LARGE-SCALE CORPORATE CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE OUT
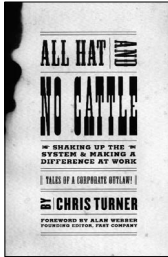
BY LAUREN KELLER JOHNSON

All Hat and No Cattle: Tales of a Corporate Outlaw

by Chris Turner

Small and large companies alike face serious obstacles when trying to shift the way they do things. But for big organizations, initiating and sustaining change can be especially frustrating. As Chris Turner points out in *All Hat and No Cattle: Tales of a Corporate Outlaw* (Perseus Books, 1999), large firms often suffer from stultified thinking and an atmosphere of fear—two realities that discourage employees from challenging the status quo and taking individual responsibility for change.

A native Texan and 16-year veteran of Xerox Business Services (XBS), Turner offers suggestions for "shaking up the system" garnered through extensive, first-hand experience at XBS. But what does she mean by "all hat and no cattle"? In its simplest sense, the phrase connotes "all style and no substance"—a lack of deep thinking, of challenging the way things are, of fresh ideas. It also describes a company culture in which managers copy one another and spend little time on personal learning. These supervisors reject ideas that conflict with their own thinking and with business as usual; as a result, their organizations become sluggish and unresponsive. In an all-hat-and-no-cattle company, mediocrity can become a way of life.

New Ways of Thinking and Acting

As Turner sees it, the main problem with such entrenched ways of thinking is that it stops people from asking questions and raising "undiscussibles." In today's work world, companies need to reimagine themselves repeatedly in order to negotiate the shifting landscape of business. But progress comes only through challenging our most deeply held assumptions. True change requires that we *think* about things in new ways, and then *do* things in new ways.

Turner's advice to large companies that want to battle all-hat-and-no-cattle thinking rests on a foundational premise: Each of us must consider ourselves "change agents" with personal responsibility for remaking our companies. As Turner notes, all the great social movements in American history—civil rights, the women's movement, etc.—started outside "the establishment," one person and one moment at a time.

She also frames her advice in terms of four skills that she sees as central to catalyzing change:
- Communicating in new ways,
- Understanding our organizations as complex, dynamic systems,
- Grasping how people learn, and
- Fostering environments that encourage learning.

"Camp Lur'ning"

What does putting these skills into action look like? Throughout her book, Turner offers numerous accounts from her change work at Xerox as illustrations. Perhaps the most comprehensive example is the "Camp Lur'ning" series of gatherings. The intent behind Camp Lur'ning was to generate ideas for "disturbing the system" in small but powerful ways. At the gatherings, participants (all nominated by XBS employees) played with learning tools such as Covey's seven habits and Senge's five disciplines, with the goal of using their new skills back at the office. The gathering also featured flexible agendas, a variety of brainstorming tools, and a limited number of rules—a deliberate strategy that encouraged creativity and let people build on new insights.

Camp Lur'ning embodied the kinds of principles that Turner recommends. It disturbed the system in ways that were congruent with the kind of organization that participants envisioned. It also invited participants to get involved, rather than insisting on or forcing their engagement. The experimental quality of the gatherings and the lack of rigid agendas catalyzed fresh thinking, and the sessions drew only those people who genuinely were interested in exploring what Camp Lur'ning had to offer.

"Camp" stimulated intense interest in learning among employees throughout XBS. More and more individuals requested opportunities to participate in follow-on sessions held in the office; departments even willingly funded the trainings. In some locations, Turner writes, "camp" became a verb. "When people received some hum-drum headquarters program with instructions to 'roll it out,' . . . they would 'camp it,' taking the training and turning it into something experiential and fun." Though small, these changes set the stage for a culture more open to questioning and learning—and for an XBS that was less hat and more cattle. ◘

Lauren Keller Johnson is publications editor at Pegasus Communications.