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Chapter Twelve

THE POSITIVE POTENTIAL OF TEMPERED RADICALS

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Meyerson and Quinn are interested in extending a scholarly look at the complementary aspects of *tempered radicals* and positive deviance behaviors defined within a Positive Organizational Scholarship perspective. Tempered Radicals, as defined in Meyerson's earlier works, are those who share an outsider/insider identity in groups or organizations and who seek to make things better for themselves and others. These authors focus on the tempered radical's "subtle, incremental and long-term strategies which slowly" make a significant difference. It is this source of positive change which is undertaken "with honor" that allows for a different notion of exemplary times to be viewed as long-term and enduring.

Over a career spanning several decades, an executive at a large financial firm implores employees he has hired to aggressively identify and hire other minority candidates (Meyerson, 2001). A closeted minister drawn to his faith but constrained by denominational unease to homosexuality decides to force open a discussion on the issue by coming out at an annual church conference (Creed, 2003). Two graduate students interested in studying feminist executives but counseled to pursue less "radical" research find ways to do both (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). An African-American woman successfully

manages the opposing pulls of her career and her community (Bell, 1990). These individuals each see themselves as outsiders, not quite fitting in with the dominant culture and dynamics of their organization. But they are also insiders, working as change agents within the system, actively engaged in challenging the status quo. Through a variety of ways, these people seek to make things better, for themselves and for others. They are tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully, 1995).

In this chapter, we argue that tempered radicals are a source for positive change and virtue in organizations. We do so by recognizing their potential to be sources of positive deviance. We begin by describing tempered radicals, who they are and what they do. We next address the positive potential for tempered radicals by bringing to bear emerging scholarship on positive deviance. We conclude by describing challenges faced by tempered radicals and offering lessons for leaders interested in cultivating and amplifying tempered radicalism.

Tempered radicals can be found everywhere, across all industries, in all positions, and in all manner of organizations, formal and informal, large and small. They make a difference by pursuing a variety of strategies, from quiet resistance to collective action. But their impact is often overlooked because as outsiders, they are compelled to pursue subtle, incremental, and long-term strategies. Rather than the heroic leaders we are too often captivated by, tempered radicals are the “cautious and committed catalysts who keep going and who slowly make a difference” (Meyerson, 2001, p. 5).

Who are Tempered Radicals?

Tempered radicals are people who “identify with and are committed to their organizations and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization” (Meyerson and Scully, 1995, p. 586). Tempered radicals embody a tension between the existing institutional order and alternative orders. They are at

once insiders and outsiders, negotiators of a middle path between conformity and rebellion (Meyerson, 2001). But they are not complacent. Tempered radicals question the prevailing logic. They are able to see ways in which normal patterns of behavior and sense-making do not meet the needs of groups of people, how the prevailing logic limits full participation, or how, in some cases, normal patterns constrain organizational effectiveness.

Tempered radicals are different from people who are in the majority in their organization in one of two ways. Either a social identity, such as race, gender, sexual orientation or religion marks them as different and positions them as outsiders within their organizations or their values or beliefs clash with those that are dominant in their organization (Meyerson, 2001). People in the first group — who work to succeed on insider terms, but are cast as outsiders — experience two types of tensions. For some people, the tension is experienced primarily as an identity-based struggle as they attempt to express a self that marks them as different and marginal. Others define the tension in terms of the challenges associated with change and resistance. These people attempt to change the organization to push outward the terms of membership and to adopt work practices that are mindful of differences so all members can thrive. Either way, whether people primarily experience the challenges of identity maintenance or the challenges associating with advancing change, when they express identities that deviate from the majority, they call into question taken-for-granted criteria of membership and norms of behavior. Thus, even those tempered radicals who experience their struggle in strictly personal terms must confront the unavoidable political implications of their enacted selves.

The men and women who fall into the second category — whose differences are rooted in value or ideological clashes — embrace change agendas rooted in those values and beliefs. The challenge facing most of these tempered radicals center around the struggle of finding ways to enact their deviant values and beliefs by effecting change while preserving the legitimacy within the very system they seek to change.

What is the Positive Potential of Tempered Radicals?

As outsiders within their organizations, tempered radicals often do not possess the authority and legitimacy needed to mandate systemic change. Any potentially “radical” action is “tempered” by their marginality and the organizational and environmental constraints these individuals face. As a result, the set of responses undertaken to push against opposing organizational norms tend to be subtle, incremental, and long range (Meyerson, 2001). It is important to note that tempered radicals are not *radicals* in the sense that they do not act in ways that represent a considerable departure from normal. Rather than working to dismantle systems, they work from within to strengthen them. Tempered radicals push against opposing organizational norms, but their actions are *tempered*: They recognize “modest and doable choices in between, such as choosing their battles, creating pockets of learning, and making way for small wins” (6).

For any set of strategies that tempered radicals employ, they face the challenge of expressing their identities or values or advancing a change agenda from within his/her organization. Different strategies meet these challenges to varying degrees. For example, tempered radicals can resist the dominant organizational culture by deliberately enacting their identities, cultures, or values through language, dress, and office decor. People employing these strategies are not necessarily seeking systemic change. They simply want to express their valued selves. Others who resist quietly may be more motivated to seek change. In our opening paragraph, we wrote about an executive at a large financial firm who worked for decades behind the scenes to improve the racial and ethnic diversity of the company. Other strategies aimed at advancing an explicit change agenda are more explicit and often collective. These include leveraging small wins and organizing collective action. As research has demonstrated, tempered radicals who engage in such activities over a period of time have the potential to affect widespread learning and change, although it is empirically challenging to isolate the causal contribution of an individual’s actions to a given outcome that was conditioned by many factors (Meyerson and Tompkins, 2007; Sturm, 2006).

Research on tempered radicalism often highlights the tactic of small wins, a “limited doable project that results in something concrete and visible” (Weick, 1984). When framed in terms of their larger significance and used as a means of challenging the status quo, small wins can snowball into more significant changes. Returning to our example above, the executive’s quiet recruitment initiative began as a circumscribed local effort early in his career. But by encouraging the minority employees he hired to actively recruit other minority candidates, the impact of his efforts was leveraged and led indirectly to the hiring of more than 3500 minority employees over several decades (Meyerson, 2001).

Despite the potential a small wins strategy holds, there are limits to what individuals can accomplish on their own. And while a “big win” strategy is possible, it is obviously more risky and more difficult to accomplish. When change efforts face significant institutional resistance or when immediate change is sought, tempered radicals often engage in a strategy of collective action. Compared to individuals, collectives possess greater legitimacy, power, and resources. “It stands to reason that people can drive large-scale immediate change more effectively by working in concert with others toward a common goal, particularly when they do not have formal authority to mandate desired changes” (Meyerson, 2001, p. 123).

Under some circumstances and for certain issues, quiet resistance may be more appropriate. And for other circumstances and other issues, tactics that place a change agenda front and center — whether small wins or collective action — are required. It is at this broader level, when tempered radicals choose to pursue strategies aimed at systemic or institutional change that we see the greatest opportunity for positive impact.

Tempered Radicals as Positive Deviants

Organizational virtuousness focuses on the “ennobling and uplifting aspects of the human conditions more than on achieving effectiveness, profitability, or notoriety” (Cameron, 2003, p. 63). The recent emergence of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) is based on

the premise that the qualities associated with virtue, energy, and high quality connections have been under emphasized in organization studies (e.g., Cameron *et al.*, 2003; Dutton and Ragins, 2007). POS is a new domain of inquiry focusing on that which is invigorating, “life-giving,” and positive in social life (Cameron and Caza, 2004; Cameron *et al.*, 2003). POS focuses on such things as “developing human strength, producing resilience and restoration, and fostering vitality,” dynamics which are usually found in difficult and challenging situations (Cameron and Caza, 2004, p. 731).

A key construct within POS is positive deviance. Unlike the popular understanding of deviance, which connotes something negative or stigmatized (Goffman, 1963) and a threat to the welfare of an organization, positive deviance looks at *honorable* or *virtuous* action that departs from the norms of a particular referent group (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2003, 2004; Warren, 2003). Depending on the situation, the referent group might be a unit, an organization, an industry, or a profession. And while the definitional purview of positive deviance covers behavior, independent of outcomes, outcomes are clearly of underlying interest. For instance, Baker and Dutton (2007, p. 326) describe positive deviance as “extraordinary positive outcomes and the means that produce them”.

Tempered radicals are often, but not always, sources of positive deviance. And the actors engaged in positive deviance are often, though not always, tempered radicals. In this section, we initiate a discussion of the complementary nature of the tempered radicalism and positive deviance constructs. We believe that tempered radicalism maps onto positive deviance to a fair degree and that they help fill silences for one another.

Intentional departure from normative behavior

To begin, the tempered radicalism and positive deviance constructs both examine intentional actions that depart from norms. While most of the early work on tempered radicalism focused on organizations and organizational norms, subsequent research has taken a wider view, acknowledging that organizational norms are often instantiations of

professional or industry-wide norms. For example, Douglas Creed's (2003) study of voice and silence in organizations analyzes the professional constraints faced by lesbian and gay Protestant ministers. Denominations with restrictions against openly gay and lesbian ministers face many challenges, including when to remain silent and when to give voice to their identities, their relationships, and their experiences of homophobia in the church. Even in denominations that *allow* for the ordination of openly gay and lesbian people, ministers must contend with the vestiges of institutionalized homophobia. Despite a "don't ask, don't tell" standard for ministers, Creed describes several instances where tempered radicals within the church successfully forced discussions of the issue of homosexuality. Similarly, Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) describe departures from the norms of any of several referent groups — an individual's organizational unit, industry, or profession — as positive deviance. While both constructs focus on individual behavior, positive deviance covers organizational and extra-organizational levels of analysis as well (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004).

Honor

Positive deviance describes action that is considered honorable or virtuous by some referent group (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004). Spreitzer and Sonenshein offer, as an example, the honorable action of the pharmaceutical company Merck, which in 1978 decided to manufacture and distribute for free the drug that cures river blindness, even though doing so was likely not in the company's best interest. As a result, Merck helped eradicate river blindness in the developing world, costing the company millions of dollars (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004).

Whether an action is meant or perceived to be honorable is not central to tempered radicalism. Rather, the point of focus is the source of action: whether an individual has a social identity that has resulted in exclusion or marginalization or whether an individual enacts values, beliefs, and agendas that are different from the majority. Yet, even though their actions are not explicitly tied to the notion of honor,

tempered radicals are often motivated to express identities or values that result in marginalization because a given social identity group expects them to do so. For example, observant Muslims will be expected by other Muslims to adhere to the practices of Ramadan, though their refrain from eating during the day may be construed as deviant and mark them as different by their fellow workers.

Departure from norms

While theories of positive deviance and tempered radicalism imagine favorable outcomes such as improved effectiveness and more inclusive norms (Baker and Dutton, 2007; Meyerson, 2001; Meyerson and Scully, 1995), research on both constructs tends to center on actions leading up to those outcomes. Spreitzer and Sonenshein's (2004) paper emphasizes the *degree* of deviation from the norm. Significant departures from the norm constitute acts of positive deviance rather than departures in ways that are merely unexpected (p. 842). Such a focus may lead some to privilege "big wins" over "small wins." Conversely, tempered radicalism celebrates relatively small departures from organizational norms. For example, Meyerson (2001, p. 45) describes how an employee's quiet display of self-expression — displaying photographs of her same sex commitment ceremony on her desk — led to an improved workplace environment: "Over time her colleagues got used to the picture, and then some became more and more comfortable seeing Jennifer with her partner, not only in the picture but also in person".

What Challenges do Tempered Radicals Face?

The framework of tempered radicalism helps surface the range of strategies and tactics used by outsiders to change values and norms that are dominant within their organizations, often with the goal of making their organizations more inclusive and effective. But as one might expect, tempered radicals face risks. People manage to navigate between the opposing pulls of their workplace norms on one hand and their personal identities or values on the other to varying degrees

of success. Some decide that the risks of pushing against organizational norms are too high and instead work to fit in. Others are marginalized further as a result of their strident actions that seem to disregard altogether existing rules of membership.

Ambivalence is a common psychological response to those who attempt to balance the competing pulls of being an outsider within (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). Ambivalence can induce assimilation. But ambivalence can also provide tempered radicals certain psychological advantages. To be ambivalent is to be both accepting *and* critical of the status quo. A tempered radical's insider status provides "access to opportunities for change," while outsider status provides sufficient detachment to recognize that the status quo needs to be challenged (Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Seo and Creed, 2002). In addition to ambivalence, several additional strains faced by individuals with "outsider" status have been identified: the lures of co-optation, reputational damage, and frustration leading to burnout (Meyerson, 2001).

Role of Leadership in Cultivating and Amplifying Tempered Radicals

An important yet under-theorized aspect of tempered radicalism is the role of organizational leaders in identifying, acknowledging, cultivating and amplifying the acts of tempered radicals. Meyerson's (2001) study found that tempered radicals placed high value in their relationships with their supervisors. As one might expect, given prior research on work teams, employees felt more willing to speak up and take risks when they shared a comfortable working relationship with their immediate supervisors. Leaders who proactively elicit input (as well as making explicit why input from everyone is essential) convey the importance of everyone's perspective, including those who might feel like outsiders, due to their social identity or cultural values, beliefs, and agendas. This kind of practice when enacted by leaders who are seen as sincere contributes to the psychological safety of a work environment (Edmondson, 1983).

In addition, leaders who sanction mistakes by revealing their own fallibility provide for their employees the freedom to experiment, express their values and beliefs, and push back on organizational norms and standards. Such leaders see failure as a natural part of work activity out of which learning and innovation flows (Edmondson, 2003). Without this safety and explicit or implicit permission to experiment, tempered radicals may determine that behavioral deviations, even relatively small ones, are too risky to initiate.

Conclusion: Advancing our Understanding of Positive Deviance and Tempered Radicalism

In this chapter, we take heed of Spreitzer and Sonenshein's (2003) call to focus on understanding how positive deviance relates to and differs from similar constructs. By undertaking this project, we believe that we have enriched both ideas. For tempered radicalism, positive deviance provides a framework for understanding and evaluating the action of tempered radicals. We know that tempered radicals push against the status quo, but the honor of those actions are not explicitly considered. Positive deviance opens the possibility for understanding how honor or virtue plays into the activities undertaken by tempered radicals.

In addition, efforts in POS to understand the determinants of positive deviance can help flesh out the psychological factors that are related to tempered radicalism, an area currently under theorized. For example, Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) identify five contributing psychological conditions for a mindset conducive to positive deviance: a sense of meaning, a focus on the other, self-determination, personal efficacy, and courage. How might a focus on these factors important for positive deviants (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2003) matter to tempered radicals?

For the positive deviance literature, its definitional emphasis on "significant departures" from organizational norms (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004) tends to preclude consideration of relatively small acts, despite suggestions of their potential significance: a series of small wins can reveal "a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and

lower resistance to subsequent proposals” (Weick, 1984, p. 43). As prior work on tempered radicalism suggests, individuals with outsider identities, values, or beliefs face organizational constraints that often prevent them from taking radical actions. Focusing only on behavior that significantly departs from institutional norms may lead researchers of positive deviance to overlook the subtle, local acts of tempered radicals and disregard the positive — and significant — outcomes these individuals generate by bundling together multiple small wins over a period of time.

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