

A review of
Leading the Revolution by Gary Hamel,
published by Harvard Business School Press (Boston, 2000)
ISBN 1-57851-189-5

Rating: 10*

Gary Hamel's newest book offers an edgy look at organizations and what we need to do to re-vitalize them. In an occasionally strident tone and with flashes of something approaching self-righteousness, he suggests that nothing short of a revolution will work. Hamel suggests that incremental change has carried business as far as it can. We need to go farther but we cannot get there by tweaking things. He believes that "only those companies that are capable of creating industry revolutions will prosper in the new economy."

What does he mean by "revolution"? Maybe it helps to first identify what he *doesn't* mean. It's not a matter of twiddling this dial or pushing a bit harder here or squeezing out the last ounce over there. It's a matter of coming up with a new concept of business, finding a new way to deliver value to customers and put distance between you and the competition. But it's not about attacking and defeating the competition. It's about avoiding them and going around them. The one who makes the rules clearly has an advantage, so re-create the game with new rules.

And it's not a matter of dot-coms versus the military-industrial complex either. Either sort of business can fall prey to institutional entropy. We need new business models and we need to build them into re-conceived organizations. The message is quite simple: "radical innovation is the competitive advantage for the new millennium." Hamel points out that knowledge begets knowledge, so the first-mover has a clear and perhaps insurmountable advantage. The critical element will not be information itself, but rather *knowledge* and insight into new opportunities that will bring *discontinuous* innovation.

"Wait," you say. "I'll need help. Can I call a consultant?" Sure you can ... and the result will be that your organization gets infected by the same orthodoxy that the consultant picked up somewhere else as a "best practice." Nope, you're on your own this time. Who ever heard of rent-a-revolutionary? You need people committed to the organization and its success and its values and its people. And you find those people *inside* the organization not at A-to-Z Rental. Why an insider? Because an organization that must depend on its people's judgment *in the moment* to make good decisions must have people with a solid and consistent value system.

* The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net scale from 6-10.

So an internal activist shall lead them ... Not an anarchist, but a member of the loyal opposition, a citizen committed to the success and endurance of the organization. Not someone who reveres the past, but rather someone committed to excellence in the future. Hamel writes that "Most social systems get changed by activists not by the elite. Yet I've never come across a company-sponsored training program that teaches the rank and file how to be activists." (Perhaps *that's* why the work that we've been doing in my company has run afoul of so many people!) "But, you might ask, "can't we depend on senior management for all this?" Hamel believes that most senior managers are more worried about not screwing up what they inherited than creating a powerful legacy for the next generation.

Will just any old insider do? Which one gets to lead the revolution? The person with the best questions, that's who. The one who can get past the mental straitjacket that the others don't even know they're wearing. Leadership will come "from the mind and soul of a malcontent, a dreamer, a smart-ass, and not from some bespectacled boffin or besuited planner," he writes.

Perhaps you've bought in to the idea of leading the revolution, but would like a handbook to get you started. Hamel has some suggestions for you. For example, the second step of eight is this: "Write a manifesto." Use it to build a case for the intellectual authority of your position. And if you can simultaneously bundle it in moral authority, so much the better. Later he offers ten design rules for innovation. Number three reminds you that a revolutionary works for a cause, not a profit. People *want* to work on something that matters, something that will make a difference for their customers or their colleagues. Give them that something and watch what happens.

Hamel suggests that "Activists are the coolest people on the planet. They change big, complicated things with the bare hearts. ... To be an activist ... you need a set of values that will set you apart from the courtiers and wannabes." These include honesty, compassion, humility, pragmatism, and fearlessness.

So here's the acid test: "Do you care enough about doing something so wonderful and unexpected for customers that you're willing to put your comfy job on the line? Go ahead, ask yourself, Do you care enough to lead the revolution?"

If you think you're ready for the revolution, this book will provide some provocative ideas.