Parables, Inertia, and Communicating Change

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BOOK REVIEW: PARABLES, INERTIA, AND COMMUNICATING CHANGE

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People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care . . . Needless to say, you can love people without leading them, but you cannot lead people without loving them . . . A leader is great, not because of his or her power, but because of his or her ability to empower others.

—John Maxwell (1993)

Our Iceberg Is Melting is a remarkably accessible book that should be recommended to all those seeking to improve an ingrained system—from schools (e.g., students, teachers, policymakers) to government bodies and established multinational companies. The story, although simplistic, is entertaining and educational. I have tested its concepts in my own organization and even with my 11-year-old daughter, who took to reading the book of her own accord, thoroughly enjoyed it, and even used several of the points raised to communicate and support her arguments for change in our own household policies.

By showcasing common sense as the cornerstone of good management principles, John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber have refocused the reader’s mind using a method that is too often forgotten in an age in which television and the Internet are the communicators, time is at an enormous premium, and the art of conversation continues to wane. This method is a powerful tool and one our ancestors knew well—the art of storytelling.

Like too many of us, the penguins of Kotter and Rathgeber’s book had grown habituated to rigid standard practices. This type of organizational
structure can be exceptionally strong, but it is also often brittle and therefore liable to fail when pressures and stresses are applied in unfamiliar places or in novel ways. The strength of the book lies in its outlining of three central truths of change management: 

1. Identifying and communicating dangers or threats
2. Facilitating functional deliberation
3. Sharing a sense of need for change to take place

It is perhaps surprising that, at least to those accustomed to rigid management styles, an action plan need not be in place before communicating the problem(s) observed. If a solution is decided upon too early or unilaterally, it may serve only to perpetuate the core issues stagnating a company’s growth. What must be recognized, however, is that convincing the stakeholders of the need for change requires that facts (rather than conjecture and fantasy) be presented to support the contentions raised—and be presented in an accessible and nonthreatening manner and environment.

This point helps identify another facet of successful change management that is gently and entertainingly raised in the tale of the iceberg. Threats to an organization should come only from the outside, and if the threatened organization is one in which each member is a true stakeholder, committed and impassioned, everyone responds. Threat within any association is analogous to the water in Fred’s (our feathered but flightless star of the tale) ice cave—it will erode the foundations (of the iceberg) and potentially destroy the entire structure. A nonthreatening society breeds input. It allows everyone, at every level, to feel that they will be (and deserve to be) heard and considered. Alice (an approachable member of the penguin colony’s Leadership Council) was the first to recognize such a need, and the value in it, in her encounter with Fred. Along the same lines of reasoning, reward does not need to be considered only in terms of financial incentive but can also be open commendation; we see this in the book in the form of heroes.

_Leadership is getting people to work for you when they are not obligated._
—Fred Smith (1986, p. 117)

Nonetheless, any task that is labored upon for the sole purpose of transient reward or the avoidance of punishment is one destined to fail. Our highest ambitions and greatest satisfactions spring from a commitment to a greater purpose. After all, no one asks, “What’s in it for me?” when the heart is fully involved. A loving family environment is, of course, the most widely accessible example of this truism, but historical studies of corporations have frequently shown that the most productive and committed workers are those who are happy in their job and their workplace. After all, modern workforces spend the majority of their waking lives in the company of their colleagues,
not of their families. Hence, happiness at work can influence not only the bottom line, but also the community at large.

*Openness by the leader paves the way for ownership by the people. Without ownership, changes will be short term. Changing people’s habits and ways of thinking is like writing instructions in the snow during a snowstorm. Every twenty minutes the instructions must be rewritten, unless ownership is given along with instructions.*

—John Maxwell (1993, p. 71)

*Change is rarely a smooth process. It can be intimidating and chaotic. In fact, transition has the potential to either launch an organization to the next level, or dump it into the deepest pit. That’s why wise leaders look out for change, then manage it, and lead their people through it.*

—John Maxwell (Church Leader Gazette, 2009)

Ownership is, therefore, the key to establishing a truly effective team and organization. The pathway to ownership is pride in, and sharing of, the principles, objectives, and leadership one initially follows. Initially, as the objective is to win full commitment and embrace a model in which no one is just a follower, but everyone is marching together to a single tune and with a common purpose. This is the defining characteristic of a vision.

After Fred’s identification of a threat, followed by Alice’s acceptance of the reality of his findings and Louis’s (Head Penguin of the Leadership Council) decision to allow Fred to present to the Council, came the need to formulate functional teams. Louis did this by demonstrating the problems with non-team independence and by building a sense of camaraderie (through such unrelated activities as squid fishing trips and informal chatting sessions). Louis selected the primary role players in deliberating and implementing the change plan based on sound judgment (as somewhat vaguely acknowledged by the Colony’s Professor Jordon) and according to a rule of thumb akin to that described by John Maxwell (1993):

*Knowing how to do a job is the accomplishment of labor—showing others is the accomplishment of the teacher—making sure the work is done by others is the accomplishment of the manager—inspiring others to do better work is the accomplishment of the leader* (p. XI).

Although teams may be founded on existing networks, as Fred relied upon his friends in the construction and placement of the iceberg model used in his first and most important presentation, they can also develop naturally through emerging and lasting friendships generated from a sense of fraternity. Such friendships should, of course, be supported in the work environment and even encouraged or designed, as Louis did for purposes of
expediency. Conflicts can and will arise (NoNo, the aptly named conformist in the iceberg’s Leadership Council, is the obvious villain of this type in the story) so strong and wisely developed teams of committed, complementary individuals are a necessity. Nonetheless, the value of NoNos cannot be underestimated; they provide a balance and subtly reenforce the need to consistently and continuously reevaluate assumptions and directions. Even with NoNo’s negative (or, more charitably, reserved, and traditional) attitude, Louis accepted NoNo and considered the role he needed to play—and deduced how best to balance NoNo’s “bad points” using Jordan’s “chatter intervention tactic” (another example of wise leadership in the suitable application of nonforced talent and the novel use of excess communication).

One man working with you is worth a dozen men working for you.
—Herman M. Koelliker (Aho, 2003, p. 59)

Such universal involvement demonstrates that any effective change management process must engage the entire organization—from the shop floor to the boardroom. We must also understand that implementation will require tailoring across the full spectrum of stakeholders in any community, and the involvement of the rank-and-file penguins as owners rather than voters or doers in the communication and change process seems lacking in Kotter’s fable: the colony was simply prepared to follow the dictates of a benign leadership. (Fred needed only convince the Council for his suggestions to be implemented.) Although some diffusion of leadership was witnessed in the guise of Sally Ann and her peers, one could, nonetheless, question the uniform applicability of the “Iceberg Principle” to the diverse functions of a large organization.

Assuming an adherence to the dichotomy of management styles captured in McGregor’s (1960) early Theory X and Theory Y approach, an authoritarian or military model is, for example and as evidenced by its almost ubiquitous usage, deemed most effective when managing operational labor or the historically classic blue collar workforce. In contrast, a more consultative or participative method is widely considered more appropriate when engaging the executive levels (perceived to be more mature and more committed). Likert (1967) extrapolated upon this concept by identifying four management styles while still seeming to advocate the development of a truly participative and mutually trusting group culture as the ideal to which organizations should aspire.

A thorough embrace of the postulate that “even a donkey will kick out against the stick eventually, but will always follow the carrot” (Lucy, 2009, p. C30) also supports Fred’s approach which, successful on the iceberg, should be equally effective when applied to the real-world diversities of
modern corporate structure (even if some implementation teething pain would be involved).

Unfortunately, there is an apparent disregard to an accumulating body of common sense and experiential evidence that trust and loyalty cannot but intertwine to create opportunities for enhanced productivity. Today’s workplace, in what could be considered a perversely myopic drive toward short-term rapid gain, can attest to increasingly little of the former, with the latter more often suffering misrepresentation as grudging self-preservation (in either direction). Hence, a change to this situation may be the first that needs to be managed and one consequentially wonders if Fred’s story might not have had a different ending had he been an indigent or unskilled laborer seeking to present his case to the corner offices of Wall Street.

Concluding from a fireplace perspective, although the almost animalistic use of anthropomorphomorphic figures in children’s fables is well recognized, the extrapolation of this trend into materials intended for an adult audience is often met with doubt or even outright derision. Nonetheless, this mechanism has proven a valuable tool for authors from Orwell and Disney through to Dawkins, Kotter, and many others. This is, perhaps, because there is a great and demonstrable validity in the use of accessible, nonthreatening characters and the art of the story in the ubiquitous effort to get a point across.

Albert Einstein spoke of the proof of true understanding and knowledge being demonstrated as follows: “You do not really understand something unless you can explain it to your grandmother” (Lissitz, 2009, p. 2). From physics to religions, and from ethics and morality to business and the environment, such is the gift of parable.

I encourage all readers who are eager to recapture the essence of the Bard in using communication to elucidate and resolve problems to read this book and reflect upon it as I (and my daughter) have done. I imagine that, having read the book, all audiences, young and old, will come to recognize many of the characters mentioned earlier among the workforces of their own icebergs.

NOTES

1. Other notable books have also used the animal parable to entertainingly illustrate basic business concepts:

Arguably one of the most quoted books of the zoomorphic genre, George Orwell’s (1946) Animal Farm was, according to its subtitle, a fairy story. Focused primarily on the sociopolitical machinations of a group of animals who overthrow a drunken farmer, assume the management of the farm and establish a model community in which all animals are equal (“...but some animals are more equal than others”), the story of Manor Farm’s rebellion and eventual devolution through violent socialism to acquiescent dictatorship, is also of one communication, barter-trade and (mis)management. From the beguiling and visionary legacy of Old Major, to the researched eloquence of Snowball and the sycophantic cajoling of Squealer, to the terse, self-aggrandizing commands of Napoleon and even the affirming simplicity of Boxer (“I will work harder!”); The voices of Orwell’s characters modulate as they convey a bitter saga of rules, regulations and economic necessities, of exploitation, propaganda and the totalitarian pitfalls along any supposed path to Utopia.
In the internationally acclaimed *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal With Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (Johnson and Blanchard, 1998), Dr. Spencer Johnson’s miniaturized world of mice (“Sniff” and “Scurry”) and tiny people (“Hem” and “Haw”) aims to motivate its readers to embrace change, adapt and grow. The take-home message being neatly synopsized by the seven life lessons eventually written by Haw on the walls of his maze-like world:

1. Change happens (“They keep moving the cheese”).
2. Anticipate change (“Get ready for the cheese to move”).
3. Monitor change (“Smell the cheese often so you know when it is getting old”).
4. Adapt to change quickly (“The quicker you let go of old cheese, the sooner you can enjoy new cheese”).
5. Change (“Move with the cheese”).
6. Enjoy change! (“Savor the adventure and enjoy the taste of new cheese!”).
7. Be ready to change quickly and enjoy it again and again (“They keep moving the cheese”).

The more recent *Animals, Inc.: A Business Parable for the 21st Century* (Tucker and Allman, 2004) is a book that sets its scene upon similar ground to that of the Orwellian Animal Farm—in that it is the tale of another group of barnyard animals electing to run their farm. The importance of the old adage “the right people (or farm animals) for the right jobs” is neatly illustrated in this fusion of business direction with story tale purpose on the Goode farm.

Lastly, Craig Hovey (2006) took the animal parable even lower than the mice of *Who Moved My Cheese?* by offering advice on how to survive the quagmire of politics and backbiting that seems to epitomize the modern office environment—from the perspective of the humble cockroach.

2. Amy Tan’s (2008) insightful article also incorporated each of these truths.


**REFERENCES**


