

Tempered Radicals

By Debra Meyerson
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Imagine you're on a jury. After closing arguments, you and 11 others go into deliberation. The foreman calls for a vote. As one juror after another responds, you realize that you stand alone, with what had seemed like an obvious conclusion. Before you decide how to respond, you wake up.

You're not Henry Fonda in *Twelve Angry Men*, and you're not in court. Then you remember: *It's happened before—just yesterday, in fact.* Unlike the nightmare, however, the real dilemma isn't over. You lie there awake, contemplating how you're going to respond to it.

This book is about people who see things differently from others. It's about who they are, what they do about it, and what it means to be such a person. It's primarily meant for such people, to help them live with their unusual vision. But it also challenges the rest of us to recognize and appreciate the value of some people who don't quite fit in.

Inspired by her own experience as a feminist business school graduate student, and by others who seemed similarly out of place, Meyerson sought to understand the phenomenon of people who are both insiders and outsiders of the same group—whether in a work or social setting. Fifteen years after beginning her research, Meyerson now shares what she's learned.

Throughout, the message is supported with specific examples found in the research. The issues covered should be familiar to anybody. Among them are the environment, race, gender, and sexual orientation. As I began reading, I wondered whether the book could apply beyond such big, well-known issues.

In the first section, we see that “who tempered radicals are” is inseparable from what they do; action is part of the profile. Motivation for action begins with either a social identity or philosophical differ-

ences that set the individual apart from the mainstream.

In the second section, which is the heart of the book, Meyerson describes five general ways that “tempered radicals make a difference.” The five approaches vary in visibility of action and in the extent of immediate goals.

At one end of the spectrum, a person may quietly resist pressure to conform, with no greater goal than to remain true to self. Or the resistance may take the form of small, nearly invisible actions designed to change the environment.

Next to quiet resistance, we find subtle ways to turn threats into opportunities. Often, people in a minority position feel trapped, with at most two alternatives, quiet acceptance and direct confrontation. Tempered radicals don't accept this limit—they find alternatives and act accordingly.

Moving up another notch, we find negotiation. To effectively deal with an immediate concern, it's important to separate one's self from the problem, then to analyze the problem itself. Is the immediate concern an effect of a larger problem? Within that larger context, what's negotiable and what isn't? What other interests are at play?

Approaching the high end of this spectrum, we find “small wins.” For the individual who remains alert for them but careful in seizing opportunities, small wins require significant effort but can be leveraged for greater change.

Finally, at their most active, tempered radicals can organize and coordinate their efforts toward greater change. They need not gain an overwhelming number of supporters, just enough to add credibility to their concerns—enough to show that

their concerns are real.

The last section of the book looks at the challenges tempered radicals face. Even the most successful examples spent many years with the ambivalence of wanting to fit in, to succeed, yet feeling

compelled to work for change. Even as they succeeded, they had to endure the perceptions of not-so-tempered radicals who saw their success as evidence of a sell-out.

Here, we are also introduced to people who, through small sacrifices, found that after several years they had lost sight of their ideals; who felt as if they really had sold out.

In the closing chapter, Meyerson explains how tempered radicals are real leaders, even though they're not normally recognized or celebrated as such. Their focus on subtleties, on the little things, makes it easy to see their relevance beyond the bigger issues they espouse.

Meyerson explains their methods of action very well. They come across as neither too simple to be real nor too complex to be practical. However, as can be seen in both their successes and failures, there are no fast, easy criteria by which to choose a course of action.

Life as a tempered radical is difficult, but such lives invariably matter. I highly recommend the book. If you find yourself in it, you will find ideas to help you through the challenges. If you know any such people, this is an opportunity to understand them better, and you may gain an appreciation for what they do.

—Steve Malerich

