

Tempered Radicalism: Changing the Workplace from Within

Tempered radicalism is a proactive approach to surviving in an organization while keeping one's sense of self intact and pursuing changes to make the workplace more equitable and inclusive. Women and men whose identities or ideals do not fit with the dominant culture where they work can relate to this delicate balancing act: fitting in just enough to stay in the game while using an insider's leverage to change the game. Tempered radicals are "individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations and also to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with, the dominant culture of their organization."¹

The dominant culture often reflects norms that make sense to and derive from the historical experiences of white, middle class, fairly conformist, male employees, implicitly assuming that identity to be typical. Tempered radicals, who differ in any or all of these respects, feel nonetheless that it is worthwhile to make the effort to belong fully to their organization, in part because being an insider lets them pursue work they love and/or earn a livelihood. They do not want to become so captivated by fitting in that they forget who they are and why they want to make changes. Nor do they want to rock the boat so hard that they risk not being heard or taken seriously, or even being shown the door.

Women and men from different backgrounds, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, ages, professions, and politi-

cal persuasions have resonated to the concept of tempered radicalism as they try, in their own ways, to maintain legitimacy within traditional contexts, while they assert themselves and their hopes for social change.

Some examples of tempered radicalism in its simplest form give a sense of how it plays out in a range of issues from personal style to professional agendas. At a professional women's networking dinner, one woman wondered if she should wear a pant suit to an interview, being true to her informal style from the start, or wear a more traditional skirt suit and wait to be more herself until she was onboard for awhile. Each choice had its costs and benefits. Tempered radicalism seeks a midway course, such as wearing a traditionally tailored suit with some idiosyncratic accessories. Another woman wondered whether she should begin to lobby for on-site child care or wait until she attained a more senior position. She feared she would not get a promotion if she became known as a strident women's rights advocate, but also feared that waiting to make a difference would defer her concerns too long.

Such dilemmas preoccupy many employees who do not readily fit the mold. Many leave the mainstream or move from job to job, hoping to find a more comfortable fit. Some surrender to silence, feeling victimized and disempowered. Others try assimilation, with all its little privileges and nagging costs. The losses for individuals are both ob-

vious and subtle, and organizations lose the energy and perspective of valuable contributors.

Exit, surrender, and assimilation are not the only options. Navigating between conformity and marginalization, tempered radicals preserve their distinctive identities and engage productively in change efforts. The hazards of tempered radicalism include feeling ambivalent much of the time. Ambivalence can be a discomforting state that people often want to escape. To restore a sense of consistency they may either leave the organization or assimilate. However, a creatively maintained ambivalence keeps tempered radicals going: assimilating to some degree in adroit ways, breaking into bursts of spontaneity as small local opportunities arise, standing up for cherished beliefs when the moment is right, finding unexpected allies among those who also sometimes hide their commitments, or burrowing into the organization to make quiet and selective changes.

Tempered radicalism arises from a desire for authenticity or from a conviction that change is needed. These two motives² are experienced differently and are illustrated with women's examples in the next two sections.

Women's Desire for Authenticity

For women in predominantly male organizations, the tension between personal and professional commitments is palpable. Some women move sequen-

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tially between dual identities, attending to one at a time. Others want to have the dual aspects of their identity in play simultaneously.

This struggle often leaves them in a double bind. "The aggressiveness, dedication, and emotional detachment traditionally presumed necessary for advancement in the most prestigious and well-paid occupations are incompatible with the traits commonly viewed as attractive in women: deference, sensitivity, and self-sacrifice.... Females aspiring to high-status positions remain subject to a familiar double bind. Those conforming to traditional characteristics of femininity are often thought lacking in the requisite assertiveness and initiative, yet those conforming to a masculine model of success may be ostracized in work settings as bitchy, aggressive, and uncooperative."³

Although this double bind can be maddening, women are beginning to improvise a sustainable mix of authenticity and legitimacy. Co-workers may subtly test a woman's "fit" with the group, expecting her to prove she is "one of the guys" and not likely to "raise a fuss" about how things are done. Women may resist these seemingly mundane tests, for example, by not laughing at a sexist joke. Tempered radicals raise their objections cautiously and selectively, so they are rarely seen for what they are – challengers of the established culture.⁴

For example, Jennifer Donaldson,⁵ a senior manager of a technical division of a fast growing medical equipment company, had been steadily promoted and was the only woman at her level. Because her male peers were loud and aggressive, meetings were like shouting contests. At one meeting, a top executive asked Donaldson for her opinion. After she began to speak, the men interrupted and argued among themselves. Donaldson stepped in and said, "Excuse me, if we want to get some work done, we can start to listen to each other, or else I'm not going to waste my time here."

Silence followed her comment, which she had cleverly couched in the accepted terms of using time well. She went on calmly to outline her thoughts on the topic at hand. Though worried about the risk she had taken, she was pleasantly surprised afterwards when the president thanked her for her courage and convictions. He promised that he would take personal responsibility for running better meetings with more effective norms for interacting. To her further surprise, many of the men at the meeting thanked her and admitted that they too hated these shouting matches; one man said he found them to be a waste of time, all about showmanship and "testosterone in action."

Donaldson's steady refusal to participate and her carefully chosen statement reflected who she was without compromise. She enabled her colleagues to reflect on their behavior and its implications. In doing so, she cracked the door open just wide enough for new norms to be ushered in. She might have been just different enough from the group that she could safely say "the emperor has no clothes" and have this exposé be welcomed by those who had been uncomfortably complicit with the status quo.

Women often experience pressures to conform as undermining, personal affronts. They may go along with them nonetheless, because women are strongly socialized into the individualistic culture of the contemporary organization. With their eyes on their careers, they try to fit in, perhaps with the faith that personal achievement is the best victory. They may miss the broader ramifications that, each time they pass a conformity test, the very norms that make organizational life difficult for women are reinforced. White women might be given more frequent invitations and temptations to become insiders. Ironically, as they learn to be insiders, they may become less likely to use their hard won insider privilege to lobby for broadly beneficial organizational changes.⁶

Important as career concerns may be, the struggles of women in organizations are part of a broader societal concern about equality and fairness, cherished ideals to which many organizations and communities aspire. Missed opportunities are costly. Because being political in an organization is discouraged and risky, some women who propel changes will deny that they are change agents. For others, it is the explicit commitment to broader change that gives them courage despite personal risks.

Women's Commitment to Change

Some women wrestle with how to use their savvy insider knowledge to advance the changes they envision, such as hiring and promoting more women and members of underrepresented groups, reducing pay inequities, managing participatively, or creating programs to help women and men integrate work and life responsibilities. They balance boldness and caution, sometimes focusing on just getting issues onto the agenda, so others can weigh in and share the heat. They test ideas before taking them public.

For example, Elsa Jackson, a Jamaican marketing executive for a large cosmetics company, had been worried that her company's advertising campaigns were alienating Caribbean women by portraying them as housekeepers and nannies. She did not want to make a big deal of it and be seen as over-sensitive, but she was offended and saw an opportunity to address the societal issue of harmful stereotypes. She turned to some trusted colleagues in another department, with whom she could rehearse how to voice her concerns and see how she would be received. Jackson was surprised at how much they welcomed her comments. When she raised her concerns to the advertising group, the company quickly withdrew a number of campaigns. Moreover, the advertising group recruited a woman of color to add to the team. From then on, Elsa found it less difficult to voice her concerns on a

range of issues, a gain both for her and the company.

As another example, a group of women engineers at a software company had begun meeting to discover and address their shared concerns as women. It came to their attention that administrative assistants were not getting a share of the generous group bonus for meeting a deadline, even though they had worked late and made essential contributions. Professional women do not always join ranks with administrative support personnel to advocate change for women in lower positions. In this case, however, the engineers recognized the political significance of the larger, shared issue that women's work becomes invisible. As group member Amy Wong explained, "I think we all felt this kinship there, because for women – and it just so happens that 95% of the people in the administrative assistant job are women – it's that whole cycle of being underpaid, in jobs that are less well paid. We all recognized how that occurs, and we wanted to see that stopped. Women's work was not being valued. I think we realized that a group with more power needs to help the ones with less power."⁷⁷ Proposed changes that threaten deeply held ideas about what is fair or images of who is a valuable contributor are likely to generate resistance and backlash. In this case, senior managers agreed that support staff were eligible for the bonus, and even asserted that it had been their intention all along, perhaps, as Wong speculated, to save face when her group framed the issue as one of basic fairness. She saw it as a success that top managers took ownership of the new policy.

Tempered Radicals' Strategies for Authenticity and Change

Our research has surfaced some strategies that tempered radicals use to find a viable middle course between conformity and stridency.

Experiment with "small wins." First, tempered radicals should recognize the

significance of a small win, "a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, may reveal a pattern that attracts allies, deters opponents, and lowers resistance to subsequent proposals. Small wins are controllable opportunities that produce visible results."⁷⁸

For example, Diane Morris was the only woman on the professional staff at a research institute in The Netherlands. She was asked for two years in a row to serve as rapporteur for the annual meeting, an onerous job with little professional visibility or benefit. She realized when she was asked again in the third year that none of the professional men in her cohort had been asked to assume this role and that it was hurting her career to be trapped in a stereotypically female support role. She went to the head of the institute and pointed out that, while she had been pleased to help out in the past, the demands of her research meant that she could not be rapporteur this year, but she would be delighted to help out by chairing a session on the program. She suggested that one of the newly recruited men might learn more about the institute by taking on the rapporteur role. Moreover, she proposed that the effort to recruit more women might be advanced by having a woman in a visible chair role. This intervention was a valuable "small win" in that it changed a taken-for-granted practice and introduced gender equity into both behind-the-scenes and visible roles. Younger women research associates, as well as senior men, noticed the affirming message sent by having a woman chair a session.

Keep the momentum going even when wins are small. It is tempting to minimize small wins. They can seem insignificant or distracting in light of the magnitude of pressing issues. For example, at a high tech company, a diversity committee designed a T-shirt to proclaim their values with a clever logo.

A T-shirt may sound trivial in the face of deeply rooted inequalities. However, it was a small win in a casual culture where people designed T-shirts for all sorts of events and products and often wore them to work. Seeing diversity T-shirts in the daily mix next to more mainstream T-shirts made committee members proud. Moreover, as Maria Rosario explained, she found that when she wore the T-shirt, people began to ask her questions about diversity, providing occasions for serious discussions where previously it had felt too abrupt, awkward, or preachy to raise these topics. Recognizing small wins for what they are – little but meaningful incursions into a culture – can provide the basis for subsequent and cumulative small wins, as well as the periodic large win. Change agents, who can easily become tired or overwhelmed, can build confidence and sustain momentum.

Between conformity and marginalization, tempered radicals find room to be authentic and make "small wins"

Engage in local, spontaneous, authentic action. Sometimes just being one's self pushes a different idea of who "we" are in this organization and models an alternative way to work. For example, the quest for authenticity and change came together for Jessica Kohn, a lesbian woman in a middle management position at a bank. She explained that the simple act of talking about her personal life in everyday conversation at work was also a political act for her, challenging the assumptions of heterosexuality. "I had to make some one-on-one decisions, and I just decided, I'm not going to hide. I'm not going to wear my lavender L [for lesbian] or whatever, but when appropriate, the conversation just naturally slips to one's personal life, and I just make it clear that I have a partner. Her name is Jean." While a broader campaign for domestic partner benefits was already under-

way at the bank, her local actions were an equally important piece of the effort to make a more inclusive workplace.⁹

Build relationships and form alliances for support. Tempered radicalism can be lonely. Individuals may look around and suspect that they are alone in grappling with alignment and wishing for change. It is crucial to find allies and to nurture connections. For example, Shataya Washington explained how she felt less alone after joining an email discussion group for women and finding some like-minded people elsewhere in her organization. She explained, “For me, and the other participants, it made me feel that I was not alone, because I could go to lunch or hang around with my friends who belonged and hear very similar stories to mine. So it normalized and validated our experiences.”

Group meetings can be the crucible for small wins. For example, Susan Rogers, a partner in a management consulting firm, wanted to help junior women. She arranged a firm-sponsored monthly luncheon for the women consultants in her office. Rogers did not revolutionize her firm’s hiring or evaluation policies. Instead, she achieved a small win by creating a network in which these ideas could be discussed and gradually broached. This forum enabled Rogers to find sympathetic colleagues and place her ideas in the context of networking and learning, an approach valued by the firm. The new terminology and framing used in her monthly lunches gradually permeated other conversations. By bringing challenging ideas into the organizational dialogue, Rogers nudged the boundaries of accepted practice.

Conclusion

While the specifics may vary, tempered radicals all face challenges related to the maintenance of personal authenticity and the management of change. The tactics that tempered radicals employ will be influenced by their motives for tempered radicalism and by the details of their local setting. Indeed, it is their insiders’ knowledge of the local nuances, language, and norms that can make them versatile and effective change agents. Tempered radicals can sustain their engagement, despite discomforting ambivalence and potential risks, by joining with others. Since publishing our first article on tempered radicalism, we have often heard the reaction: “Oh, there’s a name for what I’m doing. And others must be doing it, too.” There is power in having a named identity, rather than a vague sense of misalignment, and in knowing that one’s change efforts, which might feel fragmented and sporadic in themselves, can connect meaningfully with the efforts of others and produce significant changes for the collective good.

Encouraging and responding to the strategies of tempered radicalism fortifies individuals and also provides resources – in the form of empowered and energetic employees – for organizations to be creative and adaptive in a world of diversity and continuous change.

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¹ This note is based on our article: Meyerson, D. and Scully, M. (1995). “Tempered radicalism and the politics of ambivalence and change,” *Organization Science*, Vol. 6, No. 5, pp. 585-600. We chose the term “tempered radicalism” because it plays on layers of meaning. Tempered means moderated, but for radicals who fear “selling out,” it recalls having a “temper” that fuels passionate engagement. In physics, to temper a metal means to heat it up then cool it down to make it stronger, analogous to the process that makes insider change agents effective.

² This distinction is elaborated in D. Meyerson’s forthcoming book, *Standing Up, Standing Out: Making a Difference and Being Different through Tempered Radicalism*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

³ Rhode, D. (1988). “Perspectives on professional women,” *Stanford Law Rev.*, p. 1163.

⁴ Adapted from Meyerson, D. and Merrill, K. (forthcoming). “Professional women as change agents: The choice of ‘tempered radicalism.’ In D. Smith (ed.), *Women at Work: Leadership for the Next Century*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

⁵ All names have been changed to respect confidentiality.

⁶ The role of race in black and white women’s different approaches to tempered radicalism and the prospects for alliances between them is discussed in Bell, E., Meyerson, D., Nkomo, S., and Scully, M. (forthcoming). “Tempered radicalism revisited: Black and white women making sense of black women’s enactments and white women’s silences.” CGO Working paper.

⁷ Several examples are drawn from Scully, M. and Segal, A. (forthcoming). “Passion with an umbrella: Grassroots activists in organizations.” CGO Working paper.

⁸ Weick, K. (1984). “Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems,” *American Psychologist*, Vol. 39, pp. 40-49.

⁹ Creed, W.E.D. and Scully, M. (forthcoming) “Songs of ourselves: Employees’ enactment of identity in everyday workplace encounters,” *Journal of Management Inquiry*.

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