
**TEMPERED RADICALS: HOW PEOPLE USE DIFFERENCE TO
INSPIRE CHANGE AT WORK**

BY: DEBRA E. MEYERSON

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Debra E. Meyerson writes a compelling book on the challenges and opportunities of leadership for those who find themselves both inside a traditional organizational structure yet committed to change. She shares the stories of persons she calls "tempered radicals," and relates their experiences within organizations where strategy and diligence were necessary to effect change. Unlike other literature on leadership that focuses primarily on the role of a giant leader within an organization, this book encourages the work of each person in the art of making change. Meyerson structures the book around defining who tempered radicals are, how they work to make change, and what challenges they face in accomplishing these changes.

Meyerson defines tempered radicals as "organizational insiders" who are treated as outsiders because their values are "at odds with the dominant culture" (5). Meyerson's analysis of how tempered radicals make change is powerful because of its use of data gathered in interviews with particular tempered radicals in their contexts. Tempered radicals, Meyerson believes, make a difference in existing organizations by practicing methods of leadership that provide opportunities for significant systemic change that are broad and long-lasting. There are necessary strategies, however, for how to develop and eventually implement these changes throughout an organization. Meyerson addresses these strategies.

Meyerson's examination begins by attempting to understand the tempered radical. She first discusses the important role of self in determining the way in which a person goes about developing an agenda for change. Meyerson believes that persons are both very concretely their

"selves" and very susceptible to "social cues" from the outside, that the "selves" are both "stable" and "mutable," and that tempered radicals live within this tension (03). Meyerson's argument is that through action, the core self of a person is made real through tangible signs of the existence and importance of this self. She writes, "When people act in ways that outwardly express a valued part of their selves, they make that part of their selves "real"" (14). In this way, Meyerson describes the tempered radical by emphasizing the essential place of core values and identity in decision making, as well as the importance of acting on these values.

Meyerson describes a variety of helpful strategies used by tempered radicals to make a difference in their organizations. One way in which persons inspire change is quietly, or through often little noticed gestures or actions. In the chapter, "Resisting Quietly and Staying True to One's Self," Meyerson points out that these quiet efforts are often unnoticed or considered less important than the bold actions of others. Yet, in reality, they often help to set the necessary stage for bolder actions. She writes, "All types of efforts, including quiet forms of resistance, can *and often do* contribute to learning and adaptation, even though history's depiction of social change does not give much credit to the role of these more mundane behind-the-scenes actions" (38). Meyerson divides these types of quiet resistance into three categories: psychological resistance, self-expressions as resistance, and behind-the-scenes resistance. Some examples involve psychological armoring for the battle of hostility that a tempered radical often faces, quiet self-expression through dress, office decor or language, and the behind-the-scenes sharing of information and resources to provide an opportunity for an innovative idea to take hold.

Another tactic for making a difference used by tempered radicals is the art of negotiation. Essential to negotiating with others, however, is understanding the difference between one's own "non-negotiables" and "negotiables." Understanding the non-negotiables to be those things that compromise one's "core values or identity" will enable one to maneuver through negotiations with others (91). Knowing one's obligations, priorities, and fears is a necessity when it

comes to making decisions about which battles to fight and how to fight them. Meyerson writes, "When it comes time to evaluate a course of action – what to do, how far to push, what to give up – this kind of self-knowledge is invaluable" (89).

Meyerson describes the importance of group formation when working toward change. Individuals of various positions within an organization are able to do much to make change, but groups are often the vehicles through which strategies of change occur. It is often within groups that persons who would normally not feel comfortable voicing their views or concerns come together in strength and with new possibilities for action. It is often within groups that creative energy brings about new and different answers to questions not formerly arrived at by the individuals themselves. It is also within groups that the power to negotiate can be leveraged in ways often not possible with individuals. Meyerson's distinction here is helpful.

Meyerson emphasizes the role of small wins in effecting larger change. In the chapter, "Leveraging Small Wins," she writes, "First and foremost, small wins are powerful because they are doable" (104). Small wins can both effect change as well as affect attitudes that may shift thinking and action toward larger wins in the future. Small steps can make real the possibility of larger change, can affect a wider vision, and can broaden a base of support to concern larger numbers of people. This is what Meyerson calls the bundling of several small wins to create something larger and more powerful. She writes, "The most effective way tempered radicals extend the impact of small wins is by making explicit their significance or bundling several of them together and retrospectively framing them as a coherent package or 'program' that serves the same ends. This gives individual small wins greater punch" (111).

Meyerson's book offers powerful insights into how tempered radicals can be agents of change within larger, more traditional structures that often tend to resist such change. Persons at any level of organizational work will find in this book valuable tools for making a difference. Religious leaders in a variety of contexts, as well as any leader who seeks to

understand and produce change within an organization, will be compelled by this book and will find immediate ways to use its wisdom in the work of inspiring change.

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