

Spencer Johnson–Cowardly Weasel

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Karen De Coster has some interesting comments on one of my earlier Who Moved My Cheese? posts.

Carroll is right about several things. First off, it is everywhere in the corporate world. Second, employees are ordered to read it. Third, the thesis is: do exactly what you are told. And this, we are supposed to understand, is “learning to make changes.” Pshaw!

It is a pile of collectivist, feel-good, moronic shit. Its purpose is to dumb down every corporate drone to the lowest common denominator. The book says that you cannot stand out from others, that you must accept your bits of cheese, and smile, for it pays your mortgage and new car lease every month.

And hers is the voice of experience:

I was told–by a particular loser–that I had to read either of those two books. Or else I would suffer the consequences of a marking of “goal not obtained” in my annual performance review. My other choice of a book to read was Jack Welch’s intellectually stirring, deeply philosophical, and supremely written “Winning.” Another winner–pun intended–written at the 3rd grade level.

This is what people in the corporate environment desire of their employees that otherwise have an undergrad degree, (2) grad degrees, and a CPA. So here I was, in the middle of reading, say, *The Superfluous Men* or Bahm-Bowerk’s *Capital and Interest*, and I was supposed to embrace, into my reading time, the fish book or cheese book, or perhaps even Jack Welch’s Oprah-like brilliance. Worse than that, I was told to write a “book report” on it, explaining the importance of the book to my job, and life in general.

Seems to me she might just as well have pulled a hammer out of her overcoat, banged herself in the forehead real hard about five or six times, and gotten that “goal obtained” marking right away–without all the unpleasantness of having to read Spencer’s “book.” The practical effect would be pretty much the same: unless you prepare yourself for *WWMC?* with a generous application of Bullshit Gard (TM), you can feel the IQ points being sucked out as you read it.

That's the kind of anecdotal feedback I've been getting a lot of since I started posting on *WMMC?*, by the way. For example, I got an email from a university instructor (who will remain anonymous, for obvious reasons) who said the university president ordered everybody to read that putrid little turd of a book (that's my characterization, not hers).

In another post, Karen quotes an excellent review by Laura Lemay, who identifies the not-so-subtle message in the book:

And one of them [the classmates] says they have this great story about cheese, and how in their company when they told they cheese story, it CHANGED EVERYONE'S LIVES.

Everyone? the group asks in awe.

Well, not everyone, the classmate says sadly. There was one guy at our company who heard the cheese story, and he thought it was stupid and a complete waste of time. But then, he was one of those types who refuses to look for new cheese. And we eventually had to let him go.

Ahhh. You will read the cheese book, and you will like the cheese book. It will change your life. Or we will fire your ass.

But the funniest development of all in the world of *Cheese*: Spenser Johnson's apparently seen some of those negative reviews at Amazon and elsewhere, and he is not amused. Johnson, in an endpaper blurb, takes umbrage:

Some even fear it suggests all change is good and that people should mindlessly conform to unnecessary changes imposed by others, although that is not in the story.

No, it's just implicit in every page of this wretched little book. The real question is, how could a reader *not* make such an interpretation?

First of all, Johnson's pissing and moaning is directly across from a facing page full of enthusiastic endorsements from "organizations" that used the book to get their employees' minds right. This is our first clue that there might be a hidden agenda. The fact that *WMMC?*'s website is geared toward corporate clients might also raise some eyebrows. Much like the *Chicken Shit for the Soul* series, the book's prime customer is HR departments. Regarding the latter series, the (unfortunately now defunct) Molotov Cocktail for the Soul site helpfully explained that it was aimed at

"organizations who want to get the most out of people;" and those people would, of course, be the Prozac-plied personnel now doing twice the work they would have at the same position twenty years ago and are too sedated to feel the boss's whip cracking across their backs. "

As more than one Amazon reviewer noted, the "book" is a heavily marked up piece of fluff, specifically designed to be marketed by the gross to HR departments, who in turn pass it on to a captive audience of wage-serfs. And a lot of those employees, mindful of Haw's slogan "Noticing Small Changes Early Helps You Adapt To The Bigger Changes That Are To Come," see the distribution of this book as the prelude to downsizing or a general tightening of the screws

on the “littlepeople.” If your employers start passing out WWMC?, just remember what Victor said in that *Ren and Stimpy* cartoon: “Relax and think happy thoughts, because this is really... gonna... HURT!”

Just about every page of *Who Moved My Cheese?* has something to bear out the interpretation that Johnson finds so objectionable. It is full of examples of people wisely adapting to “change” and being rewarded, and obstinate “change resisters” who suffer the consequences of their folly. The leading character, Haw, at first questions change and then discovers the error of his ways. But there is not one single, solitary example of a character questioning change, deciding that it was unjustified, and turning out to be right. The only character in the book who even raises the question of who is responsible for change and whether it is justified, Hem, is portrayed as unattractively as possible.

“What? No Cheese?” Hem yelled. He continued yelling, “No Cheese? No Cheese?” as though if he shouted loud enough someone would put it back.

“Who moved my Cheese?” he hollered.

Finally, he put his hands on his hips, his face turned red, and he screamed at the top of his voice, “It’s not fair!”

When Hem even raises the question of who moved the cheese, and why, it’s portrayed as the moral equivalent of a toddler’s temper tantrum, or as motivated by a feeling of entitlement.

“Why should we change?” Hem asked. “We’re littlepeople. We’re special. This sort of thing should not happen to us. Or if it does, we should at least get some benefits.”

“Why should we get benefits?” Haw asked.

“Because we’re entitled,” Hem claimed...

“Why?” Haw asked.

“Because we didn’t cause this problem,” Hem said. “Somebody else did this and we should get something out of it.”

Haw suggested, “Maybe we should simply stop analyzing the situation and go find some New Cheese?”

Or as Homer Simpson said, “I mean, we could sit here and try to figure out who forgot to pick up who ‘til the cows come home.”

It’s kind of hard to make a reasoned evaluation of whether change is “unnecessary” when it’s out of bounds even to raise the question of who moved it. For that matter, Spencer makes his “change” the work of anonymous forces which are never identified, conveniently making the question of who moved the cheese impossible to answer. No scientist in a white lab coat ever reaches in to move the cheese. “Change” is not the product of human agency—it’s just “there.”

It’s also hard to imagine, in Johnson’s little world, just what the identifying features of unnecessary or unjustified change would be, although in his endpaper blurb he appears to recognize it as a theoretical possibility (like antimatter or wormholes, or something). In every concrete example in this sorry excuse for a book, the very act of questioning whether a change is necessary puts one squarely in the camp of Hem. For example, consider this anecdote from Ken Blanchard’s introduction:

One of the many real-life examples comes from Charlie Jones, a well-respected broadcaster for NBC-TV, who revealed that hearing the story of “Who Moved My Cheese?” saved his career...

...Charlie had worked hard and had done a great job of broadcasting Track and Field events at an earlier Olympic Games, so he was surprised and upset when his boss told him he’d been removed from these showcase events for the next Olympics and assigned to Swimming and Diving.

Not knowing these sports as well, he was frustrated. He felt unappreciated and he became angry. He said he felt it wasn’t fair! His anger began to affect everything he did.

Then, he heard the story of “Who Moved My Cheese?”

After that he said he laughed at himself and changed his attitude. He realized his boss had just “moved his Cheese.” So he adapted. He learned the two new sports, and in the process, found that doing something new made him feel young.

It wasn’t long before his boss recognized his new attitude and energy, and he soon got better assignments. He went on to enjoy more success than ever and was later inducted into Pro Football’s Hall of Fame – Broadcaster’s Alley.

Aha. So Job, though sorely tempted to question God, finally recognized that the Lord moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. And in the end,

the LORD blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning...

For Charlie to question his boss was akin to Job questioning the voice from the whirlwind. “My boss decided it, I accept it, that settles it.”

What’s really ironic is to imagine employees accepting “change” with such blind trust, when the “change” might result from some nitwit at the top who made a decision with a copy of *One Minute Manager* in his hand.

And Johnson’s own book, apparently, has itself become a form of cheese-moving to be accepted without question. As Blanchard put it in his introduction,

it stimulated their [his employees’] thinking about how they might apply what they’d learned to their own situation.

See, whether or not they agreed with what they read wasn’t even an issue—just how to “apply” what “*they’d learned*.”

The fictionalized Discussion in the last part of the book, between the class reunion attendees, includes an extended anecdote by “Michael,” the meta-story’s fictionalized author of the “little story,” who invented it to deal with “change resisters” in his own “organization.” At one point, he actually appears to be about to address the question of resisting change imposed from above:

Well, the further we went into our organization, the more people we found who felt they had less power. They were understandably more afraid of what the change imposed from above might do to them. So they resisted change.

In short, a change imposed is a change opposed.

But having skirted the edge of heresy by raising this question, he apparently dismisses it as unworthy of serious consideration. The book helped all these recalcitrants to improve their attitude toward change, and the issue of its legitimacy as allowed to slowly fade away:

But when the Cheese Story was shared with literally everyone in our organization, it helped up change the way we looked at change. It helped everyone laugh, or at least smile, at their old fears and want to move on.

There it is again: management assigns this shitty little book to “literally everyone in [the] organization,” and they all stop asking about who’s imposing this change from above, who it benefits, and whether it’s a good idea. They get their minds right.

...practically everyone, those who left and those who stayed, said the Cheese story helped them see things differently and cope better.

Those who had to go out and look for a new job said it was hard at first but recalling the story was a great help to them...

...[I]nstead of complaining about the changes that were happening, people now said, “They just moved our Cheese. Let’s look for the New Cheese.” It saved a lot of time and reduced stress...

I’ll *bet* it did, at least for management. “They just moved our Cheese. Let’s look for New Cheese” is certainly less stressful to hear than “They ran the company into the ground, sold off their stock just before the earnings report came out, and flushed our pension fund down the toilet! Let’s lynch the bastards!”

Before long, the people who had been resisting saw the advantage of changing. They even helped bring about change.

Michael was then asked why he thought this happened. Pay attention to his answer, because this is really important. There may be a quiz at the end.

“I think a lot of it had to do with the kind of peer pressure that can exist in a company.

“What happens in most organizations you’ve been in when a change is announced by top management? Do most people say the change is a great idea or a bad idea?”

“A bad idea,” Frank answered.

“Yes,” Michael agreed. “Why?”

Carlos said, “Because people want things to stay the same and they think the change will be bad for them. When one smart person says the change is a bad idea, others say the same.”

“Yes, they may not really feel that way,” Michael said, “but they agreed in order to look smart as well. That’s the sort of peer pressure that fights change in any organization...”

“People changed because no one wanted to look like Hem!”

But there were, alas, still a few Hems who failed to respond to the glorious visions of change presented by the Dear Leader:

“Unfortunately, the Hems were the anchors that slowed us down... They were either too comfortable or too afraid to change. Some of our Hems changed only when they saw the sensible [by definition] vision we painted that showed them how changing would work to their advantage...”

“What did you do with the Hems who didn’t change?” Frank wanted to know.

“We had to let them go,” Michael said sadly.

Again, I’ve scoured this narrative for the slightest hint that the changes imposed by “leaders” could ever be unnecessary or a bad idea. Zero. Zilch. Zip. Nada. As with every single other example in this book, the pattern is: Leader imposes change, the Haws get with the program, and the Hems get the door. In Laura Lemay’s words,

You will read the cheese book, and you will like the cheese book. It will change your life. Or we will fire your ass.

Or as Johnson helpfully put it:

...all change is good and... people should mindlessly conform to unnecessary changes imposed by others.

While we’re on the subject of that Discussion: it probably says a great deal about Johnson’s authoritarianism. Outside of the Bible in a Sunday School class, or *Quotations from Chairman Mao* in a Red Guard study circle, it’s hard to imagine any book getting such a relentlessly positive and respectful reception from a group of readers. One almost expects somebody to stand up and ask “Mr. Johnson: Your book’s sales have the momentum of a runaway freight train. How do you explain its popularity?”

The sole “skeptic,” Richard, only observes that it’s “a nice little story,” but questions how it might be actually put into use. For even this modest impiety, one half expects him to be struck dead by a thunderbolt. Richard is a lot like the first, candy-ass set of critics mentioned in Blanchard’s endpaper blurb, who only criticize the style and presentation (he dismisses them before turning on the real enemy in my earlier quote).

Critics... do not understand how so many people could find it so valuable. They say the story is so simple a child could understand it, and it insults their intelligence, as it is just obvious common sense.”

That’s the only kind of “criticism” *WMMC?* gets in this “discussion.” Not that it’s lying, bullshit management propaganda. Not that it’s trying to turn the worker into a docile serf who won’t fight back when he’s dicked around. Not that its main purpose is to enable management to get more out of the worker for less pay. But rather that it’s “obvious common sense.” That’s the kind of “criticism” that Johnson can live with. So long as the corporate drone accepts the basic truth of the message, he can get away with some irreverence toward the vehicle it’s delivered

in. If you think about it, most authoritarians probably prefer that kind of “criticism” to fanatical agreement. Fanatical agreement comes from someone who, if nothing else, at least cares about the world of the mind. The lazy-minded worker or citizen who implicitly believes in the official ideology, but is bored by propaganda, will swallow anything he’s told (as he clicks over from the State of the Union to *American Idol*).

The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that Spencer Johnson is a dishonest, cowardly weasel. His book is obviously written, with deliberate intent, to impart the very message that he so strenuously disavows: all change is good and... people should mindlessly conform to unnecessary changes imposed by others. He just doesn’t have the balls to own up to it. So when the kitchen light is clicked on, he furiously scuttles under the refrigerator, all the while affecting outrage. He’s shocked—*shocked!!*—that anyone could possibly so misconstrue the book as to actually get the message that he meant to convey.

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