

Managing Change & Technology

The Light Version... Vol 3, #5
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*To Embrace the Future,
Let go of the Past
PdJ*

IN CONFLICT WITH MICE

An examination of “Who moved my Cheese”

A negative review

From time to time I've reviewed a book because I thought it deserved the extra exposure and felt people would benefit from reading it. Naturally you'd describe every review I've written, with this motivation in mind, as a 'positive' review. This isn't one of them.

I've never, until now, written a negative review of a product, conference or a book. The reason? Why bother? There are enough people willing to write bad reviews of other people's work, I don't need to. There's an exception to every rule.

Over the past year or so, I've received numerous e-mails from people who know I'm interested in change management, and that I do a lot of work, writing and speaking in this area. They fervently suggest I read 'THE' book on change... something called "Who moved my Cheese" by Spencer Johnson MD, published by Putnam.

Naturally my curiosity finally got the better of me, and I tracked it down. Any book prompting so many people to tell me to read it, must have something going for it, right?

It's a hardcover little book. Less than 100 pages. The text of the actual book itself, starts on page 21 and ends on page 94, big print, lots of pictures (15 full pages) for a total of, at most, 25,000 words. Cost? \$19.95 USD. It takes an average reader less than an hour to read. It is a best seller by any standard you care to use. There are tales of companies who have purchased tens of thousands of copies and distributed a copy to every employee.

What message does WMMC contain that management is willing to spend approximately \$250,000 to impress it upon every employee? It must surely be a message that supports the very core of the company's management philosophy.

What did I think of the book? It is the first management book I've read that I found morally offensive.

If you take into account I found Machiavelli's "The Prince" merely an interesting, readable and useful historical book on management strategy, then 'morally offensive' is not a casual observation. It's also an assertion requiring a strong supporting argument.

Welcome to this month's issue of MC&T.

When you read any book, even a 'book' of some 25,000 words, your own personal biases influence your perception of the work. I'm as guilty of that fault as the next person... perhaps more guilty than most. I do not come to this book without my own opinions/views regarding the management of change. It's what I do for a living.

Here, in the spirit of full disclosure, is my hard wired bias when it comes to the issue of Change.

The resistance we encounter when attempting to implement change is a natural response to the threat of losing something which has proven itself useful in the past.

A 'good' manager of change accepts resistance as part and parcel of the implementation task, and works to alleviate the legitimate concerns raised by people who are only trying to protect what made them and/or their company, successful in the past.

My review of WMMC is based upon the above fundamental 'truth' as I see it. Disagree with the above philosophy and you'll disagree with my review. The philosophy found in WMMC is as diametrically opposed to this view, as is humanly possible.

WMMC is a parable about four little characters in an imaginary maze. There are two little mice named 'Sniff' and 'Scurry' and two little people named 'Hem' and 'Haw'.

The mice are described as "possessing only simple rodent brains but good instincts", the little people are described as "using their brains, filled with many beliefs and emotions."

The book isn't all bad, it raises many excellent points.

The observation that, "The more important your cheese is to you, the more you want to hold onto it" is not only true, it's insightful. The loss of a pen is trivial compared to the loss of your job, which in turn is trivial compared to the loss of a loved one.

Another true statement about change: "The quicker you let go of old cheese, the sooner you find new cheese" is totally compatible with my own personal motto: "To embrace the future, let go of the past."

My concern is with how the central theme is presented. The story revolves around how a pile of cheese is 'moved' (They eat it until there is nothing left). The two mice accept the vanishing of their cheese in their stride. Without uttering a single question, they wander off and search for more cheese. In the book this is presented as the correct response to change.

Good = Don't think,
just react,
accept the situation,
don't ask questions.

The two little people 'resist' the change by asking questions such as "Why did they do this to me?" and "What's really going on here?". This is defined by the book as "over analyzing the problem" and is clearly labeled as the bad approach to coping with change.

Bad = Think,
ask questions,
try to find out why the change occurred,
and why it was necessary.

In some situations, what WMMC offers is excellent advice. WMMC is well worth the hefty price tag if we'd only pay attention. There's an inescapable fact of life we have to accept. We will each undergo drastic changes over which we will have absolutely no control. Loved ones will die, hurricanes will blow away a lifetime of progress, lightning will strike where it is least expected... By all means, when this happens to you take the time necessary to grieve, then get over it and move on.

There is no question this is good advice. In many of life's daily hardships the only choice we have is to bull ahead. It's not even a matter of keeping a "stiff upper lip", crying (grieving, if the word 'crying' bothers you) is allowed as long as you start moving forward again. Life isn't always fair, you play the hand that's dealt to you. This is all so obviously true, that these snippets of advice come across as tired old clichés. But they are no less true because we've heard them before.

Moral? Things change, get over it and get on with your life.

The trouble is... "Who moved my cheese?" is intended more for the corporate employee than for individuals dealing with life's hardships. This is made very clear by the repeated urgings to purchase the book for everyone in your company.

WMMC communicates a single message very clearly, effectively, loudly and pointedly, to the utter glee of some, not all, management types. The message is this:

When management moves the cheese you should not ask questions, you should not resist, certainly don't "think" and don't over analyze... just change, damn it. If you don't? Then you're the problem. Be a good little mouse possessing only a simple rodent brain, and good instincts, and accept the change without question. (or else...)

The assumption is that corporate change, is always change over which we have no control. That corporate change is something we can do nothing about. That like an unexpected death, it is something we have no say in, and we should just accept it.

WMMC attempts to write a blank cheque for those managers who are either incapable of explaining why they're making a change, or who have no desire to explain their actions.

WMMC places the entire responsibility for a successful change on the backs of the unthinking little rodents scurrying around clueless in the corporate maze. Management has no defined role or responsibility in 'managing' change. They need only move the cheese without warning, without explanation, without reason, and they've done their part.

The rest is up to the corporate mice, and if THEY resist the change then we know who to blame.

Sorry, this doesn't make sense.

Of course there are situations where nobody in the organization has control and everyone just has to change. A hostile takeover is a good example, as is a sudden downturn in the market similar to what the airline industries are undergoing, but these are the exceptions, not the norm.

Most corporate change consists of system upgrades, reorganizations, process changes, promotions, firings, layoffs etc. etc. None of these are 'random' events, unless of course, management is so totally incompetent they really don't have control over these types of changes. I.e. They are literally incapable of planning of any sort.

Most corporate changes are hopefully decided upon for good rational reasons. Managers can, therefore, explain that reasoning process to their employees.

The management style of "Change by Edict", suggests that management believes the people they employ, are incapable of the same level of reasoning as are the managers. Every organization I know of, mouths the phrase: "Our strength is our people"... Therefore, handing "Who moved my Cheese?" to all staff members, contradicts a core corporate belief... unless secretly, management really does want employees to just shut up and obey orders without thinking.

Ironically, anyone handed WMMC by their employer, is also handed the solution to their problem. If an employee values their ability to think, to ask questions, to be of value to the company, and if they hold to the obviously absurd belief that they were hired to make a difference, then they know that receiving WMMC is a signal that their 'cheese', that thing they value most as a thinking employee, is being taken away.

For this decision only... act exactly as the book suggests. Don't think. Just react. Rely on your instinct. Leave immediately and start looking for your new 'cheese'... seek a company that values your ability to think, to ask questions and to contribute to the growth of the company.

Peter de Jager / February 21, 2002

P.S. To any manager who handed out WMMC to their staff, this article is sedition. I recognize full well, that I've just precluded getting hired by all those companies who ever handed it out to their employees. Such is life... for a non-mouse.

When I announced last issue, my intent to review WMMC, I thought it only fair to provide some other voices access to the podium. I did not receive many, and I expected more positive reviews than I received.

In the interests of fairness, here are ALL the replies I received.

WHAT IS A VALUABLE INSIGHT WORTH?

by Anon

I've heard people say that they thought this book was amazing and people who thought it was a piece of ^%#^&. I fall in between. Certainly it does not present a positive change process, but it does present what often happens in reality. So from the point of view of helping people cope with unexpected and unwanted change, maybe it can help. Whether one likes the presentation style or not, or whether one finds the whole thing obvious is, of course, a personal issue.

I did find one very valuable saying. Again, one might say "Well that's obvious". But as we all know, what's obvious to one is not obvious to another. The saying was:

"What would you do if you weren't afraid?"

That, to me, made the book worth my reading time. Whether it has anything to do with change is, to me, irrelevant. I ask myself this question every now and then when faced with difficult decisions. Call it a removal of restrictions, which is one of the best ways to brainstorm. It frees you to consider actions and options you might not otherwise have thought of.

I suppose the question is: "What is a valuable insight worth?"
By Anon.

Continued in a later e-mail...

Yes, you can use my comments if you think they're worthwhile. Please do not include the e-mail address as the comments are mine and in no way reflect my company (and so on, standard disclaimers etc).

Certainly in the case of change, it behooves management to remove the fear. If they don't, they get what they deserve (people complaining, leaving, less productive, etc). On the other hand, as intelligent adults, it behooves us to attempt to take control of our circumstances. We may not like it, but then life doesn't ask our permission to do things to us.

I use the saying completely out of any context of change. I use it when confronted by difficult decisions where I might be concerned about repercussions. At a minimum I get to consider actions I might not have otherwise considered.

TWO CENTS WORTH OF CHANGE

by Steve Epner

Be careful of asking for thoughts - you will get some. Here is my simplistic two cents on change. I hereby give you permission to publish this as long as you identify me as the author and do not restrict my ability to use this in the future.

Change is something that many of us have to deal with daily. It either becomes overwhelming or natural. All of us bump into people on both ends of the spectrum as well as everywhere in between.

One consulting assignment caused me to recognize the difficulty that many otherwise intelligent managers have in dealing with change. After an extensive process of working with a team to define a vision for the future, we presented it to the management group. No one was going to be able to understand and internalize all of that work in an afternoon. I knew I had to be able to sum up all of my findings in one overhead.

It was one of the most difficult slides I have ever had to develop, but I think I succeeded. The client accepted the need to change and has been very successful. Here is my last slide to share with your readers. I hope it will help them to move forward.

If we do not change	We will fail.
If we wait to change	The best we can do is follow others.
If we embrace change	We can lead and succeed.

Steve Epner CSP
314-983-1214

INSTIGATING CHANGE

By Kim Walters

Hi Peter,

True, management usually instigates change--in the context of what this book recommends, is that always a bad thing?

The message isn't to abandon a good thing, but rather to search out contingencies for when your 'cheese' runs out. If management isn't preparing for change, who will? Employees generally don't have the power, or the 'big picture need' to see why it may be necessary to move out of the comfort zone.

You're welcome to publish my comments.

Regards,
Kim Walters

WHO WAS WMMC WRITTEN FOR?

By David Randolph

When reviewing such a book as "Who moved my cheese?" it is important to ask "to whom is the book intended?". I submit that for the specific audience that the book was intended, the book is a very good book.

The book, "Who moved my cheese?", is written for the person who has been in one company and one job for their whole life. The goal of the book is to show the belief that looking for something new actually might work. For this reason, the book neglects to mention that "there are cats out there who eat mice". Such a mention would destroy the whole idea of the book - which is to impart a belief in change.

Now, whether or not that expression of the faith is the best way to motivate others to adopt the faith in the good of change, is something that motivational people can debate over.

David Randolph
dave@prairietrail.com

That's all I received in the way of input for this particular issue. I suspect that I will receive a few more as a response to all the thoughts above. I'd like to continue this exploration of two, obviously very different, views of how change should be managed or how we should respond to corporate changes.

*If you have some thoughts... I'm sure you do... send them via this link.
Thanks in advance,
Your moderator
Peter de Jager*

*I love an opposition that has convictions
Frederick the Great*

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All comments are always welcome! Send them to me at pdejager@technobility.com

Change Seminar Opportunity

I will be holding four one day Change workshops, at the following locations and dates.

Montreal, QC	June 1 st 2002
Philadelphia, PA	July 19 th 2002
Orlando, FL	July 28 th 2002
Toronto, Ont	August 10 th 2002

*The fee structure is unique. \$595.00USD for your first attendee.
\$250.00USD for additional team members.
\$100.00USD for one admin assistant.*

The course format? A hands on, interactive workshop designed to teach the Change Process Model and Change Implementation Strategies as outlined in MCT0103 & MCT0107 (archived at www.technobility.com). The workshop will address both the theory and the practice of Change Management Projects from a Team perspective.

Each attendee will also receive a copy of The Change Chronicles Video, a \$75.00 value.

Contact me at pdejager@technobility.com if you're interested in sending your Change Management Team to this seminar, or to arrange an in-house event. *Class sizes will be restricted to 30 attendees.*

MY SERVICES & PRODUCTS

I'm primarily a speaker/consultant on issues relating to Change and the Future. You can contact me via e-mail at pdejager@technobility.com or call me at 1-905-792-8706 to discuss how I might be of service to your organization.

My primary speaking topics fall under the umbrella of Change, Technology and the Future. Here are some sample titles.

Managing the Impact of Change...

Basically everything I talk about in this journal are topics I consult and speak about. Let's discuss how I might be of service to you. If I can't help you, I know someone who can.

Commerce ends with an E!...

Our focus is first on our 'commerce' and then on the Internet

The Rule of 100 in your business...

Why rapid change in ANY direction forces you to re-examine your business, your industry and even society.

Technology in Context...

What instant access to information means to any industry.

The Erosion of Boundaries...

What does the ever increasing flood of technology mean to life in general?

The drive to simplicity in the face of complexity...

Why Cities in Italy are reversing the clock on Technology.

The Vapour Point of Product

What happens when it costs less to build it yourself than to buy it from a store? An examination of the near future of Rapid Manufacturing.

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A collections of mini-essays about this thing called Life.

That's it... see you next month!
Peter de Jager