Book When Managers Rebel

David Courpasson and Jean-Claude Thoenig
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Recommendation

This is not a book about workers rising up against abusive employers with pitchforks and torches. It's about highly respected, dedicated young managers who like or even love their jobs, but who rebel when they feel their employers have driven them to the breaking point. Organizational sociologists David Courpasson and Jean-Claude Thoenig explain how managers reach such pivot points, and what trouble ensues when they do. In their view, such apparent trouble generally amounts to a constructive challenge from managers to their superiors that says, "I object to what you're doing, but I'd like to suggest how to fix it." The book's real-life case studies (the names have been changed to protect the innocent) show how managers in varying situations rebelled in different ways. Although the authors offer little guidance on how to realize the positive outcomes of these rebellion scenarios in your own workplace, *BooksInShort* thinks this book will help middle managers better understand how they can solve problems by embracing constructive resistance and rebellion – and yet escape career death.

Take-Aways

- Manager rebellions occur frequently and are generally about how leaders run their firms.
- Managers don't rebel to bring their employers down; they rebel because they see inequalities and seek better solutions.
- Usually, rebelling managers are pre-middle-aged high performers in the process of settling into their lives and careers.
- Managers rebel when their work impinges uncomfortably on their private lives.
- They resist when employers cross the "forbidden zone" of privacy in such areas as work-life balance or personal values – for instance, threatening their sense of right and wrong.
- Managers also rebel when they see contradictory behaviors at high levels or when they feel at risk of losing their own identities.
- Rebelling managers signal to their superiors that they are available for negotiation.
- Smart companies respond respectfully and flexibly to rebellions in their ranks.
- A successful rebellion can "reverse the balance of power" in a firm, but only for a while.
- Companies that are "oligarchies" should strive to be nonhierarchical "polyarchies."

Summary

Rebels with Causes

When managers feel that they are at a breaking point, their companies can find themselves dealing with "rebellion, revolt, protest," and more. A rebelling manager's superiors may assume that he or she is going through a tough time at home, not getting enough sleep, or crumbling under too much work. They can be tempted not to take rebellion seriously. But they should. Managerial rebellion has more substantive grounds than stress or even pay raises. Such rebellions occur for an entirely different reason: disagreement over "the way the top executives run things."

> "Far from protesting over salaries or working hours, [managers'] rebellions deal with something of an entirely different order: how the company is managed."

Managers who rebel are not malcontents. Typically, they are respected, contributing players who are getting established at their firms and who generally enjoy their jobs. They rebel because they reach a point where their employers' expectations interfere with or infringe on their private lives, beliefs, or values, or the company trespasses on a "forbidden zone" of privacy. The ensuing revolt can lead to resignations, but nearly all manager revolutionaries start by offering better solutions or encouraging change. Here are a few real-world examples of such "creative rebellion":

The Rebellions of "Patrick" and "Michael"

Patrick was a manager at "Construct," a French civil engineering firm. His boss, Louis, called him late one Friday evening at home to tell him that management had selected him to run a "major testing lab" the firm had purchased in Scotland. Louis gave Patrick 24 hours to think about the offer and informed him that the new job started in a few days. Taking the months-long assignment would separate Patrick from his wife and new baby. Deciding that he could not leave his family on such short notice for so long, Patrick declined. He knew rejecting an assignment was a cardinal sin at Construct, and he would have to resign. He left a few months later and found a new job. Four colleagues who disapproved of what the firm did to Patrick also left.

> "Rebellion sends out signals and establishes precedents."

Michael was an engineer at "Strand," a manufacturing firm. His managing director told him the company was going to assign him to lead a low-performing factory that needed to be shut down. As the boss, Michael would have to lay off more than 300 employees. He felt he couldn't take the assignment because, years earlier, his father had lost a job in a garment factory during a layoff. With that painful memory, Michael knew he could never do the same thing to other workers. He turned down the offer and, eventually, left the company.

> "The reversal between what is essential and what is secondary is triggered by the feeling that deeply held values are being trampled on, and that the public life of the firm disrupts the private lives of employees when and how it sees fit."

Patrick and Michael both rebelled. By declining to take the Scotland-based assignment, Patrick publicly stated that the company's short notice and punitive attitude showed that it had no respect for its managers' personal lives and priorities. Michael would have had to go against his personal values to take on the assignment of closing the factory. He decided that, since he couldn't do it, he wasn't managerial material. Both men faced "the dilemma of obedience": They technically could decline their companies' offers, but they knew that would endanger their careers.

The Rebellion of "Bruno"

Bruno ran the Chinese headquarters of "Brick," a worldwide supplier of construction materials. He became impatient when the company delayed opening new stores in his region, particularly since his superiors had promised to fund the stores quickly. Bruno felt the company's behavior was wrong. In fact, he was so frustrated that he approached Brick's CEO at a cocktail party and complained that his projects were on hold. Bruno was sure Brick would fire him or make him resign for this breach of company etiquette. Like Patrick and Michael, Bruno was a respected, levelheaded professional who rebelled because he felt his employer was out of bounds. "Rebellion often occurs on an ethical plane" where a manager's resistance motivates others to act. Once other people see someone compelled by their values pushing back against bad management, they will sign on for the fight.

Rebellion and Workplace Environments

Businesses value "hegemony," a hierarchical environment where workers associate with their bosses enough to prevent rebellions. But Patrick, Michael and Bruno, though they liked their jobs, couldn't go along with their employers. Like most workplaces, their firms were "fluid universes" in which "only individual performance" mattered – an attitude that positions employees to make family-unfriendly decisions and forces them to compete. Firms dislike change, so they watch even high-performing employees for any deviant behavior, like turning down assignments, which they punish. Such "soft constraint" is a frequent cause of manager rebellion.

> "When they become aware of double standards and double-talk, when they witness injustices, rebels turn to their lives outside the company."

Managers like Patrick, Michael and Bruno resist when they witness contradictory behaviors at high levels, when they lack "credible and sensible markers" for their own actions, and when they can't hang on to who they really are. But rebellious managers don't necessarily know, care about or conspire with one another – they lack a "team" or "locker room" spirit. Sympathetic colleagues sign on to their causes of their own accord. Rebellions involving personal values or beliefs, like Patrick's, Michael's and Bruno's, bring "the private sphere into the public [workplace] arena."

The Rebellions of "Mark" and "Charles"

Mark, a manager at "Agro," an agrochemical company, learned that the firm's research and development committee had abruptly canceled a project despite the objections of its director, Jack. Mark felt that the committee members were uninformed and had made an inappropriate decision, so he wrote a protesting email to 20 "R&D managers and project heads" – not asking to overturn the decision but questioning how the committee had reached it. This savvy approach created a bit of a groundswell among the managers. Mark summarized their reactions into a report for the R&D vice president. As a result, Agro offered Jack the financial resources he needed for his project and reappointed him to finish it. Agro also crafted a new list of standards for closing projects. The next year, the firm promoted both Mark and Jack. Mark's rebellion demonstrated that a single resistant manager's campaign can become a "collective movement."

> "Powerful rebellions are powerful because they are inspired by a desire for acknowledgement that not everything is allowed in the kingdom of consumerism or of performance and careers."

Charles was a branch manager at "Bank." When the corporate marketing director engaged an outside consultant to institute new assessment standards and perhaps

close two "nonperforming" branches, Charles saw the marketing director's actions as unfair and "at odds with" the bank's culture. Although closures didn't threaten his branch, Charles and some other managers of safe branches rebelled with a memo that disagreed with the new standards and offered "a better way to compare branches." Bank's CEO convened a special committee to revisit the new standards, and the corporate office eventually adopted a different, more community-based system for evaluating branch performance. The marketing manager learned the hard way that branch managers had a potent collective voice. Charles's rebellion shows how protest arises out of "emotions and feelings." His sense of "injustice" obscured the risk in his actions, and, eventually, the rebellion he led moved beyond feelings and entered a "professional" phase.

> "Oligarchies, through their hegemonic hold on power, ignore views on managing the company that are different from their own, and even condemn the expression of those views."

Mark and Charles professionalized their rebellions by offering alternative solutions to the problems they saw. Such successful rebellions require, among other factors: "sympathy" about an unjust situation, an "expert" publicly to offer better answers, leadership from respected managers, "graceful exits" for the targets of the rebellion, an opening for change, a "villain" or "scapegoat," mutual respect among opponents, and a somewhat paradoxical use of bureaucracy to apply strictly any appropriate rules to solve the injustice the rebels are trying to correct. Rebels must always make it clear that "a resolution is possible and desirable."

You've Rebelled, Now What?

Rebels can never be sure if they will lose or win. Patrick and Michael resigned from their jobs. A manager's resignation can make those who remain behind feel "hurt" or "disappointed," worse than they would after a firing. Some managers sooner or later quit on the heels of someone else's resignation. In all cases, the company's world is turned upside down, if only temporarily. The rebel's resignation weakens the firm's "social rules," and discontent arises among the remaining managers. That's why smart companies respond more flexibly to their rebels and handle them well, so that the organization emerges even more solid after the rebellion.

> "A polyarchy is viable and effective when stakeholders' right to negotiate, and their right to negotiate how to negotiate, are recognized."

Mark and Charles received promotions, and their firms moved "to take control." Because they were rebelling against "middlemen," not the executive suite, they did not get fired. Still, that risk always exists. Neither man could assume that the resolutions would be so agreeable. By offering new solutions, they demonstrated "pro-managerial" beliefs, even as they engaged in "creative rebellion." They called on their workplace community to act and proposed change. Like Mark and Charles, managers who rebel typically are pre-middle-aged and are undergoing "a transitional period in their lives, that of self-actualization." There are three types of creative rebels:

1. **"Neo-professional"** – These rebels rely on their skills and knowledge. They engage in "collegial" creative rebellions where they spar over job and performance qualifications.
2. **"Communitarian"** – These managers share similar beliefs on appropriate ways to work. They embark on "territorial" creative rebellion when the firm violates their values.
3. **"Equilibrist"** – These rebels try to reason out whether the injustice they perceive is, indeed, unjust. Their creative rebellions are "cognitive," and they often protest illegitimate decisions. These rebels have "the resources to bounce back."

What Creative Rebellion Does

A creative rebellion can make employers recognize the societal changes occurring outside the company's walls, because rebellions often happen when managers' private and work lives collide. Today's rebels probably spent years working long hours to establish great performance records and professional credibility. But rebellious managers snap, especially if they perceive hypocrisy that deeply contradicts their experience and sense of dedication. A gulf widens between these managers and their senior supervisors, and the rebellious managers blame their superiors for the inequities they see. The company has trampled on their forbidden zone, and the rebels move out of their "zone of indifference" and into resistance.

> "Rebels are not out to undermine authority and bring down their companies. They merely refuse certain ways of doing things and propose acceptable alternatives."

Still, managerial rebels have no interest in storming the Bastille. They want to solve problems, even if that means "contesting the legitimacy of decision makers." They rebel against "an ideology," not against "authority." Those in power should respond with transparency, take ownership of solutions and recognize the rebels as leaders. This is possible even in a hierarchy, which is still the operating construct of most companies. Executives can incorporate the rebellions into their firms' politics, and attempt to flatten their hierarchies or adopt new structures. In a "heterarchy," for example, "no single part" of the organization is "dominant."

A Preference for "Polyarchy"

The best organizational structure is a polyarchy. While many companies are "oligarchies," wherein a small group holds and wields power, a polyarchy confers power on the largest possible group within its framework. As such, it provides for "pluralistic political governance." This is the most flexible corporate model and the most responsive to rebels' grievances, because it assumes the possibility of negotiation. A polyarchy shelters no "enemies," only "adversaries." Compromise abounds, and rules emerge through self-determination and deliberation. Decision makers consider and respect employees' forbidden zones. And, though those decision makers often hold only temporary authority, they retain the power to keep the firm from descending into disorganization. Google and pet-food giant Royal Canin are excellent examples of polyarchies.

A Rebellious Future?

How far can managers take rebellion? It depends on how savvy their superiors are and how they react when they encounter resistance. Senior managers make a mistake when they conclude that rebelliousness stems only from too much hard work or stress. Instead, they should take it seriously and be willing to alter their organizational structure and maybe even share some power. The most important step they can take is to offer their middle managers – their potential and, perhaps,

current rebels – "the option to say no or to do things in other ways."

About the Authors

Consultants **David Courpasson** and **Jean-Claude Thoenig** are organizational sociologists. Courpasson, a professor at the EMLYON Business School, edits the research publication *Organization Studies*. Thoenig is director emeritus of research at University Paris-Dauphine.