



Rosabeth Moss Kanter

The change masters

It is difficult to classify Rosabeth Moss Kanter as a specialist in any particular area, as her prolific writings encompass a wide range of topics. She views herself, however, as a thought leader and developer of ideas, and is best known for her work on change management and innovation.

Much of Kanter's success is due to a combination of rigorous research, practical experience, and her ability to write in a clear and concrete way, using many illustrative examples.

the behaviors observed within Indsco:

- the structure of opportunity,
- the structure of power,
- the proportional distribution of people of different kinds.

Before this book was published, it was generally assumed that behavioural differences underlay women's general lack of career progress. Kanter's findings made structural issues central, however, and the implications for change management were significant. If all employees were to become more empowered, according to Kanter's analysis, organisations rather than people would need to change. Accordingly, the book ends with practical policy suggestions to create appropriate structural changes.

While working on this book, Kanter identified the need for organisational change to improve working life, create more equal opportunities, and make more use of employees' talents within organisations.

"The Change Masters"

"The Change Masters" puts forward various approaches to achieving these ends. Kanter compares four traditional corporations like Indsco with six competitive and successful organisations, described as "change masters". All findings were weighed against the experiences of many other companies, and much other material. From the six innovative organisations, Kanter derives a model for encouraging innovation.

Innovative companies were found to have a distinct, "integrative" approach to management, while firms unlikely to innovate were described as "segmentalist" insofar as they were compartmentalised by units or departments. The difference begins with a company's approach to problem-solving, and extends through its structure and culture. Entrepreneurial organisations:

- operate at the edge of their competence, focusing on exploring the unknown rather than on controlling the known;
- measure themselves by future-focused visions (how far they have to go) rather than by past standards (how far they have come).

Three clusters of structures and processes are identified as factors that encourage power circulation and access to power: open communication systems, network-forming arrangements, and decentralisation of resources. Their practical implementation is discussed.

KEY THINKING

Kanter has authored or co-authored several books and well over 150 major articles. Her doctoral thesis was on communes, and her first books, written during the early 1970s, were sociological. The three books for which she is best-known are "Men and Women of the Corporation", "The Change Masters" and "When Giants Learn to Dance". There is a logical progression within them, in that the first studies the stifling effects of bureaucratic organisation on individuals, while the subsequent titles go on to explore ways in which flatter, "post-entrepreneurial" organisations release, and make use of, individuals' talents and abilities. All three were extremely successful. Later books include "The Challenge of Organisational Change" (with Barry A. Stein and Todd D. Jick), "World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy" and "The Frontiers of Management".

"Men and Women of the Corporation"

"Men and Women of the Corporation" won the C. Wright Mills Award in 1977 as the year's best book on social issues. It is a detailed analysis of the nature and effects of the distribution of power and powerlessness within the headquarters of one large, bureaucratic, multinational corporation (called Industrial Supply Corporation, or Indsco, in the book). The effects of powerlessness on behaviour are explored and the detrimental effects of disempowerment, both for the organisation and individual employees, are made clear. Women were the most obvious group affected by lack of power, though Kanter emphasises that other groups outside the white, male norm, such as ethnic minority members, were also affected.

Three main structural variables explained

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|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1943 | Born Cleveland, Ohio. |
| 1977 | Publication of "Men and Women of the Corporation". |
| 1983 | Publication of "The Change Masters". |
| 1986- | Professor of business administration, Harvard Business School |
| 1989 | Publication of "When Giants Learn to Dance". |
| 1989-1999 | Editor – <i>Harvard Business Review</i> |

LIFE AND CAREER

Kanter was born in 1943, in Cleveland, Ohio, and attended the top women's academy, Bryn Mawr. She took her PhD at the University of Michigan and was associate professor of sociology at Brandeis University from 1966 to 1977. Between 1973 and 1974 she was on the Organization Behavior Program at Harvard, and she was a fellow and visiting scholar of Harvard Law School between 1975 and 1976.

From 1977 to 1986, Kanter was professor of sociology and professor of organizational management at Yale, and from 1979 to 1986, she was a visiting professor at the Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 1986, she returned to Harvard as the "class of 1960" professor of entrepreneurship and innovation, and she still holds the post of professor of business administration at Harvard Business School.

Between 1989 and 1992 Kanter was editor of the Harvard Business Review, and she acted as a key economic adviser to Michael Dukakis during his 1988 Presidential campaign. She has travelled widely as a public speaker, lecturer, and international consultant. In 1977, she and her future husband Barry Stein set up a management consultancy called Goodmeasure, which has some large and well-known multinational companies as clients.



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BUSINESS THINKERS



Individuals can also be change masters. “New entrepreneurs” are people who improve existing businesses rather than start new ones. They can be found in any functional area and are described as, literally, the right people, in the right place, at the right time:

- the right people – those with vision and ideas extending beyond the organisation's normal practice;
- the right place – an integrative environment fostering proactive vision, coalitions, and teams;
- the right time – a moment in the historical flow when change becomes most possible.

The ultimate change masters are corporate leaders, who translate their vision into a new organisational reality.

“The Change Masters” advocates “participation management” as the means to greater empowerment. Some major “building blocks” for productive change are identified, and practical measures to remove “groad blocks” to innovation are discussed.

“When Giants Learn to Dance”

“When Giants Learn to Dance” completes Kanter's trilogy on the need for change which, she considered, United States corporations had to confront and manage in order to compete more effectively. The book is based on observation from within various organisations, through consultancy projects. The global economy is likened to a “corporate Olympics” of competing businesses, with results determining which nations, as well as which organisations, are winners.

The games differ, but successful teams share some characteristics such as strength, skill, discipline, good organisation, and focus on individual excellence. To win, American companies would have to become progressively more entrepreneurial and less bureaucratic. Kanter suggested as a model for the 1990s the “post-entrepreneurial” corporation, in which three shaping forces would play the key roles:

- the context set at the top
- top management values
- project ideas and approaches coming up through the organisation.

An “athletic” organisation of this kind would be lean, flexible, and able to do more with less, and would seek to create synergies through the use of team and partnership approaches. The organisation would be built on empowerment, and employees would be highly valued within team-based or partnership relationships.

Kanter picks out seven skills or sensibilities that characterise individual “business athletes”. These are:

- the ability to operate and get results

without depending on hierarchical authority, position, or status;

- the ability to compete in a way that enhances cooperation, and aims to achieve high standards rather than destroy competitors;
- the high ethical standards needed to support the trust that is crucial for cooperative approaches when competing in the corporate Olympics;
- a dose of humility, basic self-confidence being tempered by the understanding that new things will always need to be learnt;
- process focus, that is, respect for the process of implementation as well as for the substance of what is implemented;
- a multifaceted and ambidextrous approach that makes possible cross-functional or cross-departmental work, the forming of alliances where appropriate, and the cutting of ties where necessary;
- a temperament that derives satisfaction from results, and a willingness to be rewarded according to achievements.

“World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy”

“World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy” focuses on world class companies with employees described as “cosmopolitan” in type. These people are rich in the “three Cs” – concepts, competence, and connections – and carry a more universal culture to all the places in which their company operates.

This knowledge-rich breed is set against “locals” who are set in their ways, and the two groups are viewed as the main classes in modern society. The book is optimistic, in that Kanter believes stakeholders can influence world-class companies to spread best practice around the world.

Globalisation, it is argued, offers an opportunity to develop businesses and give new life to the regions. From her studies of regenerative areas, Kanter suggests that business and local government leaders can work together to draw in the right sort of companies to create prosperity.

European as well as American successes are used to illustrate the benefits of globalisation, and the centrality of regional economies.

Later works

“The Challenge of Organisational Change: How Companies Experience It and Leaders Guide It” is a book on the management of change, filled with practical examples. In line with many other writings on managing change, a distinction is drawn between evolutionary and revolutionary change, here described as the “glong march” and “bold stroke approaches.

“Rosabeth Moss Kanter on The Frontiers of Management” collects Kanter's essays and research articles for the “Harvard Business Review” together into one volume.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter in perspective

Overall, Kanter's books present some fairly complex ideas in a way that many people seem to find approachable. They are well-argued, well-illustrated, and supported with a wealth of practical research evidence.

Some of her central ideas, once viewed by some as unrealistic, have now become absorbed into general management wisdom. These include empowerment, participative management, and employee involvement. In “The Frontiers of Management”, she is presented as a ground-breaking explorer who has initiated a revolution in terms of new ways of working. It is also pointed out, however, that some managers have still not crossed the frontiers, or do so in aspiration rather than actuality.

THE BEST SOURCES OF HELP

Books:

Key works by Kanter

“Men and Women of the Corporation”, New York: Basic Books Inc, 1977
 “The Change Masters: Corporate Entrepreneurs at Work”, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983
 “When Giants Learn to Dance: Master the Challenge of Strategy, Management, and Careers in the 1990s”, London: Simon & Schuster, 1989

Further reading

Books: “Guide to the Management Gurus: Short Cuts to the Ideas of Leading Management Thinkers”, Carol Kennedy, London: Century Business, 1991
 “Key Management Ideas: Thinking that Changed the Management World”, Stuart Crainer, London: Pitman, 1996
 “World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy”, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995

Journal articles:

“World class guru”, Godfrey Golzen, *Human Resources*, May/June 1996, pp. 38-40, 42-44
 “Interview with Rosabeth Moss Kanter”, Tim Dickson, *The Financial Times*, 17th May 1996, p. 17

