



Hello,

Today, I want to tell you a story. It's a little longer than our usual newsletter but I hope you'll find it engaging enough to read it through to the end.

When I first started working at [Zingerman's](#), Ari "The CEO" Weinzwieg, sent me an email:

"Thanks for being here. I'd be happy to meet with you if you'd like to."

Awwww. I recall thinking, that's nice. The personal touch. I had just quit a decade long job at a global billion dollar company to work at Zingerman's. It felt good that the CEO had written to me. Did he write to everyone, I wondered, or just the new corporate refugees? Either way, old habits die hard, I read it corporate memo style – thought of it was one of those top down "We care about You as an individual" memos, took a moment to feel appropriately cared for, and deleted it.

I was wrong.

Ari does this GNP (Gentle Never-ending Pressure) thing and he followed up on that email in conversation every time he saw me at the [Deli](#) for the next month –

"Really. I'd be happy to talk to you. About anything. This is a pretty big change for you"

So, in a "[I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore](#)" way, I thought, what do I have to lose? The be-careful-what-you-say-to-the-muckety-mucks-it-might-ruin-your-career had never been my thing anyway. I gave it a shot.

A couple of weeks later, I met with Ari and many great (and frustrating and challenging and yes, difficult) conversations ensued. I was all fired up from my ongoing and very excellent training at Zingerman's and the day to day experience of opening the Bread counter at the Deli. In each meeting I told Ari all the great ideas that this now-finally-inspired-by-work corporate refugee was having every single day! I want to do this. And that. And change this at the Deli. And make that happen. And it's all already great but it could be even greater. And here's how we can get there.

Ari listened. Somewhat patiently. It's a challenge for him with folks who are just talkin'. Which I was. And it showed. Then one day it went like this :

Ari : *So, how did it work?*

Me : *What do you mean?*

Ari : *How did it work?*

Me : *How did what work? I haven't actually made it happen.*

Ari : *Why not?*

Me : *Well ... you know, I'm just the manager-in-training. I don't even have a "home" department yet. And I was an engineer two months ago and vegetarian and I don't know anything about food or anything, really.*

Ari : *But it was a good idea, right?*

Me : *Yeah. I think it was.*

Ari : *So, what are you waiting for? Are you waiting for my permission? Great. You have it now. By the way, we have a recipe for creating change called [Bottom Line Change](#). If you haven't come across it yet I'll send you an essay to read. You don't have to use it but trust me; it will go much more smoothly if you do.*

WOAH. I thought. That's it? It doesn't work like that. I have a great idea and I just go do it? That's **crazy**.

In that other world in which I worked, it some times felt like the only way I could do the right thing was despite the leadership not because of them. What I did to advance my career and what I did to make a better product were, more often than I cared to admit, different things. Entirely.



And here I was at Zingerman's, mostly clueless on many fronts – food, service, and finance – to name a few, and yet, if I had a good idea, it had a home. It had the power to do good. To create positive and long lasting change.

How strange. How brilliant.

And it worked. Less than six months later I was riding high on the simple fact that I could create a positive impact on an organization I loved working in by just having a good idea and being willing to work at making it real. It was a high. For the first year it was almost an addiction! I didn't want to stop! And just about every leader I have worked for at Zingerman's has responded more or less like Ari did, if sometimes with a little more patience!!

"Everyone is a leader", Ari writes in his new book – [Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading – Part 2 – A Lapsed Anarchist's Approach to Being a Better Leader](#).

Everyone is a leader. Ari writes about it from the point of view of being an owner. Or someone with a position on an org chart. But I want to tell you about it from the position of someone who saw the power of it when I wasn't on any org chart. When the only "power" I had, on paper, was that of someone who has a good idea, who cares, and who is willing to do the work to make it real.

Since that moment, almost 8 years ago, I did "get" a position on the org chart, and less than three years later, I was managing \$3 million in revenue and 25 people in the [Retail department at Zingerman's Deli](#).

But I won't ever forget the power of that lesson from the "other" side – the side without a position on the org chart. I won't ever forget how exhilarating it was to be told – **You have a great idea? You have the responsibility and the tools to make it real. Go do it.**

I tried very hard to be that kind of leader when I did get on that *all-powerful* org chart. Don't get me wrong, it's a lot of work. When you create an environment where everyone is a leader, that's exactly what you get. Everyone has an idea. They're involved. They're engaged. They're inspired. And trust me, reality means that some of those ideas are ones that you just want to roll your eyes and say :

Seriously?

But what you do in an environment where everyone is a leader, is you treat it as a legitimate idea and you talk through it and you willingly, even excitedly, invest the time to be a sounding board and a reality check, and then you nurture them through it, because you want to be sure you don't mess with their inspiration and desire to be a leader when you walk them through why this particular idea is probably not going to fly.

Cause that's way better than spending all your time and energy trying to teach someone that you trust them and that it's okay to think and make a judgment call on the fly or to inspire someone to do the right thing – someone who has been told for years that it's their job to be a drone and obey whoever is on the org chart, one wee little bubble above them.

Read the rest of that chapter in [Zingerman's Guide to Good Leading – Part 2 – A Lapsed Anarchist's Approach to Being a Better Leader](#). Read them all, in fact. I can tell you from both "sides" that it will be well worth your time.

The logo for ZingTrain. It features the word "Zing" in a large, purple, cursive script font, followed by the word "TRAIN" in a smaller, purple, sans-serif font. A horizontal line underlines the "Zing" part, and a registered trademark symbol (®) is located at the end of the line.