

# Musings from



**Musings from Gate 44** is a series of papers written from one of the most sacred reflective places in a consultant's life – the airport. As we depart our client's cities, we are often decompressing, celebrating, venting, strategizing and reflecting on behalf of those we serve. We're inviting you into our private thoughts about...you. "You" means those of you leading complex organizations trying to grow, change, improve and compete. These "musings" are stimulated by patterns we see over and over again as we work. Our hope is that letting you into our inner thoughts will help you grapple with the issues that frustrate your noblest aspirations and thwart what you seek to achieve. (We hope we'll also have a chance to laugh gently together at some of the silly things organizations can do.)

## The Inner War of the Revolutionary

By Ron A. Carucci

*How in the world do you announce a gate change when the new gate is in an entirely different terminal a train wide away with the words "now boarding all rows?" First I thought I'd heard "D44" – I was in terminal D so it wouldn't have been that bad. But my jaw dropped when the voice clarified "C44." So I ran to the center concourse, up the escalator, onto the train, off the train, down the escalator and up to the gate, sweating and panting. Once I got there, I saw people NOT boarding the flight. Then I heard the voice again. "We apologize for the inconvenience, but in addition to the gate change, we've also had a change of equipment. This plane has fewer seats on it, so we're going to need some volunteers to go on a later flight in exchange for travel vouchers. Also, those of you who have been upgraded on the flight will need to be reseated, and I only have middle seats left."*

I hate sudden, abrupt change. I don't like having the terms of change dictated to me. And I hate being disappointed – especially by a disembodied voice offering a middle seat on a four hour flight as a consolation prize.

This experience reminded me of my last two days with the senior team of my client's organization. We were offsite at a nearby conference center plotting the massive change they are undertaking to consolidate all of their manufacturing and supply chain operations to prepare for the launch of an entirely new product line. This is going to increase the size of the company by nearly 50%, and could change the way their whole industry competes. The energy around the table was frenetic as ideas and dreams flew everywhere. In between the new and exciting concepts, though, you also heard how difficult this was, and how traumatizing it would be for those who couldn't be reassigned into new jobs and would have to be downsized. Passion for the new was tempered with an appreciation of the strain that leading this revolution was going to impose. As I watched the energy level in the room rise and fall with each new revelation of opportunity and challenge, I realized I'd seen this before, this inner war of those planning a revolution in their organization. It was both exhilarating and exhausting to watch.

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## Ask yourself this question:

What happened the last time you tried to lead change? Did the thrill of possibility vanish before the realization of all it would take to realize? If so, don't worry. You aren't alone. Leaders who aspire to change the world, or at least the world in which they lead, all seem to come wired with the same "revolutionary genetic code." They are perpetually torn between the euphoric hope of their dreams, and the depressing lament of how difficult it will be to make those dreams real.

## The war of agency and ambivalence

Chances are good that if you are at the helm of an enterprise or business unit, you've been handed some mandate from somewhere – your board, the market, your employees, your shareholders – for big change. And the moment you began to dream of how to steer your way through big change, you were faced with the realization of just how hard it would be. Scenes from past organizational triumphs and tragedies came vividly to mind as you weighed the cost and benefits of plotting revolution. And it is likely that every step of the way, you wrestled between these two forces that propelled you forward and held you back.

In our decades of experience working with leaders masterminding great transformations, we have seen this inner war derail promising endeavors too many times to count. So our hope is that by taking a closer look at how these two forces can combine for both great good and great disappointment, leaders can grapple with them more productively when the inner heat of battle is raging furiously.

Having a strong sense of *agency* is essential for revolutionaries. They must believe they can effect change, and believe in the efficacy of their voice and influence to make it happen. Agency is more than just self confidence and bravura. It is the deep sense of personal power that one has the capacity, the commitment, and even the duty, to make something

better. When agency runs amuck, as we'll discuss, it can leave behind painful carnage as a leader's recklessness turns unrestrained agency into disaster.

Understandably, leaders can become paralyzed with *ambivalence* in the face of daunting change, especially since that change is playing out in a public arena where employees, shareholders, customers, and analysts are watching with feverish anticipation of either rousing success or catastrophic failure. Privately second-guessing themselves, scrutinizing the motives of others struggling to help, backing off of ideas that feel too risky for safer, more conventional solutions, leaders can feel the dangerous isolation of leading revolutions to debilitating degrees.

Here's the most important thing you need to accept about this inner war that you've likely experienced when leading change: it can never be "resolved." There is no perfect, harmonious middle ground. Moreover, for revolutions to occur in societies, organizations, nations, this inner war of the revolutionary is *necessary*. It is ultimately what propels leaders toward the pursuit of transformation. Alleviating the war shouldn't be the goal, unless you no longer wish to effect revolutionary change. What a leader *can* do is better understand how to work with these forces constructively.

During the course of any major change initiative, this inner war between agency and ambivalence can be contended with in countless cycles of ups and downs. In order to understand what happens in the extremes of each, let's first take a look at the inner raw material a revolutionary brings to start with.

## What revolutionaries bring

In the last Musings from Gate 44, we talked about the *Anatomy of a Revolutionary*, the capabilities that revolutionaries possess to lead change well. Unlike capacities that can be developed, these "raw materials" are more hard-wired into revolutionaries, sometimes genetically, sometimes environmentally. They create natural tensions within revolutionaries that propel them forward. It is the tension that these attributes create that, when managed well, enable revolutionaries to guide the tumultuous work of transformation. And when their balance is tipped too far in the direction of agency or ambivalence, the revolution and the revolutionary can both experience tragic consequences.

However they get there, here are the components we repeatedly see in those who arrive into the world ready and eager to change it:

- **Voice** with which to paint a picture of the future (vision)



- **Ideas** with which to shape thinking about what is and what could be (perspective)
- **Passion** that ignites the hearts of others to want to join (motive/motion)
- **Discontent** with the way things are that provokes uneasiness with the status quo (compelling restlessness)
- **Conviction** that things can and should be different (hope)

Let's look at how you can work to keep each of these in balance, avoiding the form each can take when either its agency or ambivalence is exceeded.

## Sing in Tune: The Voice of the Revolutionary

Even the most unmusical of us knows to wince when watching American Idol's early hopefuls make buffoons of themselves when they open their mouths to make sounds uglier than finger nails on a chalk board. We also know to gasp in awe when a magical voice sends chills up our spine with musical sounds we instantly recognize as rare. The voices of revolutionaries are no different. The word pictures of a desired future painted by a revolutionary are what compel others to join the cause. Revolutionaries stir desires and belief in others for a greater good and sway them to relinquish what has become familiar to set out on a journey for some not-yet-seen horizon. When revolutionaries speak, people listen. And when the vision is alluring enough, people join. We can think of plenty of historical examples – Lincoln holding the nation together during the Civil War or Churchill rallying his island countrymen in the Battle of Britain or Gandhi leading hundreds of millions of Indians to a new future of self determination. The revolutionary leaders of companies may not sway the fate of millions, but for the people in their organizations, their leadership can be every bit as profound. Aaron Feuerstein, CEO of Malden Mills, faced a test of his leadership when fires destroyed three quarters of his factories. He kept all of his employees on the payroll and inspired them with his vision of recovery. Within a year, Malden Mills had rebuilt and exceeded its numbers from the previous year.<sup>1</sup>

When your revolutionary voice turns strident, there is a shift from inspiration to violence. Your anger grips your voice and you end up causing more harm than good. In one organization we worked with, a man charged with leading a small initiative was getting resistance from other parts of the organization, and his frustration led him to vent his aggravation on a blog site. Eventually the hit rates of that site reached a huge level, and the leaders of the organization he was condemning were being blasted as others assumed his complaints were legitimate and joined in the public flogging. Unfortunately, it backfired on him when the

truth about his complaints were exposed as hyperbolic ranting. The leaders of the organization were actually working to help him, but anytime he didn't get his way, he just sulked and threw a tantrum. His blog-rants got him ostracized from most people in the organization, and eventually he had to leave because nobody wanted to work with him. Excessive agency can contaminate a revolutionary's voice with vitriol and violence, dismantling the very cause it created by condemning those who oppose it.

An equally unfortunate extreme of your revolutionary voice is muting – when you are silenced, or silence yourself. This often happens in the face of extreme battle fatigue, or when opposition to your revolutionary vision is so strong that it drowns out your call to a different future. This can often happen in deeply politicized environments where power struggles take precedence over mission and strategy. In one global NGO we've worked with, the CEO had embarked on a strategy for global expansion into new arenas, but got into a power struggle with the chairman of the board. Despite the CEO's attempts to work through their differences, she and the chairman only became further estranged, and the board and the organization became alienated from one another. The chairman's voice eventually swayed the board to fire the CEO, claiming her capability was insufficient to execute the strategy. Unfortunately for the chairman, the CEO was tremendously respected by the ranks, and the war that ensued between the staff and the board paralyzed the organization for nearly a year after she was forced out. Later discussions revealed that the board was never really aligned on terminating her, but didn't have enough voice of their own to stand up to the chairman's relentless campaign against the CEO. She simply became too exhausted to fight the uphill climb and stand up for the organization and the vision they had created together. Excessive ambivalence can mute your revolutionary voice when those whose power base is threatened by your vision seek to silence you, or when your own exhaustion leads you to surrender your voice to the decibels of your opponents.



## Push Convention Unconventionally: The Ideas of the Revolutionary

Great ideas are the mainstay of great change provocateurs. Your revolutionary ability to connect unconventional dots, see unmet or unexpressed needs in markets, societies, or industries, and generate ideas that escape most of us, are what set you apart from your everyday good leader. What often makes the revolutionary's ideas powerful is the way in which they can change perspective. As Einstein said, "I think that only daring speculation can lead us further and not accumulation of facts."<sup>29</sup> Paul Newman, thinking about how he could link a quality foods line to his philanthropic interests, has said, "When the idea for Newman's Own came up, I said, 'Are you crazy? Stick my face on the label of salad dressing?' And then, of course, we got the whole idea of exploitation and how circular it is. Why not, really, go to the fullest length, and the silliest length, in exploiting yourself and turn the proceeds back to the community?"<sup>30</sup>

The point about revolutionaries is not just that they have unconventional ideas – many people are struck with inspiration. The point here is that revolutionaries bring these ideas to life in a way that changes the organization. As Teresa Amabile has said, "All innovation begins with creative ideas . . . We define innovation as the successful implementation of creative ideas within an organization. In this view, creativity by individuals and teams is a starting point for innovation; the first is necessary but not sufficient condition for the second."<sup>44</sup>

It is true that too much of a good thing can be harmful, especially when it comes to provocative ideas. Typical entrepreneurs are ideation machines, generating far more ideas than could ever be acted upon. And sometimes their provocative trait, when exceeded, can push people's tolerance for the unconventional and end up being divisive instead of unifying. "We just can't keep up with him" is the typical lament of those who work with social or commercial entrepreneurs who want to revolutionize whatever they can get their hands

on. Eventually people become exhausted trying to figure out which of your "ideas du jour" is the one you are actually serious about. And when your ideas are particularly controversial, (which some revolutionaries enjoy simply for the sake of the controversy), they can have a backlash effect, causing entrenchment in those whose fear of or umbrage at the idea convert them to ardent antagonists, campaigning against it. A CEO we know in a post merger integration had a new go-to-market model which was to be rolled out to the global enterprise in stages for different geographies, giving all offices a common working framework. The CEO has tinkered with this model extensively, however, and the result is that after 18 months, this organization has several different versions of its model based on which version reached what geography. The different geographies are now digging their heels in and don't want to change further – and the unifying potential of the model has been lost completely. This is an example of how excessive agency can turn your revolutionary ideas into weapons of mass destruction, splintering or inflaming a community of otherwise would-be supporters and implementers.

Sadly, sometimes it is the revolutionary herself whose fear of – or even boredom with – her ideas becomes the diluting factor. Good ideas have unique gestation requirements, incubating in a variety of ways that sometimes surpass your patience or courage. The revolutionary may pull the trigger on an idea haphazardly, often prematurely, simply for the sake of no longer having to delay gratification or tolerate ambiguity. Excessive ambivalence can dull your creativity and curiosity, making ideation an ironically mindless activity. Further, such ambivalence can be triggered by your inability to delay gratification, allowing the necessary time for a good idea to marinate in the iterative kneading process required for it to reach its full potential.

## Wear Your Heart on your Sleeve: The Passion of a Revolutionary

Passion fuels the revolutionary and her community. The heart of the revolutionary has seemingly endless emotional bandwidth, and when offered to those she leads, tends to propagate passion in others. Lawler Kang, author of a wonderful book on the subject, *Passion at Work*, says, "Having and instilling a passion for your work (and life) is a surefire way to draw on your and your team's best efforts...[a] productive benefit of working your passions is focus. You have mooted out or de-prioritized the bevy of 'things that must get done or the sky will fall.' You know what is important to you and your team and you are pushing forward with the strength of Goliath and the precision of David. What a powerful combination! A final performance booster



generated by swallowing the passion pill is that your personal and team goals will be as closely aligned as they ever can be. This interplay between matching your personal passions with the objectives of your group is the application that kills moribund results.”<sup>5</sup>

It is ultimately the stirred hearts of others that brings them into your cause for great change. Yes, sound logic and justification must run through your dream to some plausible degree, but ultimately the choice for others to raise their hand and sign up for the journey resides in their passion being engaged. Ultimately, passion is what will separate out those who jump in on an impulse just to join from those who actually stay the course through the tumultuous, unglamorous journey of transformation. It will be important for you to be able to detect the difference between these types of individuals so you can invest your time accordingly.

When passion runs amuck, it can turn into zealotry. Revolutionaries whose passion turns into a tool that shames or attempts to “convert” others manipulatively will build a large army of fair-weather friends who will likely defect at the first sign of trouble. While your passion is a key element to igniting others’ hearts, be sure not to eclipse others’ passions by drowning them in yours. Dave Arnott talks about organizations that are so passionate about their identity and mission that they take over the lives of their workers. Arnott describes Southwest Airlines, 3M and USAA Insurance as examples of companies that impose attitudes that blur what people do with who they are. Arnott compares the level of lost identity in cultish organizations with actual cults like the Branch Davidians, who blindly followed their leader, David Koresh, into a fatal confrontation with the FBI. This kind of followership is the dark side of passion and it frequently ends in disaster, either for the leader or the organization. Temper your zeal and inspire others without stealing away their volition. Ultimately, the choice to follow your lead must be theirs.

The antithesis of zealotry is a change agents’ worst enemy: apathy. Nothing is more destructive to great causes than the deadening of people’s hearts, especially yours as the revolutionary. Nonetheless, great battle fatigue, the endless pushing against the grain, may wither your passion to a barely detectable ember, and ultimately snuff it out completely. You will need to guard against this by ensuring you have a replenishing supply in the form of colleagues and community who actively help sustain your passion. One CEO we’ve worked with brought a new strategic direction to life in his organization by enlisting the heads of the company’s LatAm, Europe and AsiaPac regions as thinking partners in the roll out. He took responsibility for the roll out in North America himself. These region heads became not only allies in the change, but idea generators themselves, adapting the strategy to the needs of their regions while helping

preserve the key idea behind the overall approach. The CEO was continually recharged by the passion these three leaders brought to the task – the group became self-sustaining and able to meet the challenges of staying the course over two years.

## Foster Your Penchant for Yearning: The Discontent of a Revolutionary

As a leader of great change, you come wired with an important genetic code: the ease with which you are discontented. Your natural ability to be dissatisfied with how things are (a sister-characteristic with the next one, Conviction) makes you a natural leader of revolution. Revolutionaries naturally yearn for something greater than they currently have. They are eager to close the gap between what is and what could be. Many great revolutions are born from a leader’s discontent. Julie Aigner-Clark founded The Baby Einstein Company in 1997 because she was dissatisfied with the range of educational products available to children under age three. She and her husband invested \$18,000 of their savings to produce the first Baby Einstein video. The idea caught on rapidly and Baby Einstein had over a million dollars in revenue by the end of 1998.<sup>6</sup> The company is now a sizeable division of the Walt Disney Corporation with revenues well in excess of ten million dollars. Clearly discontent can have a considerable generative power.

Unfortunately, too much discontent can contaminate a cause when it becomes contempt. When discontent becomes a stance of being against something, you have moved from a generative to a degenerative posture and risk making things worse than they started. In our book, *Future in Formation: Choosing a Generative Organizational Life*, we tell the story of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) in combating teen drug abuse. ONDCP launched an anti-drug media campaign aimed at young people which tried to convince them to be “against drugs.” Despite spending a billion dollars over six years, ONDCP’s campaign was a complete failure. The organization realized that a campaign “against” even something as



indefensible as drug use was self defeating. ONDCP switched it's emphasis to changing the influences on young and through its new tag line, "above the influence," it had huge success based on giving young people something to say "yes" to rather than just "no."<sup>7</sup>

When you lose your ability to transpose your discontent into a pathway forward, you risk forfeiting the revolution through your own indifference. While the loss of passion leads to apathy, a deeply emotional checking-out from a cause, your loss of discontent can lead to indifference, an inability to choose translating your discontent into a desire for something more. You can become unwilling to push the boundaries of convention if you reach a point where you simply don't believe others will join. One extreme can lead to the other. If you exude excessive contempt for a desired change, so much so that others feel defensive and harshly judged their eventual indifference to your rallying cry may ultimately infect you with the same indifference and your need to protect yourself from their reciprocal judgment and rejection.

At the moment, the financial services industry is littered with once-great leaders who have ended their tenures in seeming apathy and headline gabbing rejection. Richard Fuld, the CEO of recently failed Lehman Brothers, and Alan D. Schwartz, last head of Bear Stearns, were both company men who knew their organizations inside out and were aggressive leaders. Fuld was called the most intimidating man on Wall Street in the business press on many occasions. But in the past year, both of these executives severely underestimated the risk of the sub prime mortgage crisis and seemed at times indifferent to just how precarious their companies' positions were. Both companies are now effectively out of business, with devastating effects on Wall Street that are still unfolding.

## Listen to Your Inner Barometer: The Conviction of a Revolutionary

It is not enough to be discontent with how things are. You must also be convinced that things can and should

change. Conviction is what fuels discontent to join passion and ideas to create a picture of something new, something more. As a revolutionary, you have naturally high standards and expectations. The bar is high for you, and you want to garner the support of many to join you to leap over it. Conviction, then, enables you to set a standard for the revolution so that compromise doesn't invite you to stop short of your dream.

When your convictions turn into dogma, and your uncompromising rigidity puts people off, then you will see mass defection from your revolution. The fine line to balance between conviction and dogma is the degree to which you allow others to translate your standards into their own way of participating without compromising the dream. Sometimes the addition of others' convictions will reshape and stretch the dream – something you should want. And indeed, sometimes people's lesser convictions or inability to live up to the standards may risk diluting the collective conviction for the cause. Your ability to discern between the two is key, and sometimes that will take more time than your patience allows.

The result of one too many defections may lead the revolutionary to throw up her hands in hopeless futility. So often we see the emotional ping-pong match within a revolutionary between "we must change" and "oh, what's the point." Again this is the agency-ambivalence war come to roost in the form of hopelessness.

## Rites of Passage: Don't Let the Inner War Become Your Counter-Revolution

The adage that we are our own worst enemy could not be more true than with revolutionaries. Sadly, the greatest saboteur of revolutions is often the revolutionary himself. For most agents of great change, their pursuit of transformation is almost always some outgrowth of change they have pursued, or are pursuing, within themselves. Psychologically, this is known as *projection*. When the leader makes her organization an object of her inner war, great harm can ensue. It is inevitable that to some degree this type of projection will happen when a leader seeks to revolutionize something. The question is of degree. If the leader has not done sufficient inner work to examine and understand the origins of what is driving the compulsion to effect change, she risks damaging her organization in a future pursuit of external change that is really a diversion to avoid the inner change she truly wants. Perhaps the most overt examples of this phenomenon in public awareness are the purge trials conducted by Stalin in Russia and Mao in China. In both cases, a political revolution continued as an



endless projection of perceived threats into the cadres of the revolutionary elite itself. The result is the same in nations as it is in business – an organization at war with itself, killing off its own internal talent and leaving a “scorched earth” behind.

To guard against excessive projection, we would strongly suggest that any leader at the helm of a revolution put safeguards in place to ensure that neither her agency or ambivalence, provoked by some unacknowledged pursuit of change within, inadvertently sabotages her great cause. Here are a few ideas on how you might do that:

## Avoid the Dangerous Isolation of Revolutionaries With Regular Community

If you do not have a routine set of trusted comrades with whom you regularly meet to receive honest, hard perspectives, calibration on emerging ideas, support and encouragement, you’re already in trouble. The natural tendency of revolutionaries to be solo acts and isolate themselves from others, especially potential resistors, endangers a revolution when the leader cuts herself off from healthy community and relationship. You need people who will have the courage to honestly speak and inform your life and your cause with candor, unfiltered perspective and unbridled advocacy. Your personal “kitchen cabinet” of trusted advisors can serve a great good helping you keep your revolutionary cause on track.

## Practice Regular Personal Formation

Holistic self care is an essential element for healthy revolutionaries. It can come in many forms, but paying attention to ongoing personal development – physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, is a vital element to remaining a healthy revolutionary. The multiple battles being fought during great change assault a leader’s physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual health. To assume otherwise would be dangerously naïve. Having access to resources and helping professionals who can routinely attend to these areas of your life is crucial if you are going the distance with your revolution. You would never knowingly drive a car too far beyond the limits of its need for an oil change. If someone you loved with a history of heart disease was having extreme chest pains, you’d act with swift urgency. Just as the health and maintenance of our human and physical assets is necessary and important, so is the health and maintenance of our revolutionary assets.

## Be Insatiably Curious

No leader would ever suggest (at least not publicly) that she has mastered all she needs to know. Most leaders ascribe to some philosophy of continuous learning, regardless of whether they actually put that into regular practice. For revolutionaries, it is especially important that they always “be in school.” As they require those they are leading to perpetually learn in order to adapt to the changes they are hoping to effect, so too must they model for those they lead the posture of voracious ongoing knowledge and skill acquisition. To be sure, leading a revolution comes with untold risk and occupational hazards. It behooves you to prepare well and remain diligent on the journey. Too much is at risk and too many could be harmed along the way with unnecessary carelessness. Revolutionize well. Start with yourself. The rest will likely go much better if you are the first recipient of transformation.

*We’re finally boarding here at Gate 44, so I have to sign off for the moment. Let me do so with the thought that no revolution is failsafe. The risks are constantly lurking around every corner. Peril is always imminent. And so is victory. Knowing that how you contend with the inner war of agency and ambivalence will have direct implications on how you contend with the revolution you are leading can go a long way to sustaining your cause.*

*If you want to hear more, drop me a line at: [ron@passagesconsulting.com](mailto:ron@passagesconsulting.com)*

- 1 - *Visionary Leadership*, Corinne McLaughlin; <http://www.visionarylead.org/articles/vislead.htm>
- 2 - [http://www.woopidoo.com/business\\_quotes/business-ideas.htm](http://www.woopidoo.com/business_quotes/business-ideas.htm)
- 3 - Ibid
- 4 - *Creativity in Context*, Amabile, T. M. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996.
- 5 - *The Productivity of Passion*, Lawler Kang; <http://www.myarticlearchive.com/articles/6/074.htm>
- 6 - “Baby videos spell big money: Mom turns ‘Einstein’ into million-dollar enterprise,” Eric Hubler; Denver Post 03/12/1999
- 7 - *Future in-Formation: Choosing a Generative Organizational Life*, Ron A. Carucci and Josh J. Epperson: Passages, 2008

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