



That's Not How We Do It Here!: A Story about How Organizations Rise and Fall--and Can Rise Again

By John Kotter, Holger Rathgeber

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**What's the worst thing you can hear when you have a good idea at work?
“That's not how we do it here!”**

In their iconic bestseller *Our Iceberg Is Melting*, John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber used a simple fable about penguins to explain the process of leading people through major changes. Now, ten years later, they're back with another must-read story that will help any team or organization cope with their biggest challenges and turn them into exciting opportunities.

Once upon a time a clan of meerkats lived in the Kalahari, a region in southern Africa. After years of steady growth, a drought has sharply reduced the clan's resources, and deadly vulture attacks have increased. As things keep getting worse, the harmony of the clan is shattered. The executive team quarrels about possible solutions, and suggestions from frontline workers face a soul-crushing response: “That's not how we do it here!”

So Nadia, a bright and adventurous meerkat, hits the road in search of new ideas to help her troubled clan. She discovers a much smaller group that operates very differently, with much more teamwork and agility. These meerkats have developed innovative solutions to find food and evade the vultures. But not everything in this small clan is as perfect as it seems at first.

Can Nadia figure out how to combine the best of both worlds—a large, disciplined, well-managed clan and a small, informal, inspiring clan—before it's too late?

This book distills Kotter's decades of experience and award-winning research to reveal why organizations rise and fall, and how they can rise again in the face of adversity.

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Editorial Review

Review

“This unique parable shows us how we’re *safer* in changing times when we innovate!”

—**Spencer Johnson, MD**, author of *Who Moved My Cheese?*

“This simple parable of furry mammals facing the challenge of adapting to threat offers real insights into the journey so many of us make. Brilliant!”

—**General Stanley McChrystal (Ret.)**, author of *Team of Teams* and cofounder of the McChrystal Group

“It works. And not just for meerkats.”

—**Gaëtan Thomas**, NB Power president and CEO

“John Kotter does it again. His use of metaphor helps readers distill down to the fundamental requirements for a high-performing organization: tapping the hearts and minds of team members in service to a compelling purpose. Leadership enables this, and in doing so unlocks tremendous creativity and potential.”

—**Leigh Morgan**, COO, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

“Kotter and Rathgeber’s ability to impart clear lessons via fable is as strong as ever.”

—**TD Magazine**

About the Author

John Kotter, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, is often called the world’s foremost authority on leadership and change. His many previous books, including *Leading Change* and *Our Iceberg Is Melting*, have been translated into more than two hundred foreign-language editions and have been bestsellers around the world. He is a founder of Kotter International, a consulting firm that specializes in helping leaders transform their organizations.

Holger Rathgeber is the coauthor of *Our Iceberg Is Melting*, a former executive at a medical products firm, and a principal at Kotter International.

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The vultures had mysteriously turned from scavengers to killers. No one knew why. These awful, scary, deadly creatures were probably the final blow that was leading to the collapse of Matt’s clan.

Matt was a Meerkat—those smallish African animals that humans seem to find cute and interesting. Matt, like all Kats, had his own distinct personality and skills. He had always been shy and could be a bit too rigid once he had a plan in mind. But an inherent sense of loyalty, a soft smile, and skills he always used to help the group had made him much appreciated. He had usually enjoyed life, and most of the time life had enjoyed him back. But then . . .

Because the rain seemed to have disappeared, his clan of fuzzy little creatures no longer had enough food for

everyone. At least once a day, Matt ate less so the young and old and weak could have more. But that hardly made even a small contribution to solving the problem. The increase in the number of predators was—well, Matt had never seen anything like it. A few Kats said it was all connected. Less rain meant less food, which was leading to strange and unpredictable changes in predator behavior. But who knew for sure?

They could not seem to agree upon, much less bring alive, any new big ideas to deal with the new problems. For Matt and many others, that was incredibly frustrating. Making matters even worse, getting the most routine daily work done was proving more and more difficult.

It was not as if Matt never heard any promising new ideas. He had two very creative friends, Tanya and Ago, who had come up with a possible way to find more food and waste less, and a potential method of spotting predators faster than before. But both Kats ran into a wall of “that’s not the way we do things here,” a reaction that, considering the circumstances, made no sense. Matt tried to pitch in and show others why such an argument was illogical. He talked to Kats he knew the best, those born in litters about the same time as he was. He talked to his Family Chief. And he got nowhere.

Matt was so tired. Because he was respected, he was asked by one of the big bosses—an Alpha—to take on this project and that project and another. The toll on him added up. He was not at all the type who walked through his days quietly or loudly angry at the world. Yet here he was . . .

One very mad Meerkat.

Introduction

This story is about important issues almost all of us are now facing: The rate of change is going up, that fact can be hard to see clearly or to deal with well, and when we cannot find ways to avoid hazards, grasp opportunities, and produce the results we all truly value—all of which we know is possible because some people do it—life can become quite unpleasant.

We have chosen a fable format here—a story with a whole cast of characters, including Matt—because fables can take on big issues and be useful for many people. And the issues here really are big. To understand how we can get better outcomes, we need to more clearly understand how organizations rise, why they often eventually struggle no matter their past success, and why they can fall. We need more clarity about how a few rise once again to grow, fulfill their mission, create great jobs and services and wealth. It helps to see the role that discipline, planning, reliability, and efficiency play in these stories. And the role of passion, vision, engagement, speed, agility, and culture. And there is the issue of management versus leadership—and the latter not from just a few people in big corner offices.

Yes, yes, we know that this is a bit much for a short book. And, yes, many others have had much to say about these issues. But we think there is too much fog around some fundamental points that relate to success today. Only when we begin to lift that fog do we have a chance of turning twenty-first-century challenges and threats into exciting opportunities—for our businesses, governments, nonprofits, and ourselves. We could go on and on talking about the many decades of research underlying the ideas and insights in this story. But a discussion of that here could undermine our goals of being short, thought-provoking, useful, and fun.

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James Alvarez:

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