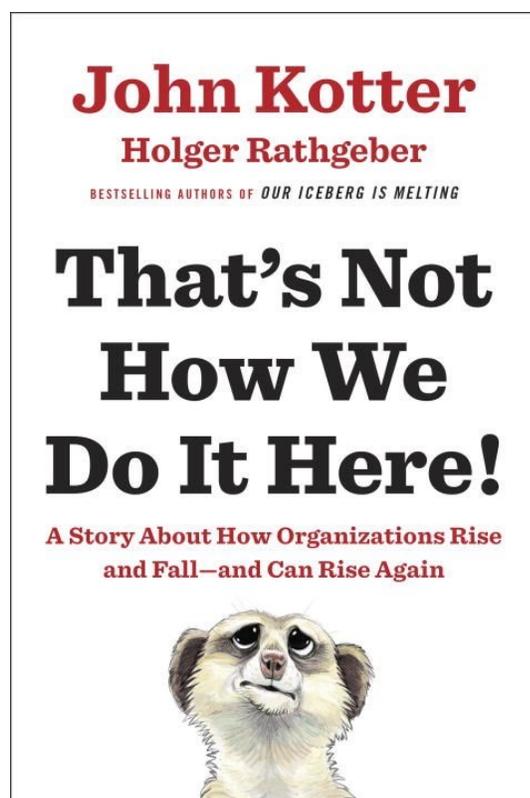




Book Review: 'That's Not How We Do It Here!'

By Kotter & Rathgeber

John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber take us out into the desert of Africa to teach us some valuable lessons about leadership and change.



If you're looking for instruction, advice, and inspiration on leadership and change, John Kotter should always be your first stop. The professor emeritus at Harvard Business School has many decades of research and many books on the topic under his belt. Our founder and former president Jack Covert named his book *Leading Change* as one of The 100 Best Business Books of All Time, and that is just one of a multitude under Kotter's name that could be considered a classic in the genre.

In his new book, he and coauthor Holger Rathgeber tell of a problem common across many organizations beset by increasing change and challenging times: *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.*

This story is a bit different than most we read in business books, because it takes place in the Kalahari Desert, and Matt is a Meerkat. Yes, it's a fable. Kotter and Rathgeber have given us a fable before, and it is one of the best—*Our Iceberg is Melting: Changing and Succeeding Under Any Conditions*, which was recently re-released by Portfolio and has a 10th anniversary edition planned for 2017.

The star of this new fable is Nadia. The Meerkat clan she belongs to has grown to more than one hundred and fifty members, which we are told is "a remarkable size that is far from typical." To keep it functioning well, specific plans, schedules, procedures, measures, rules, best practices, and layers of bureaucracy—a certain *way of doing things*—have been developed over the years.

But these were management tools developed for a very specific and favorable environment, and that environment is changing. The rain has seemingly vanished, the insects and reptiles Meerkats eat are becoming harder to find, and vultures—which most Kats in the clan had only

ever heard of, Vultures having left the area when a brushfire cleared the land they call home a generation ago—have not only returned, they have changed from mere scavengers picking up scraps into predators.

In response, the alphas and betas of the clan spend more and more time meeting about the new dangers, shuffling management teams, and reviewing procedures. The system of Kat-management that had been so reliable and useful in the past is failing them. New challenges and problems are arising all around them. They didn't have any established policies or procedures to deal with the new threats, and the ones they did have weren't working anymore—often, they were impediments.

When Nadia's best friend Ayo, a guard, comes up with the revolutionary idea of climbing tress to see farther and get a better view of potential dangers to the clan, he is disciplined for violating guarding procedures and removed from his post. As being a guard is the only thing Ayo has ever wanted to do and all he thinks about (the authors refer to him as a guard nerd), he decides to leave the clan, just as the best burrow maker and two of his friends had two days earlier. The clan is shedding talent and losing hope. Believing that there has to be a clan out there that has faced similar challenges and found a better way to meet them, Nadia decides to leave with Ayo to search for it and learn from them.

They find other clans quickly, but most are either even more dysfunctional or not welcoming new members because of the drought. Finally, they happen upon Matt, a fellow rover from another clan that has disintegrated in the face of all the new threats and changes. Matt has heard of a clan doing well and accepting new members, and they set out together to find it. The clan is recently formed and only has a dozen members. It is small and nimble and new in its ways—the clever and crafty startup to the large and closely managed corporations Nadia, Matt, and Ayo were used to in their former clans. Led by Lena, this new clan is facing the reality of the drought by focusing on coming up with new ideas that turn the challenges into opportunities. They develop innovations in food sharing and creation. It is a clan with more energy and passion than any of them had ever witnessed before, an idea-generating machine coming up with many new way of doing things, beating the odds and growing rapidly even in the middle of the drought. It is revolutionary.

But when the clan grows to fifty members, things begin to break down. It is a lightbulb moment for Nadia. She realizes that high spirit and high ideals aren't enough to keep the burrows in good order, that Lena's visionary leadership was great at inspiring innovation and ideas, but that more structure would be needed to support a larger clan. After a heart to heart with Lena in which Nadia shares her insight, she and Ayo set out for home with all they've learned.

Nadia thinks she has found a middle path, a way to be smart and disciplined, while also being able to create and change—to be creative, responsive, and open to new initiatives and projects that keep the clan at least evolutionary if not revolutionary, while also keeping it stable and safe. She believes she can help replace complacency with a sense of urgency to keep improving and growing the clan, the clan's quality of life, and its ability to weather change.

Instead of diving into the weeds of management theory and rote business examples, Kotter and Rathgeber take us out into the desert, and give us a fable that is simple and short yet powerful. I'm glad that Kotter has teamed up with Rathgeber again and returned to the fable format.

Fiction has the ability to stretch our minds in ways that more straightforward business books do not. The characters' experience resonates with our own, and the situations they find themselves in reminds us of elements within our own organizations. Instead of giving us a numbered list to check off, or specific takeaways or programs to implement, they allow us to complete the picture for ourselves, to make our own connections, to find our own lessons and how to apply them. T

here is about twenty pages of more straightforward business lessons at the end of the book that wrap it up and explain some of the ideas, research, and theory behind the story, but the greatest power resides in the story itself. And, even if we tend not to take these stories for adults very seriously at first, that shouldn't surprise us.

After all, the world's most famous fables, Aesop's Fables, exist not only to impart moral lessons and education, but to expand our moral imaginations, and it has been doing that for over two thousand years. That's Not How We Do It Here! does the same thing for our organizational intelligence and imagination today.

Moral of the Story

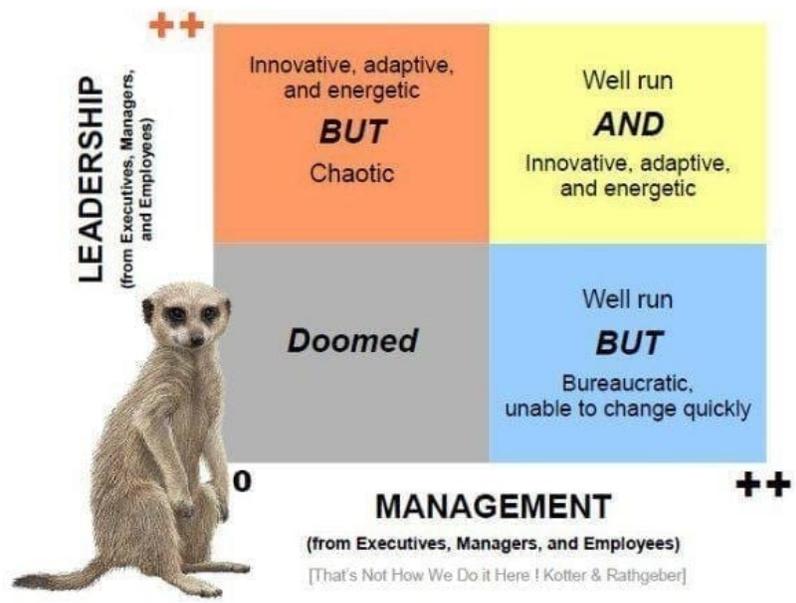
The moral of the story is that some companies, or colonies in Nadia's world, are well managed and some are well led. However, very few are both well led and well managed. Nadia's challenge is to work out how to combine the best of both worlds – a large, disciplined, well-managed clan and a small, informal, inspiring clan to allow hers to thrive once again.

Kotter cleverly uses the story to highlight the importance of the two styles of leading an organization (leadership and management) to work and function together, rather than compete.

A conundrum, or magic formula, that is hard to achieve in the modern business world!

Applying Business Tools...

Page 147 contains a diagram that perfectly summed-up the leadership vs. management 'problem' in the form of a matrix:



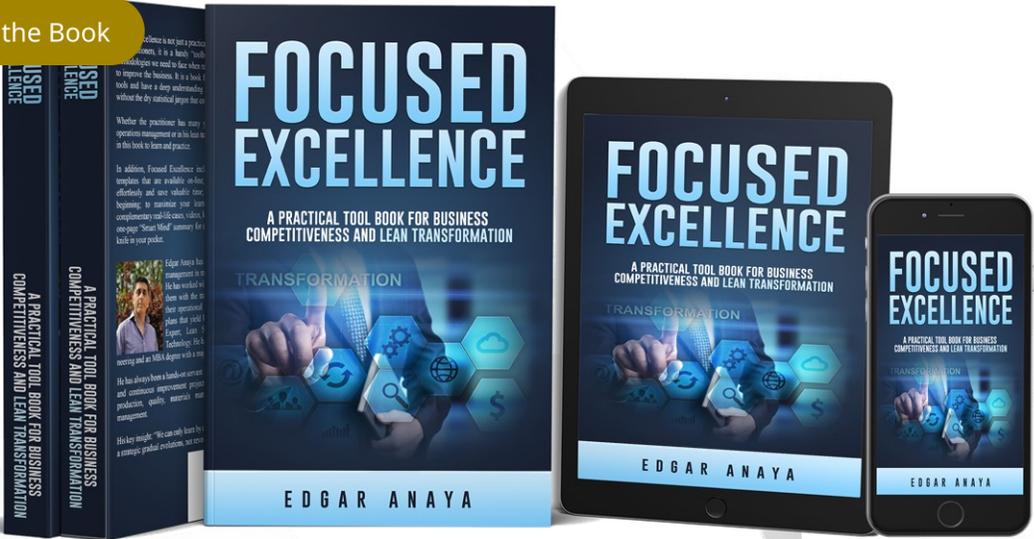
Leadership vs Management matrix
Source: J. Kotter and H. Rathgeber

Final Thoughts on That's Not How We Do it Here

To illustrate, these four boxes (above) show the problem most companies face. They are rarely top right. Most tend to fall into the bottom right quadrant, well managed but lack the capacity to innovate and adapt. Whilst not the worst-case scenario, a lack of vision will ultimately, over the long term, reduce an organization's competitive position. It will open the prospect of attack, not from vultures as in Nadia's case, but from competitors taking the initiative and with it a sustainable competitive advantage.



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