the Tempered RADICALs

How employees push their companies

– little by little – to be more socially responsible

by DEBRA E. MEYERSON

ARBARA WAUGH IS NOT YOUR TYPICAL RADICAL. For one thing, she has worked for Hewlett-Packard (HP), the global technology company, since 1984. She has held mainstream positions including recruiting manager and HP Labs personnel director. She drives to work each morning in Palo Alto, Calif., an affluent, well-ordered college town that is the birthplace of Silicon Valley. But listen to her speak for a few minutes, and you begin to sense something *different* in her approach to her job.

"I show up as a completely corporate person," she explained. "And yet I'm every bit as committed to the things I was committed to in the 1960s when I was a hippie: ensuring that I leave the world better than when I found it; working for greater social equity; ensuring that the poor don't get poorer as the rich get richer; equal opportunity; a just world; a world that works for everyone."

Rick Fox isn't your run-of-the-mill radical, either. Fox finished college in 1975, went to work roughnecking for Shell, and has been with the international oil giant ever since. He moved up through the ranks quickly, searching for oil from the Gulf of Mexico to Alaska, Syria, China, Brazil, and Scotland. Today, he works in New Orleans as operations manager for an oil rig 70 miles off the coast of Louisiana that produces 160,000 barrels of oil and 260 million cubic feet of natural gas a day. But listen to him talk about the qualities that have made him successful, and it's equally clear: Fox is hardly a mainstream employee.

"There is something that allows a person to break away from the expected, if you will, and create something different in the workplace," he explained, "something that is accepted by others."

David Welton too is not quite a full-fledged radical.[1] In the 1990s,

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he worked for a large bank in Switzerland, a company that in some ways epitomized corporate culture. But there's something distinctly *not* button-down about Welton as well. He arrived at the bank with very distinct ideas about the role of such institutions in society, and was determined to work within the system to promote his views to a wider audience.

Waugh, Fox, and Welton have little in common professionally. They work in different industries, occupy different roles, and face different challenges. They have never met. Yet the three of them have something crucial in common: They are self-identified "tempered radicals." And they have used similar strategies to promote the notion of corporate social responsi-

ducting 30 interviews with people in a wide range of occupations, including academics, neurosurgeons, college officials, corporate executives, and secretaries. Because these individuals push agendas for change from inside the system, I dubbed them "tempered radicals."

In 1995, I went on to interview 182 people in three companies, plus 56 other professionals who self-identified as "change agents." Among the subjects in these interviews were doctors, nurses, lawyers, architects, investment bankers, entrepreneurs, chief executives, journalists, and a Navy admiral. The data I gleaned formed the basis of my book "Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work" (Boston: Har-

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bility within their companies.

Under-the-Radar Rebels

All types of organizations – from global corporations to small neighborhood schools – have Waughs, Foxes, and Weltons. They occupy all sorts of jobs and stand up for a variety of ideals. They engage in small battles, at times operating so quietly that they may not surface on the cultural radar as "rebels." By pushing back on conventions, they create opportunities for change within their organizations. They are not heroic leaders of revolutionary action; rather, they are cautious and committed catalysts that keep going and who slowly make a difference.

Along with my then fellow graduate student Maureen Scully, I began researching such individuals 16 years ago, con-

vard Business School Press, 2003).

Tempered radicals operate on a fault line. They are organizational insiders who often succeed in their jobs. They struggle between their desire to act on their "different" agendas and the need to fit into the dominant culture.

They use several strategies to create change that run the gamut from very quiet and cautious to more explicit and strident. Some quietly act in ways that express their personal values, subtly calling into question taken-for-granted beliefs and work practices. I've called this strategy "disruptive self-expression" because of its potential to shake up the status quo.

For example, a woman working within her company to promote fair trade with poor communities throughout the world filled her office with colorful artifacts given to her by villagers she was cultivating as trading partners. Each artifact served as a conversation starter, stirring discussions about the customs, crafts, and needs of faraway cultures. Such chats led inevitably to talks about the corporate and social benefits of purchasing raw materials and crafts from these communities. Ultimately, the artifacts and the conversations they triggered influenced the company's supply policies and pushed employees to question

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their assumptions about indigenous cultures and how corporate purchasing affects them.

Many tempered radicals make a difference through little acts of self-expression – their dress, language, or leadership style. A tempered radical who was a department manager told me that, even though it was not the norm in his office, he insisted on taking off work for the Jewish holidays. This seems like a minor issue, but it signaled to his employees that it was legitimate to observe religious and cultural traditions. His actions made it easier for others to take off for non-Christian observances. Over time, as his colleagues were promoted, they mimicked his behavior. Eventually, the company adopted a personnel policy that facilitated such observances, validating behavior once considered deviant.

Small actions that demonstrate conformity reinforce the dominant culture; actions like the one described above can roil it. And even if a person's intent is not disruption per se, everyday acts can create ripples that lead to significant change. The rippling occurs partly through a process that University of Michigan organizational theorist Karl Weick calls "deviation amplification," in which a single atypical action sets the stage for others to follow. The important thing for tempered radicals is to take small steps and be persistent.

Besides acts of self-expression, many tempered radicals employ a second strategy that involves "leveraging small wins"[2] (sidebar, p. 18). One activist, for example, promoted social responsibility through a series of little victories: She persuaded her company to put green bins under everyone's desk so they didn't have to walk to a central recycling can; to put a bottle bank in the parking lot, making it easier to recycle glass; to configure computers to shut down automatically, conserving electricity; to purchase low-energy bulbs that employees could buy cheaply and use at home; to set up carpools for lunchtime supermarket shopping; and to buy coffee and tea from fair-trade suppliers.

Getting Started as a Tempered Radical

1) Build relationships with people inside and outside the company who share and appreciate marginalized aspects of your identity. These groups can form along ethnic lines – groups of Latino workers, or gay and lesbian workers, for example; they can also form around values and beliefs – for example, the sustainability network at Hewlett-Packard. As one tempered radical told me, "You can't keep sane on your own."

2) Develop the discipline to manage heated emotions to fuel your agenda. This is what Barbara Waugh did, for example, when she found out that the HP sustainability conference was going to be cancelled. Such discipline will keep you in the driver's seat, prevent you from surrendering to forces that could block your effort, and enable you to come up with alternate tempered approaches.

3) Separate public "front stage" performances from "backstage" acts to create an appearance of conformity and credibility while acting on differences to sustain your sense of self. Stated differently, learn to frame your agenda in language that has legitimacy among those in power. For example, a tempered radical at an automotive technology company who is passionate about environmental sustainability told me that he relies on long-term financial arguments when pushing for "green" technologies.

4) Design behind-the-scenes actions and initiate conversations that create connections with other people who have similar values, beliefs, and identities. Activities will be most effective if they have the potential to accumulate or to ripple into additional changes. They need not be immediately obvious as change inducing, and they need not directly threaten the status quo. David Welton did this successfully by initiating conversations about social responsibility with the "future leaders" group at the Swiss bank.

Each initiative by itself was unremarkable. Together, they created a stir. Employees began to talk about conservation and exchange ideas about how they could make incremental differences in their daily lives. The conversations spread, yielding additional small wins.

The key assumption underlying tempered radicalism is that organizations are continuously evolving, adapting to market conditions, workforce requirements, and technological innovations. Sometimes the changes are dramatic, but most often they take the form of incremental adjustments. Tempered radicals push and prod the system through a variety of subtle processes, rechanneling information and opportunities, questioning assumptions, changing boundaries of inclusion, and scor-
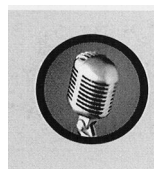
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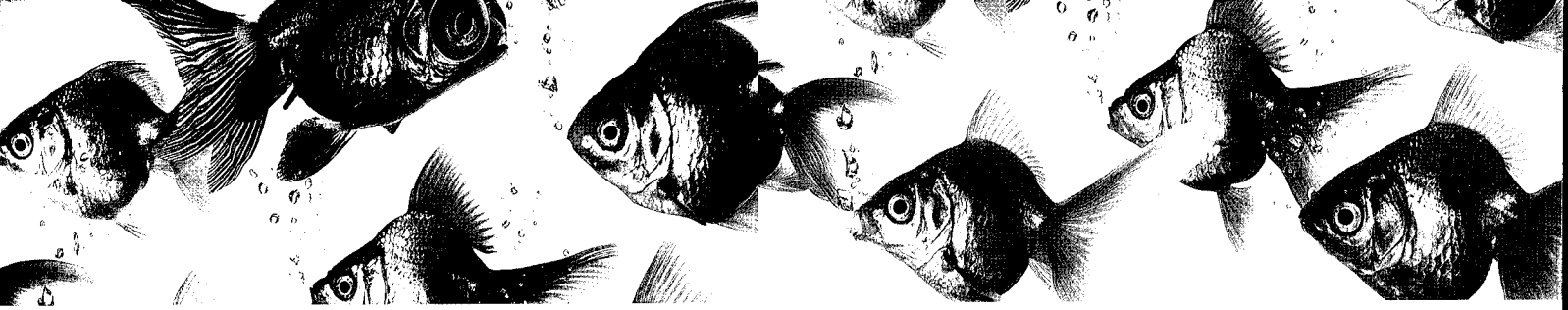
Starting Small

empered radicals often seek to advance their agendas by taking advantage of "small wins" – an environmentalist might get co-workers to turn off lights or computer monitors at the end of the day, or to use natural instead of artificial light.

Why start small? First and foremost, small wins are powerful because they are doable. The approach encourages people to act by doing what they can do now, rather than being overwhelmed by the challenge or searching endlessly for the perfect approach to the problem.

Because they are doable, small wins create a sense of hope and self-confidence. This leads to heightened ambition and more effort, which in turn are more likely to lead to desired results.[1] The capacity of small wins to generate hope and to attract involvement of other people makes them a cornerstone of community-organizing efforts. Saul Alinsky, the grandfather of community organizing, believed the reverse was also true: When people believe they do not have power to change their situations, they stop looking for opportunities to make a difference and – guess what? – they don't find any.[2] These initiatives are as much about creating positive momentum as they are about accomplishing a task. Small actions toward desired ends kick-start change – for both individuals and groups.

Another benefit of the small-wins strategy is that it minimizes anxiety and personal risk. In addition, small wins are usually minor enough that they do not engage the organizational immune system, at least until they accumulate enough to take on larger significance.

Finally, small wins express and sustain tempered radicals' "different" values and identities. They are concrete reminders that individuals will not suppress these parts of themselves. They may be the best antidote against co-optation because they demonstrate who we are and what we care about.

A departmental recycling program won't solve global warming, but it does demonstrate that waste can be reduced. Small wins are small experiments. Even when the changes are minor – and remain minor – small wins are qualitative, if not quantitative, demonstrations that things can be different.

1 Bandura, A. *Social Foundations of Thought as Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985).
2 Alinsky, S. *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971).

ing small wins.

Their actions may be aimed at protesting repressive working conditions, pushing to hire underrepresented populations, or fostering a wider range of religious and cultural beliefs. Sometimes these pushes and prods add up to bigger wins in ways that are hard to predict. But when the target for change is something big and specific, like a significant shift in company policy or distribution of resources, a change process that involves collective rather than individual action is more effective in generating movement. People drive large-scale change by working in concert with others, particularly when they do not have formal authority to mandate the desired changes.

The biggest advantage of working together is that collectives have greater legitimacy, power, and resources than individuals. Consider any recent social movement and its accomplishments. Could a group of disconnected individuals – no matter how highly motivated and persistent – have accomplished a fraction of what MoveOn.org, for example, has achieved as a collective movement? The same principle holds true for groups of corporate employees.[3]

Uniting the Tokens

In the late 1990s, "sustainability" was not exactly a buzzword in corporate America. The idea that a corporation should be concerned about its impact on the environment, and about sustaining the planet's limited resources, was not widespread. In her self-published 2001 book, "Soul in the Computer," Barbara Waugh wrote, "The people who care about sustainability … [were] thinly distributed all over the world as 'tokens' and surrounded by folks who [didn't] care."

A Hewlett-Packard scientist approached Waugh, then director of strategic change for HP's industrial research lab, and expressed interest in exploring the notion of "technology for sustainability." Intrigued, Waugh looked into the issue. She discovered that others in the company were concerned about sustainability as well. "There were people all over the company who were interested in this, but they were isolated," Waugh recalled. "I said, 'What we need to do is pull together all the weak signals in the system and allow them to experience themselves as a very strong signal.'"

Her answer was to start promoting an entirely new kind of conference, "HP for Sustainability." "We will use this event to amplify our positive deviance," Waugh wrote, "and by choosing to unite, we will take the crucial step of moving from tokens to a minority. Tokens can't change anything. A minority is the only thing that does."

At that time, sustainability was such a fringe concept that no one on HP's senior management team knew anything about

it, according to Waugh. One top executive even admitted that he assumed the conference was about sustaining *profits*. To make matters worse, eight months into the planning, HP abruptly cancelled all conferences as a way to control expenses.

An employee who wanted to toe the party line might simply have accepted the marching orders from above and given up on the sustainability gathering. A radical employee might have protested the decision loudly or leaked something unflattering to the news media. As a tempered radical, Waugh took a third way.

Some of the keynote speakers were from companies that were key HP customers, including the executive vice president for business development at 3M. So Waugh reframed the event as an HP Labs "customer visit." The new goal was "to find real business value with key customers in the issues around sustainable development." Waugh got rid of all posters and printed

lated employees to come together and find a common voice. "When the HP sustainability deviants disaggregate and go back to their divisions," Waugh wrote, "they're now members of a much larger group – a group that now has its own newsletter, its own Web page, its own conference. … A group that has the capacity to call the CEO in and ask him to account for the company in the area of sustainability."

The nonconference conference touched off an internal movement for sustainability within HP. Conversations that began at the conference spread and continued. Today, there are about 500 HP employees in a grassroots, self-organized sustainability network. Global citizenship, including the promotion of environmental sustainability, has become a major corporate objective. The company now gives preference to suppliers with sound environmental practices. And HP was the lead technology sponsor at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Devel-

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materials that referred to the event as a conference, but sent out voicemails and e-mails to let interested employees know the customer visit was open for all to attend.

"It was really smoke and mirrors," she recalled.

Waugh was prepared to go all the way over the issue, even at the risk of her job. Indeed, it's important that tempered radicals differentiate for themselves those things they feel are non-negotiable from those over which they are willing to compromise. But the sustainability gathering was not something Waugh was simply going to let pass.

In September 1998, 150 people met for a two-day customer visit, the first gathering on sustainability at HP, and quite possibly one of the first such events ever sponsored by a corporation. In addition to presentations by HP customers, the conference featured Native American drumming by an HP Labs director; a talk by the founder of the Pacific Cultural Conservancy International on how global corporations destroy indigenous cultures and what they could be doing to preserve them; and a speech by a business school professor about the "profitability of green thinking."

The collective action component was crucial, allowing iso-

opment in Johannesburg.

Collective action on the company's environmental policies began with a few people taking action on their own – talking about common concerns, stirring broader interest, and ultimately creating a collective process. Such isolated individual actions often help set the stage for a corporate transformation.

Seizing Opportunity

Ursa is an incredible hulk. The oil platform, aptly named after Ursa Major, the constellation of stars that includes the Big Dipper, sits in 4,000 feet of water in the Gulf of Mexico, 70 miles off the Louisiana coast. It displaces more water – roughly 97,000 tons – than an aircraft carrier. Its main deck sits 100 feet above the sea, and its facilities – including bunk space for 180 workers, a hospital, and a drilling rig – rise another 300 feet above that. The generating plant on the platform produces enough power to run a small city. Its drills burrow to a vertical depth of 26,000 feet, and extend some three miles from the platform in several directions in search of oil and gas.

Rick Fox, the operations manager, stepped on to the rig with
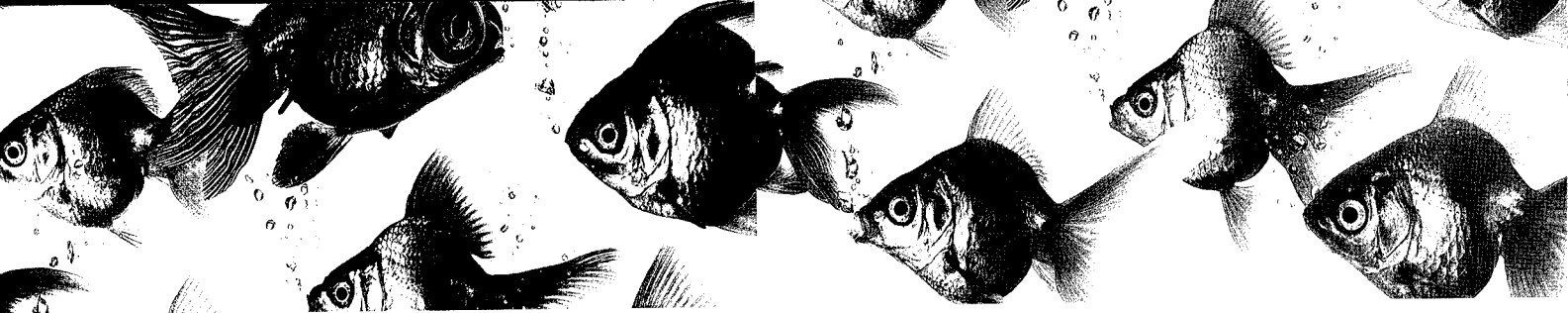
Tempered radical Rick Fox is operations manager of the giant Ursa oil-drilling platform, where he worked with employees to make their jobs safer while protecting the environment.

a bold agenda. He had been concerned about the culture of oil platforms – typically hierarchical, almost militaristic organizations without much cross-pollination among departments. Fox wanted a structure that was team-based, with high involvement at the lowest levels, a system in which everyone felt a degree of ownership over decisions, and everyone's voice counted. He had reorganized a previous oil platform along these lines with good results, and was determined to build on what he had learned to infuse a new culture on Ursa.

Fox believed the workers on Ursa needed to adopt a set of goals that merged social responsibility with business imperatives and safety concerns. And like Waugh, he started by initiating a collective conversation about these concerns.

In January 2000, Fox convened a three-day conference on the platform. There were 18 other operations leaders in the room, including engineers, the operations foreman, and key staff making up the platform leadership team. By the end of the conference, at Fox's urging, the participants had come up with five straightforward goals: (1) No one gets hurt; (2) Respect and protect the environment; (3) People must support each other; (4) "Not a dollar more than it takes"; and (5) "Every drop of oil as fast as possible." The employees left the room committed to these goals and determined to persuade other platform workers to support them.

The goals necessitated radical changes in thinking and behavior. For starters, even the most mundane jobs now had to be planned ahead of time – a major shift in platform culture, yet essential toward achieving good safety practices. The goals also meant breaking down departmental barriers on the platform, since every employee was expected to pursue all five goals at once. Furthermore, the goals were expected to resonate with the workers' own values, and challenge them to perform their best in all five areas – not an easy thing.

But operations on Ursa began to change. In 2001, for instance, repairs were needed at an onshore gas storage facility. If Ursa continued producing oil and gas while the repairs were under way, the gas had to be vented and burned – something that is bad for both the environment and the bottom line. But because employees had by then internalized two goals – respect and protect the environment and "every drop of oil as fast as possible" – they shut down and repaired the platform at the same time the storage facility was being fixed.

"It became a job where we were communicating every hour across the whole network," Fox recalled. "They saw an opportunity and seized it. Ten years ago, we might have burned the gas. But this time they didn't lose the gas or release it as emissions. And by combining the repair schedules, we stayed on target with our oil production."

An Agenda of Change

David Welton, a self-proclaimed tempered radical who worked in a large Swiss bank, had just returned from a two-week seminar on social responsibility, part of a master's degree program at Britain's University of Bath. Welton had been studying at Bath as part of a "future leaders" program at the bank whose participants also were put through a two-year internal training program. Those recruited into the program had unusual access to key executives and were perceived as the next generation of top bank executives.

Welton felt that part of his role would be to advocate socially responsible and environmentally sustainable business practices at the bank. He believed the first step was for the bank to undertake a social audit of its practices to determine where it stood in various areas of social responsibility and environmentalism, how it was judged by different stakeholders, including employees, and what areas needed the most work. But he knew he could not push through such an ambitious institutional agenda on his own. He also knew that some senior executives

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were starting to view him as a loose cannon.

Welton spent much of his first year in the training program trying to drum up enthusiasm for his agenda among his fellow future leaders. Although the participants were in frequent contact and shared similar professional goals, they had no real collective identity or sense of purpose. Welton saw this as an opportunity: A shared commitment to bringing about change at the bank could bring the group together.

Welton described to his peers the bank's role in the global economy and how its lending and employment affected various communities around the world where it did business. He explained how the bank, with only minor adjustments to its hiring and purchasing policies, could help these communities. He also pointed to the credibility the trainees had within the bank and how they had a unique opportunity to influence its senior managers to alter their practices and set an example for other institutions.

By the end of that first year, Welton had convinced his cohorts to adopt his agenda, creating the basis for a strong collective identity. No longer were they just a random collection of fast trackers. They now had a common sense of purpose and responsibility.

At an annual meeting with top bank executives, Welton and his colleagues were asked to present their concerns and a plan for addressing them. Speaking for the group, Welton argued for placing social responsibility on the bank's agenda and for conducting a social audit of its operations. The audit would serve to raise employee awareness, he said, and provide a way to measure progress on key goals.

The executives approved the initiative and authorized a task force led by Welton and another future leader to begin the implementation. Looking back on his accomplishment, Welton said it was the unanimous support of his colleagues and their legitimacy as a group that enabled him to move his progressive ideas

How Tempered Radicals Forge Collective Action

STRATEGY	EXPLANATION	EXAMPLE
Clarify the issue and the movement.	To galvanize support and inspire action, clarify your purpose by framing the issue broadly, but clearly.	Rick Fox's five simple goals for the Ursa oil platform, including such clear-cut imperatives as "No one gets hurt" and "Respect and protect the environment."
Focus on internal culture.	Focus on the culture of the collective itself, as indicated by norms of behavior, clothing, music, food, and language. Include different identity groups within the collective.	Barbara Waugh featured Native American drumming, a talk by an indigenous healer, and a presentation from a business school professor at the first HP sustainability conference.
Actively solicit support.	Try to gain support from people or groups who identify with core issues, to create a sensitivity and a sense of inclusion.	David Welton spent his first year educating other "future leaders" at a bank and developing enthusiasm for his socially responsible agenda.
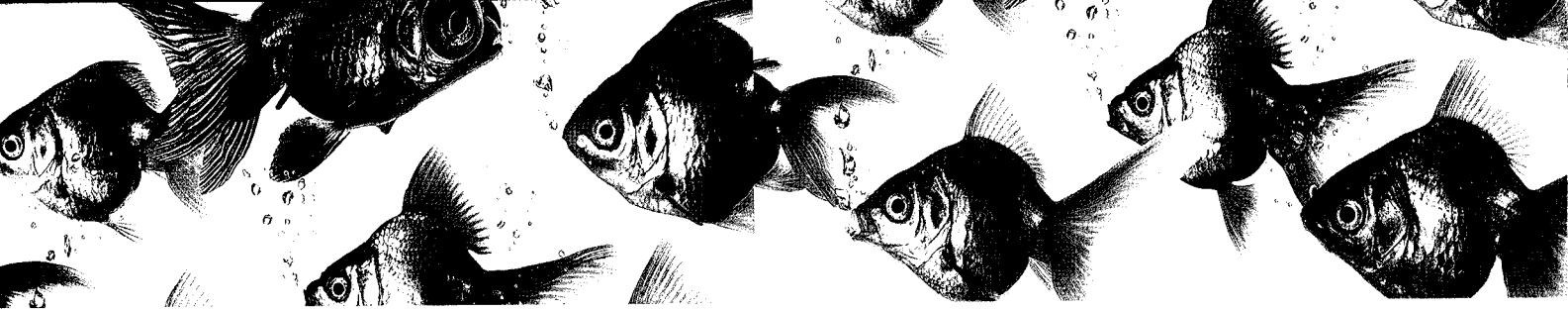
through the system. If he had struck out on his own, he might have changed a few minds and garnered some support along the way. But to catalyze such an immediate and institution-level response, he needed the muscle of a collective.

If Not Now, When?

It does not always make sense to join forces with others. Sometimes it's better to do the work alone; sometimes, tempered radicals simply need the help of a few allies. Most tempered radicals switch back and forth between enacting their ideals in small, quiet ways, and explicitly organizing like-minded individuals to effect organizational change.

For such people the issue is not "Am I a lone agent or community organizer?" The more relevant question is "Under what conditions, for what issues, and in what circumstances does it make sense to join forces with others toward a collective end?"

My observations of the tempered radicals who have successfully organized collectives are consistent with the findings of many social-movement researchers. The research converges on the importance of three conditions for fostering collective action: (1) The presence of immediate political opportunities or threats; (2) Available structures for members to organize themselves into a collective; and (3) The chance to frame collective identity, opportunities, and threats.[4]

Sociologists have observed that collectives tend to form and ignite into action when a set of individuals is faced with either an immediate threat to their interests or a political opportunity to exploit.

Consider the experience of Barbara Waugh. One of the turning points for her also marked the greatest threat – when she learned that the sustainability conference was to be cancelled. Waugh received a call from the head of product stewardship, who told her: "We've got to call off the conference. I sure can't co-sponsor it – I don't even think I can come. I think you are going to be really at risk if you continue trying to do it."

But Waugh believed that an opening existed, providing an unprecedented opportunity for action. HP had just created a mile-long exhibit called "A Walk Through Time" featuring 88 panels illustrating the evolution of life from stardust to man. Unveiled on Earth Day at HP campuses in Palo Alto, England, and Japan, the exhibit merged the story of life and mass extinctions with the latest findings made possible by technology. Bill Hewlett, the company's co-founder, reviewed the Palo Alto panels in his wheelchair, and the popular exhibit later traveled around the world. Waugh saw that the issue of technology's relationship to the environment was firmly on the company's radar. The time to strike was at hand.

Researchers also have shown that the availability of resources and credible structures at the time of an opportunity or threat helps determine whether a collective entity actually forms to respond to the situation.[5] Employee associations or union committees are examples of legitimate structures for collective action. In Welton's case, it was the future leaders group that provided a ready structure for coordinated action.

Moreover, the framing of a problem or set of interests serves as the link between impending threats or opportunities and group action. Framing is a sense-making process that involves actively and publicly interpreting something, such as an ambiguous threat or opportunity in terms relevant to a group's interests. At a minimum, framing makes the group's members feel that by acting together they can address the situation.

Fox saw opportunity and galvanized managers and workers on Ursa by framing five major goals. The goals were both compelling to the platform workers – i.e., their own safety was at stake – and bigger than them as individuals. Fox's success in mobilizing rig employees was partly a result of his capacity to provide a persuasive frame – a shared purpose, a shared sense of opportunity, and a shared feeling that everyone was in it together and had to make a difference together.

Tempered radicals who seek to elevate corporate social responsibility to the institutional level should be alert for new political opportunities or threats. They also need to know if there are available structures for members to organize themselves, and if they can frame the opportunities and threats in a way that appeals to the group's interests. If the answer to one or more of these questions is yes, the time may be ripe for a tempered radical to take closely held social and political values and catapult them on to the corporate agenda.

As Waugh put it: "If several thousand people in the company push the envelope one inch on a footlong ruler, you can actually change the company." ☐

1 "David Welton" is a pseudonym. Welton requested anonymity as a condition of being interviewed for this article.

2 Weick, K. "Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems," *American Psychologist* 39, no. 1 (1984).

3 Zald, M. and Berger, M. "Social Movements in Organizations: Coup d'Etat, Insurgency, and Mass Movements," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 4 (1978).

4 McAdam, D.; McCarthy, J.; and Zald, M. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

5 McCarthy, J. and Zald, M. "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (1977).