sort of piece of MBA work looking at how you could make the

factory more efficient. There were six or seven guys from Rolls-Royce and they were doing work with Cranfield, and when they left they gave me a magnum of champagne 15 years ago. I said to myself, I'm not opening that until we do 50,000 bikes. That Magnum sits by my desk. It's been under every single desk, and I've moved desk about 10 times. And it goes from desk to desk, I kick it. And I remind myself, hopefully, in February next year, based upon the latest estimations, we will bust the 50,000 bikes in a year. There isn't enough champagne in there for the 400 staff, we now have enough to get a few extra bottles, but by God, we're gonna have fun. And that's what ambition is about

HR

Enough to invite those guys from Rolls Royce back?

WB-A

Absolutely. No no, we lost touch with who they were.

HR

Before there was that 25,000 goal? Was it just a case of people going? Well, what we make is that's going to be our total and..

WB-A

Andrew's complete philosophy, he has no interest in three year plans, five year plans, no interest in setting these ideas, because we just do our best. That's what we can do, we're going to do our best. And in some respects, that's true in a sort of absolute purist world where you do your best. But ambition creates focus, it creates alignment behind a single vision. And if you just do your best, everybody just does their best, but they might be pulling in different directions, and therefore not moving the company forward because it's not clear what everyone is getting behind. So ambition is a catalyst for delivering growth.

HR

Bringing those two words together, then ambition and measurement. I think a lot of people listening to this podcast will be guilty of over measuring certain things and dramatically under measuring other things. What's your take on the right kind of measurement? And how have you baked that into what Brompton does?

WB-A

I think the problem is that people probably measure to three decimal places in areas in which they feel very comfortable. But actually what the business needs to really grow is factors of 10. And you need to get the big ambition, the mega strategic goal set. And if you can deliver it in anything less than five years, it's not big enough. And I think if you can get that right, then because it's big and lofty, you can't start talking about my new ti because it makes it look silly. Next to the lofty ambition, it forces you to pull up those KPIs to be macro strategic KPIs. Once

you've got those, your team will then understand and let them create their own KPIs. You don't want to be getting down in the weeds, they know what they need to do to deliver the next level up. And so it filters down the organisation. But if you in the management team are getting too caught up in the weeds, you're not setting that top line ambition.

HR

And is that measuring to three decimal places? Could that be kind of described as measuring for validation of certain assumptions or things you want to ring true? Is that what people gravitate towards?

WB-A

I think we can get caught up in over bureaucracy, we can get caught up in doing the sort of stuff that is very perfect and very exact. And, you know, allows us to tick the boxes and pat ourselves on the back. But you know, we're so close, our nose is so close to the wall, we can't see that we're about to sort of crash into it. And what you need to do is is not get caught up in oh, yep, everyone else does this. And oh, yeah, well, we have to do this because that's what everybody else is. Stand back. What are we trying to achieve? What does the customer want? How can we make it but there are blindingly obvious things that we're doing forget getting into the there are some big stuff of our staff happy? Do they understand if we've got our communication, right? Have we set three simple goals. Everybody in the company understands that we can measure and see performance against get back to basics and and get rid of some of the minutiae out of the business because that drags you away from steering against the horizon. You know, you're looking at the next little pimple in front of you.

HR

So that leads me nicely on to my next question, which is kind of around sentimentality in how you kind of lead you don't come across as someone who's particularly sentimental or afraid to make decisions, is that something you've had to learn and become confident with? Or is it just always felt like the right way of doing stuff?

WB-A

Funnily enough, I am very sentimental. I am a very huggy lovey, I care for my staff deeply. I feel an enormous sense of responsibility not to screw this up, because I will let down people I've known for 17 years, who I respect hugely, and I have a deep responsibility to my staff and to our customers.

But I have an even bigger, burning desire to have a bigger impact on society. And I know this business can do it. And therefore, I'm impatient for us to fulfil our potential. And I'm not content with us just floating along. We have a weird society where more and more of us are living in cities, and it's making us miserable. We've got people going under the ground and paying for the privilege. And you wonder why we've got mental health and physical health, you know, going off the scale, and it's just as relevant in Europe as it is in the Americas or in Asia. And this little bike that Andrew invented is it just makes you happier. And it allows you to explore your

city and all the other great stuff. So that is what's driving me. And occasionally, I have to upset people. Doesn't matter whether they're my supplier, or my customers, my staff, but I will do so with a sort of honest, genuine, fair ambition. I'm not doing it to be nasty and vindictive, I'm doing it because they need to know the truth. And if we're not honest with each other, we won't fulfil our potential. And honesty is really, really important to me. And I find being honest is so much easier, because you don't have to remember the sort of slight fudgy untruths you made. And you just tell people as it is, and then they know where they stand.

HR

And you found that that kind of approach works for people across the board, no matter what role or background they have?

WB-A

You create a culture within your organisation. And we have a culture in our organisation where it's a very much delegation. My role is to serve my staff I employ people who have knowledge I don't have I employ people who have experience I don't have my role is to tell them where we're heading. And to leave them now that I've told them what we're trying to achieve, to tell me what they need to help us achieve it in their relevant departments.

But it's about supporting those individuals. But our business does not suit every type of individual. So when you're going through your recruitment, you're looking for a particular type of person who fits the culture of your organisation. And sometimes it's not a fit, well, that's fine, there's nothing wrong with that. If it really isn't the right fit, well then find somewhere that is the right fit. But what you can't do is try and be all things to all people, you've got to be who you are, be quite clear about it and go for it, and find and encourage and bring people with you and try your best.

HR

I hope you enjoy my conversation with Will, we'll get back to his story very shortly. It's the small things is brought to you by Be the Business, a not for profit movement, helping every firm in the country improve their performance, one small step at a time. We know every business leader is different. So visit Bethebusiness.com to find out which of our programmes might suit you best. Now, back to the episode.

HR

So with with new recruits, do you have anything that's kind of particularly detailed about how they begin their first few weeks and months with the business to get them used to that kind of culture and their way of doing stuff?

WB-A

So we definitely we have a sort of relatively traditional onboarding, I don't think it's good enough, it frustrates me, we don't have enough time on the shop floor in our different retail shops. We do

a bit of it, but not enough. And you know, so many things we always want to get better, but it's not bad. But it could be better. I think the main thing that is different is most people join an organisation after their first three, three or so weeks of induction, they then go right what would you like me to do? And they expect to be told, but not in our organisation? After three or four weeks, if someone comes and says, What do you like me to do? We look at him like the three eyed frog and say, I've got no idea. That's why I employed you you muppet. This is what we're trying to achieve. You've been employed, tell me what you need, because you know more than I do, so that we can get there and come back to me in a week or in a couple of weeks. And tell me what we need to do to get there. And it doesn't matter where you are in the organisation. Every person who works for you knows more than you in that field. So listen to them and give them the opportunity to contribute.

HR

That kind of empowerment, I imagine more often than not, not only is it like people aren't used to but it can really change the way that they act and behave and can be the moment they've been waiting for from an employer and a job that they have.

WB-A

Yes. And it's funny, it seems so obvious. But I think there is this weird cultural thing that we have in business, where when you're in business, the higher up you go, you're meant to know more like some miraculous thing where just when your job title changes, you suddenly know everything. I still know nothing. I mean, I spent my entire time pottering along discovering I don't know most stuff. So actually, the idea that somebody who's meant to be the boss doesn't know everything. I mean, it starts with our prime minister for who's meant to know everything, which is completely unrealistic and not true.

So I think if you can be humble as a leader, that doesn't mean you're not ambitious. That doesn't mean you're not demanding, but you're humble in terms of your knowledge, and that that humility that vulnerability allows your staff to rise up and feel responsible. You know, it's like if you do everything for your children, your children are never stand on their own two feet. It's the same with your staff, you've got to let your staff feel like they know more, and they can lead and they can lead in their field and they should lead because they have more knowledge.

HR

Now, you told me you're a bit obsessed with waste. We're sitting here right in the middle of Brompton HQ, factory floor is 20 metres away. How does that play out in this work environment, this obsession with waste?

WB-A

So waste? It's a funny word because of course, we had the word the wastepaper basket. And I think that's what people think waste is, it's like stuff, which it is, you know, if I see something on the floor that has value, I remember in the early days, I used to even go through the bins and collect all the bits and bobs, and take them back to the staff and say, Would you like 10 quid,

and they'd say, yes. And then I'd empty all my pockets out and show them the 10 quid that I just scooped out the bin. I mean, you know, that's obvious. But actually, waste is like putting on X ray specs. And you see it everywhere. Non value add, where people are doing stuff that is not contributing is not adding value, like they're trundling along, walking miles to go and get something or it's harder for them to do than they need to. Or they're having meetings where they're basically sitting on their phone, because they're bored, they don't really need to be there.

We're riddled in it, it's everywhere. And the opportunity to take the sort of shackles off your staff to explain to them what waste is, so they can see it like you see it, they go ahh now ok, so maybe we can do this differently. Maybe we can do this. So it makes it easy. Or maybe we can say we only have one person from each team coming to the meetings, and they can be responsible and communicate back to us, or whatever it happens to be. But the exciting thing is, once you know what waste looks like, you discover to your horror you're riddled in it, the stuff is everywhere. And how exciting is that? Because if you're still in business today, and you're making a profit, let's hope, and you're riddled in waste, think how much better you could be if you reduce that waste, you're never going to eliminate it. Because every time you get to a point where you've optimised it, you're doing something new, you don't quite know what you're doing, and you introduce a whole new load of waste. So it's a neverending story, but it is everywhere. And you've got to open your eyes and see it and question everything. Why? How is that adding value? Could we do that better challenge challenge challenge.

HR

And I suppose a big part of surfacing those waste improvements is empowering your staff to be the the ideas behind those the people saying, look, well, I just I've been doing it this way for weeks, but I just don't think it's the right way. So how some of the more junior members of staff played a role in this improvement journey, this elimination of waste is becoming a slicker, a more slick operation?

WB-A

Yeah, there is a real blind spot again in business that when you look at somebody's CV, you're sort of you compartmentalise them, and you say, Well, this is what somebody knows. And all I can see is what's on their CV, and that's all they know, you are seeing a 10th of somebody in their CV because they're telling you what they think you want to know. But we all are rich, complex, interesting individuals with families and challenges and interests outside of our life. And in that bit, there is value and far more than you might realise. And you need to find a mechanism to allow people to fulfil their potential in the richest possible way.

I mean, we have found one of my guys was a young paint inspector. So his job was under a special light when the parts came from the paint company. We now do it in house. He was checking the paint and we have primary secondary and tertiary faces for inclusion scratches you know fish eyes anything like that. Anyway, he said Will you know if you don't mind and a little hand goes up. I think we could do this a bit better. Yeah, great. Take a few parts home. Yeah, you're going to come up with a new idea. Great. Well done. Anyway, Potters off. Four weeks, come back and he said Will know how to go. Oh, great. We'll let's see how he's got on with his good idea. Anyway, blooming Nora, he'd modelled the whole things in 3D. You could turn them

round on themselves. You held a mouse over it, it lit it up. It told you whether it's primary, secondary or tertiary. You clicked on it. I was like, Oh my god, Kane, this is insane. This is awesome. How do you do this? He goes, Oh, well, you know, I do a bit of programming on the side. What? This is outrageous. He now is no longer inspecting paintwork. He is a programmer in our company and is doing amazing things for our business, some of which I want to talk to you about and show you on the shop floor but it's there is value everywhere, and you just need to take the time to allow it to present itself.

HR

Should we go look at on the shop floor. Now then?

WB-A

Sounds like a plan.

HR

So Will, we're on the factory floor. Now tell us what we're looking at here.

WB-A

So we are on, we've got three lines, we've got two standard bike lines, then we've got an E-bike line, which is over there. And we're standing on one of our main bike lines. And we've got about 19 stations, we've got red bikes, black bikes, purple, shiny bikes, we've got three speeds, six beads, all manner of stuff, piling whizzing down the line about to go in a box and zoom out the factory.

HR

Okay, so we're here to talk a little bit about the technology that you guys have got some of the stations, so yes, what are we looking at here? What what are the what are the technology, what talk about simplicity, talk about what it's trying to do here?

WB-A

So first thing is if you look over there, which no one can see, but you can, there is a pillar, and it's got a massive, great computer on that pillar, there's a massive, great computer and on that pillar. So all of our pillars, this factory is smart, we built the infrastructure when we came into this factory three and a half years ago, so that we could drop down and push data into the factory and suck data out. So that's what's happening on each pillar. But then when you break it down into each station, you see each station has a little screen. Behind the screen as a little box. That little box is a masterpiece, and it's a Raspberry Pi, which cost 40 quid. And with a bit of magic from Python, which is a coding language, we now have a very, very sophisticated production control system, where we are able to tell our staff which bike is going to be built, we've got 16m variants. So we tell the staff what to do for that particular bike. We also there we have a torque wrench, so we know what tightness we're tightening up a bolt. What that means is, for that

particular bike, we will know who has touched every single bolt on that bike, we know who put the mud guards on who put the main frame the front frame together, we have an absolute record. We also know for the safety critical bolts, how tight they were tightened. And that's incredibly powerful information, it allows us to have visibility of our production flow, the speed of the flow, it allows us to control quality, and it allows us to give something to our customers, which is confidence in the quality control of this bike.

HR

And before you had this kind of technology on these stations, it was slightly the unknown of those kinds of things which you now have the data on.

WB-A

So before we had bits of paper that got lost that were random, you know, if five years down the road, you wanted to find it, forget it, no chance in a million years. And this system cost us pennies. It all exists. This is technology that's just out there. You can just buy it on Amazon. You just need to believe and have ideas and make it so. And you know, the funny thing is, people too often jump for the sort of consultants, and to go and find this sort of, I don't know, 200 quid an hour, amazing mega person. But you've got universities, you've got young talent bubbling up, you've got talent inside your own staff. And you've got to innovate. If all you do is just chuck money at consultants, you're not going to be beating the competition, you've got to come up with new ideas and suck ideas from different places. And this is just one example where one of our staff unlocked huge potential in our organisation.

HR

And what did you do with all members of staff, when you put these in on the stations, what was was going to education process so that they saw the benefit, it wasn't just another chore that they had to kind of, you know, adhere to every day?

WB-A

Things don't happen overnight. So when we started with a programme, we started with a really basic version, we were just experimenting, we were just trying to see if it would even work, then it got better, then it got more sophisticated, then we were able to integrate torque wrenches. And then we were able to have a fully configured bike which our customer can design their own bike, which then talk to the Raspberry Pi. And because we own it, because it's our system, we can adjust it, we can evolve it, we can make it better.

Of course, we're introducing an ERP system, which is an off the shelf, keep it simple, amazing mega system. But within that you want personalised processes specific to your business because one, they are just what you need. This is a competitive advantage for us versus the competition.

HR

And this kind of application that is used the Raspberry Pi and the touchscreen has kind of lit the lit the fire on other things you might be able to do to smooth even more stuff?

WB-A

I mean, there's so much more stuff you want to be able to do here. So the way the Raspberry Pi now works is if you're not trained on the station, you can't log in. So therefore it automatically checks you're trained. If you haven't been on the station for a long time. And while you've been away, for example, you're away for three or four weeks, some really important bit of insight came before you can log in. It'll say by the way while you're away, be careful with this because we found a problem. So and you could do weird stuff like you can have a drone and if a customer when you start the bike wanted to have their bike being videoed? While it's being made, suddenly, this drone could fly out and track their bike. And then they get a live feed of their bike be made. I mean, once you start with this stuff, it's just non stop. And again, it's cool. It's different. And it's not ridiculously expensive. It's, it's actually peanuts. It's just having the ambition and allowing your staff to have a go and play. And maybe it fails. But who knows? It'll be fun try.

HR

And one final thing before we go back upstairs, we've got a screen at each end with kind of live assembly line statistics. We're seeing how many bikes in built in packs? Yeah, how long has this been here? And what what does this do for the staff.

WB-A

So it's sort of all linked to the same thing. Because once you're able to collect data, then you can communicate back to your staff where you are, we have self managed teams. So our aim is up there, what we're trying for for the day, in the case of today, it's 143. And we've done 104. But it's swings and round about if you have a bad day, you won't do 143 in another day, you might do more. But what we want to do is give our team, we don't tell them exactly what to do, tell them what we're trying to achieve, okay, so they can all see it. And if we're on track, and if we're not on track, and they will adjust, we won't come and tell them what to do, they will adjust so they're in control of their own destiny.

HR

Fantastic. Well, let's get back upstairs and stop distracting these people let them get back to what they're doing.

WB-A

I know, we've dropped at least one bike as we've been involved in this conversation.

HR

Well, that was really interesting to go look at on the shop floor to see how something so simple. We're always guilty of over complicating something like technology, has improved what you guys are able to do. And the fact that that's come from one of your more junior members of staff, he's not doing that anymore. It's showing you what they've what the potential is, did that kind of interaction with with a member of staff like that give you reason to start going, I need to give people more opportunities to come forward these ideas because it relies on someone having the confidence, put their hand up and go, excuse me, person who is much more senior to me, I think there's something wrong here.

WB-A

I think you will find that it's a bit like people with our ideas, boxes, that sort of works. But my experience that's a bit limited. It's not set much waiting for them to come forward with the ideas. It's more a case of the manager at any level, listening and seeing, seeing the potential. And we have a birthday breakfast, every month, whoever's birthday it is we will go and have breakfast with me and we have a slap up breakfast. I was sitting next to one of our appraisers this morning. And it turns out, he does solid works. He's from Spain, he's got his own workshop. He's been making his own bikes, he can do MiG and TIG. He's been stuffing, like, what it's just happened this morning. Today. I'm like, right, you need to do a CV, I need you to put a PowerPoint presentation together, I'm going to get your meeting with our design director, because this is cool stuff. And you know you you've got all this knowledge I didn't even know you had. And that was just pure luck sitting next door to him at breakfast. But we have similar things with, you know, our pre pre assembly and Lucy's just be made team leader. And she's fantastic at managing people. Craig joined us when he was 16. He's now running for 35 people, we are not perfect. And there's plenty more stuff that we haven't seen. But I think in business, it's humility, it's listening, and you need to drive that right through your organisation, and not have this fear that other people might know more than you that's something to cherish and to celebrate not to be fearful of.

HR

And did he know that those skills were interesting and relevant that someone like you? Was he hoarding them? Or is he just for trying to find the right way bringing them to you?

WB-A

What happens is people are naturally quite afraid. That's why when you asked me waiting for them to come up with the ideas, it's quite intimidating, you don't realise it because I don't think I'm intimidating. But people are naturally intimidated, because you are, you know, a level above or two levels above. So it's it's more that the real trick is to create a culture of listening, and also a culture where there's space to find out about people. That's why we have, you know, we can have the idea of everyone getting to know each other when they're having a fag, because that's thankfully on the way out. But what we have done is shoving a fantastic coffee machine in. So anyone from the company at any time can roll up and have a cup of coffee. Well guess what? They'll meet somebody who they didn't even know. They're both making coffee, they chat about what they do, and you learn and you get to know who people really are. And there's value in that part of the organisation.

HR

Coming back to the role of technology, we've gone and seen a relatively simple application of technology which is having a big impact for you guys. I know you're about to roll out a big ERP system and that will be complicated. That will be messy, but are businesses guilty of over complicating technology and thinking that it's either this massive thing or nothing at all?

WB-A

I think yes is the answer. And you could say the same with robotics. You could say the same with all these amazing tools that exist because for the majority of us were small, medium-sized businesses., we're muddling along, you know, we're not Nissan's, or we're not the the amazing Ocado video that we've all seen where these robots whizzing around picking everything up dropping off. And it seems like people seem to sort of make out that it's either you're stuck in the dark ages, or you're some complete no human being robots everywhere world, when in fact, for us normal businesses, that's pretty unrealistic.

So you just need to pick the areas where it's a complete and utter no brainer, where you take something that has been tried 1,000 times and just stuffed it into your organisation. And the great thing about us a lot, the normal businesses, the ones that actually are not very productive and have all this opportunity for change is it's so obvious, it's all there. You can talk to her, you know, 100 businesses that are doing it better than you and now open their doors and give it to you because they're not competing. There's so much best practice in the UK because if you're going to survive in the UK, you need to be lean, you need to be efficient, and we can all learn from each other. And it's far more fun picking your staff off, and piling off to go and see Charles Tyrwhitt Shirts or Stannah Stairlifts or Hayter lawn mowers or Case New Holland tractors, than to sit for a half day in front of a bunch of PowerPoint slides. It's crass and boring. You know, and those guys who we go and visit, they give us their best practice for free. And it's great.

HR

So it tees me up quite nicely for my slight curveball questions, think I might know the answer to this. But if I told you that you have to week when no one was allowed to make any bikes, no one was allowed to do what it is they come in and do every day, what would you do with them?

WB-A

So you're right, you're leading me into the very question, the bit I want to do is to take people and take people in different parts. So for example, training, I think the hotel industry is one of the best industries when it comes to training young people, they, you know, in a relatively short period of time, take young people who don't have a great deal of skill. And they take them to a level where they are incredibly presentable, they are very professional, and they are doing it on a massive scale. So I would take my training team off, and we'd go and have a jolly good day at some fancy hotel, or have an enormous breakfast, learn loads and come back brimming with ideas.

You know, as I've already mentioned, I've taken my team to Charles Tyrwhitt shirts, because he shifts more boxes, to far flung parts of the world, his automated pick and pack systems incredible. His ecommerce systems incredible. There is so much wonderful, best practice in the UK. It's team building, it costs very little, it's good fun, and it creates an ongoing relationship. Because after that, you know each other, you're on LinkedIn, or you've got each other's emails and you start having a network. And it's a really valuable thing at all levels in the organisation to network and learn from others because it's why take the risk and try and be the first person to do it. When someone can say to you Don't waste your time with that. That's the one you want to go for and get on with it.

HR

And I think I'm right in saying your staff own a decent amount of the business. I don't know who it is, who owns what. Tell us a little bit about that, and what kind of impacts that kind of model has.

WB-A

So we and it was before my time and I would say our chairman Tim was the instigator. But he was keen from the outset to have staff ownership. And as a great scheme, called an enterprise management initiative scheme. An EMI scheme, we're now I've got too big. So we no longer qualify for that we use something called a C SOP. It's a brilliant scheme, because to issue options at the price of the company at the time, quite difficult to value your business, but you take your best bet. And those options wouldn't mature for five years. So effectively, it tied me and other members of staff in the company for five years. At a time when no one had heard of us where we were struggling to get good talent. It was a real way of actually finding out people who really believed in the business. They weren't sort of people who wanted to come on for two years and hop to the next company, the next company in that company. Because if you left you lost it all you had to be in for five years. And that philosophy has really served as well. And it now means that about 20 per cent of the company is owned by staff. And in many respects, it's a really good sort of balance to the shareholder group. Because the staff have a very long term view on the business. It's not running from one side to the other. So it just stops the business getting, you know, shoved in one direction the other what we're focusing on is the next 5, 10, 20 years, not the next three months results which for an engineering company is disastrous.

HR

And do they have any kind of role in decision making just being able to have that stake in the company, bring it to the table when it's decision make.

WB-A

So fortunately not, in some respects, we have about about 110 shareholders, which some are Andrew's oldest friends from university. When I did a management buyout of sorts back in 2008. Anyone who was I knew and, you know, was sufficiently I don't know, gullible, you know, I persuaded them to put some money in, like, my dad's got some shares. My brother in law's got some says, friends from uni have got shares, random people I met that I thought could stick

their hand in their pocket, they were, you know, they pile and put a bit of money in. So we've got a motley crew. But those shareholders all have influence. We don't have our AGM with everyone but at any time they can email me and they can ask me questions. And we're extremely open. Thankfully, we're private. So all the staff know how much cash we got in the bank, they know what we're doing. But what you don't have, if we tried to run the company with 110 shareholders, I mean, we didn't get a single decision done. You know, you've got to have a board who represent your shareholders. And we have a great board and a great executive team. So they have a role. But it's not like some theoretical Nirvana where everybody turns up and has a contribution, because that would just be total chaos.

HR

I want to finish up with what you call ant steps, on the podcast we call them small things. But they're those little bits that add up to something quite substantial. How is that kind of happened at Brompton? And what are some of those ant steps that you call them? What do they look like in a bit of detail?

WB-A

It's hard to say, but I think something that is relevant in our business, and I'm coming back to where I started is the ambition. And when I took over in 2008, we spent a bit of time with Andrew, who was stepping down as CEO and I was taking over to sort of really define what we stood for. Because even though we all knew it, we'd never really actually written it down. And it culminated in really what we were trying to do was to change how people lived in cities. And that one little sentence has been as relevant then, as it is today. And I think, if you spoke to most of our staff, they would recognise that as being what we are trying to achieve, not how much profit we're gonna make next month, or how many bikes we're gonna sell, they're all in there. But the thing that is the you know, the shining light is we want to make how people live in cities better.

When it comes to ant steps, we have some big problems facing the world. At the moment, we have a problem that our government are, sadly on a five year cycle, they get voted in every five years. So once they're in, there isn't the same urgency. Whereas I and every other business in the world, I'm voted every second. If a business makes a mistake, a bad mistake overnight, that business can be wrecked. And I'm selling bikes 24/7 around the world. So for me, I think the people that are going to change the world is the consumer. And it is the consumer making a slight change in their behaviour a minute shift. Rather than jumping on the tube they can get on a bike, it's delightful. Rather than buying that product, they can buy this product rather than buy from this organisation they can buy from that organisation. And if we can mobilise the consumer, if we can educate the consumer, business will change far faster than politics, business is international, its global, we will solve our problems because business will take the lead because it's following the demands of its customer. But those demands are not massive, it's a small shift. And it doesn't matter whether that shift is in our organisation, or outside of our organisation, the things that make the big difference is getting consensus and small movements. And that has a big impact.

HR

I think that's a great place to leave it. I think it's really interesting that a bike business, which simply makes bikes has a vision to change the way cities operate and help people move through them. I think that's an incredible thing for for starting moving towards instead of we want to hit this revenue or we'll make this many bikes it's actually shifting how cultures and cities interact. I think it's really honestly I'm not going to look at a Brompton the same way again when I see one whiz by so thank you very much for sharing all those insights.

WB-A

My pleasure.

HR

Will inherited a business which looked like an inventor shed. All he could see was row after row of stock and stuff. His journey, first as an employee and then managing director, has seen him tackle a number of important developments, most of which we can all learn from. He's creates an environment where he sets the big, lofty multi year target, and employees are able to set their own KPIs and determine the best way they will contribute.

To make hundreds of bikes a day and one of 16,000 different permutations, every single bit needs to be in the right place at the right time. His use of simple but smart technology now means Brompton has complete control accountability across the span of a bike build. They know who tightened up which bolt to what amount and when. And what's even better is that the digital coding powering the system was written by someone working in the paint shop.

By really listening to staff when they have the conviction to come forward, he'll uncover the previously hidden skill that has now been unlocked and transformed one person's contribution to the business. Will spoke about a weird cultural thing we have in business where as you go higher, you're supposed to know more. He's decided to ignore that expectation of spending his time potting around discovering things he doesn't know is this vulnerability that power staff to rise up and be responsible? Every day he tells them they know more than he does.

Overall Will's approach to making Brompton a smooth running machine centres on tackling waste of all kinds. From asking stuff that they would like a tenner and then empty out the contents of a bin to show them all the things that were needlessly thrown away to tackling the other non value adding things like going on in a business like meaningless meetings. He has adopted a set of X ray spectacles to surface ways to improve. Once you know what waste looks like, you'll realise it is everywhere. But as he shared, how exciting is to think that you're still in business and hopefully making profit despite all this waste. Think how much better you could be if you could reduce it.

It's The Small Things is all about making change in your business manageable, giving you the inspiration and confidence to spend more time working on the business rather than simply in it.

Visit bethebusiness.com to access more helpful advice and guidance from our benchmarking assessment tool, which points it's there as your business we think are most in need of attention to our expanding range of ebooks looking at different themes such as employee motivation.

There's lots to help shape your next step. And if you've enjoyed the podcast then please help us by subscribing rating or leaving a review.