

# TEMPERED RADICALS SPEAK COURAGEOUSLY TO INSPIRE CHANGE

Educator and author analyzes  
energy on the inside

BY DENNIS SPARKS

**J**SD: *In Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003), you wrote: “Tempered radicals’ are people who want to succeed in their organizations yet want to live by their values

or identities, even if they are somehow at odds with the dominant culture of their organizations. Tempered radicals want to fit in and they want to retain what makes them different. ... These men and women of all races, religions, ethnic origins, ages, and sexual orientations from every corner of the globe describe how they must

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walk a fine line in their efforts to fit in without selling their souls.” In your description of tempered radicals as everyday leaders, you observe that they “are quiet catalysts who push back against prevailing norms, create learning, and lay the groundwork for slow but ongoing organizational and social change.”

**Meyerson:** Tempered radicals experience both a personal and political struggle, although they may not

experience it as explicitly political. When they assert an agenda or express ideals or identities that are different from what's dominant or acceptable, they challenge organizational norms. Doing so is inherently a political process. It's empowering and reassuring, though, for these individuals to see themselves as part of something bigger, to view a struggle that felt very personal and lonely as something that's larger and potentially more collective.

It's important to understand that tempered radicalism is not just a category of people or a static quality. It is a way of being, a stance toward a dominant culture, organization, or profession. It's being both an insider and an outsider, working to fit into what is currently acceptable and working to change norms of acceptability. It's about rocking the boat, but not so hard that you fall out of it. So tempered radicalism is in many ways a balancing act that gets expressed in a variety of ways.

#### NONCONFORMITY LEADS CHANGE

**JSD:** In explaining the role of tempered radicals as "constructive agents" in organizations, you argue that "... asserting the nonconforming aspects of oneself can pave the way for learning and change by questioning current practice and expectations and providing an alternative. ... When people act in ways that outwardly express a valued part of their selves, they make that part of their selves 'real.' ... Actions can also bolster people's sense of efficacy, proving to themselves and to others that they can make a difference, even if the direct consequences of their actions are small. ... [A]ctions transform people



Debra Meyerson

from the stance of passive bystander or victim to that of constructive agent." Elsewhere in your book you observe, "Under certain conditions, small positive deviations amplify and change the context such that these once deviant behaviors become the new norm. ... Often tempered radicals lead change more deliberately by initiating small wins that result in new relationships, understandings, and patterns of behavior."

**Meyerson:** I'd like to provide a broader context for that observation. A macro theory of change says that organizations are basically static and change only when something major happens. Another view sees organizations as organic and evolutionary, which means they are changing all the time. If we think of organizations that way, little nudges in the system can change the network of relationships, stimulate learning, and affect how work gets done. It means that small

actions actually matter and that people can provoke change from many places within the organization. This view is supported by a great deal of research.

These nudges to the system in service of an agenda or an identity create self-reinforcing cycles. When actions produce a concrete result, they increase a person's sense of efficacy, which in turn fuels new efforts and a different perspective on what constitutes an opportunity for making change. Success fuels involvement, and involvement fuels more action, and so on. The process begins, though, with action rather than analysis. Action leads to efficacy which leads to bolder actions and brings other people into the fold.

#### RADICALS SPEAK THE TRUTH

**JSD:** One of the actions you suggest is candor. You write in your book, "[M]ost conflicts are not created by tempered radicals; but tempered radicals are often the ones who speak 'truths' and raise issues that have been suppressed."

**Meyerson:** People who identify with the term "tempered radical" view the world differently, or at least have different experiences, whether that's due to their race, gender, religion, training, or professional orientation. Because of their experiences, they see things others don't see. For instance, a black woman attorney who was a junior member of her law firm was really unhappy with the way cases were being assigned to the young associates. Because she stood outside the majority, she saw patterns

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not seen by senior partners in who was getting the plum assignments and who was not. This attorney had an opportunity to speak to a very senior partner who wanted to know about her progress in the firm. She spoke her truth based on her experience. Upon inspection, it turned out that the firm was not distributing assignments equitably, which also meant it wasn't using its resources very well. This young attorney parlayed her perspective into significant change both for herself and the organization. She did so by speaking forthrightly about her experience in a nonthreatening way.

### HOLDING ON TO GOALS

**JSD:** Speaking forthrightly is often frightening, both to the speaker and to those on the receiving end of the message. In your book, you observe that tempered radicals are under "enormous pressure to conform and to suppress beliefs that challenge the majority" and that "the fear of exclusion and social ostracism by a group majority can drive people to act, speak, and even think in a way that is opposite to what they believe to be true and right."

**"Effective agents of change at the grassroots level know who they are and what they are trying to accomplish."**

**Meyerson:** Effective agents of change at the grassroots level know who they are and what they are trying to accomplish. Effective tempered radicals hold on to their deepest goals, which enables them to push through their fears and to choose their battles effectively.

This clarity enables a person to know when to let things go, when to really push, and what kinds of action to take. Clarity also enables someone to depersonalize a situation to avoid emotional, knee-jerk reactions. Clarity about what's negotiable and nonnegotiable is really the most essential thing.

Clarity of purpose also gives tem-

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**POSITION:** Debra Meyerson is associate professor of education and organizational behavior at Stanford University's School of Education and Graduate School of Business, where her research interests center on organizational change practices directed at advancing gender and race equity, conditions conducive to learning from grassroots change efforts in organizations, the negotiation of gender roles, and work and family boundaries in the age of communication technologies and post-industrial work.

**EDUCATION:** Meyerson has a bachelor of science degree in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she also earned a master's degree in business. She earned her Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Stanford University.

**PROFESSIONAL HISTORY:** Meyerson serves as co-principal investigator of Wallace Foundation research projects and previously as a principal investigator on Ford Foundation Research Grants; assistant professor of organizational behavior and

human resource management at the University of Michigan; visiting professor of organizational behavior at the University of California, Berkeley; visiting professor and lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Business; visiting professor in the department of management science and engineering at Stanford; visiting scholar at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Stanford; and professor in the Center for Gender and Organizations, Graduate School of Management, at Simmons College.

**PUBLICATIONS:** Meyerson has written numerous articles and books, including *Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003); "The Tempered Radicals," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2004; "Radical Change, the Quiet Way," *Harvard Business Review*, 2001; and "The Modest Manifesto for Shattering the Glass Ceiling," *Harvard Business Review*, 2000.

**TO CONTINUE** this conversation with Debra Meyerson, contact her by e-mail at: [debram@suse.stanford.edu](mailto:debram@suse.stanford.edu).

pered radicals a sense of patience and the ability to persist in what they are trying to do. Someone recently suggested that the most important tempered radical of our time may be Thurgood Marshall. He's known as someone who made big, sweeping changes, but if you look at the history of his work in the civil rights movement, you see that he knew when to wait and when to act. Both as a Supreme Court justice and an activist, he had a brilliant sense of timing combined with patience and persistence.

### SCHOOLS CAN CREATE CONTEXT

**JSD:** I'm curious about ways in which school or school system leaders can help people gain clarity about their purposes and values so that they

can find the courage to speak their truths and the energy to persist over many years.

**Meyerson:** The most important thing school leaders can do is to create a context that is focused on a worthy goal and in which teachers feel safe to regularly inquire into their own and others' practices in ways that promote professional learning. When people feel secure within a community of learning, they are much more likely to challenge the dominant norms and to inquire into the pedagogy used in the school. Such a context focuses energy on learning rather than on proving one's competence, protecting turf, or maintaining the status quo.

Debbie Meier, who has been very

involved in the small schools movement and is now at Stanford, recently spoke to my class about how she interacted with teachers each day to improve practice. She described various ways in which she inquired about teachers' practices, what they were learning from each other, and the kinds of research that would help them improve their teaching. Meier is able to provide tough feedback because teachers trust that her intention is to improve practice rather than put them down. Her intention shows up in everything, from how meetings are run to the amount of time built in for collaboration to ongoing inquiry focused on teaching and learning. All of this works, though, because it is surrounded by a context that creates the psychological and organizational safety that such learning requires and provides practices and routines that engage people in learning.

#### EVERYDAY LEARNING

**JSD:** Most teachers associate professional development with courses, workshops, and guest speakers. You are describing ways in which everyday

interactions can stimulate some of the most important types of professional learning.

**Meyerson:** The most valuable learning that takes place in schools occurs when teachers interact as part of their daily routine. While learning is rhetorically at the center of schools' work, schools are not very good at promoting this type of professional learning, at least not the ones I've been studying. Learning is a product of grassroots activity, of questioning and challenging to make things better.

Tempered radicalism is sustained through the daily interactions that occur within a supportive context.

An important part of that context that it's important to mention is the celebration of small victories and the creation of learning around those victories. That's done when teachers experiment, have some success, and have deep conversations with one another about the things that are working. Teachers initiate these interactions to stimulate learning, not to pat themselves on the back. Experiments become the stimulus for conversation and the vehicle for pro-

fessional learning. That's how organizations improve.

#### PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

**JSD:** Your perspective on the ability of individuals to improve their own professional circumstances and the quality of work in their organizations seems positive and hopeful. For instance, in your book you observe that "Tempered radicals inspire change . . . They inspire by having courage to tell the truth even when it's difficult to do so, and by having the conviction to stay engaged in tough conversations. . . Their leadership inspires — and matters — in big and small ways every day."

**Meyerson:** When you are in the thick of grassroots change and pounding away day after day, it is often very hard to know if your actions are actually accomplishing something. It's an act of faith on the part of the individual to believe that over time these daily actions matter. Having done this research, I can see how it adds up. My book is in praise of purposeful small acts that fuel the learning that is necessary to create sustainable change. ■