



## IGNITING LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE

# 10 Insights from the Field

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### 1. DISRUPT YOUR HABITS

The inability to find solutions to escalating business and social problems is a fundamental failure in thinking. If we're unwilling to question our beliefs and broaden our worldviews, we're condemned to a scarcity of ideas. Real change happens when people and organizations begin to consider other perspectives, when they disrupt habits and legacy beliefs and open themselves to new and courageous ways of thinking and acting that will lead to better solutions for businesses and society-at-large.

### 2. THINK "PROCESS," NOT "PERSON"

You know the stereotype: the heroic leader who rides into town and single-handedly saves the day. But what if leadership isn't about the attributes of an individual or the powerful position he or she holds? Consider this alternative view: Leadership isn't a person. It's a process of influence that mobilizes people to confront the values, attitudes, and beliefs that are preventing them from thinking, living, and working more creatively and courageously. Dare to question the stereotype. Start a dialogue about what good leadership is and should be.

### 3. THINK "HUMAN," NOT "MACHINE"

We've all heard it before: "People are our greatest asset." The predominant underlying assumption, however, is that organizations (and therefore people) are like machines. This thinking only perpetuates industrial era, autocratic management practices, and it's time to leave it behind. Organizations are human systems, made up of endlessly complicated, fascinating, creative, competent, independent people. We need to honor people's unique (and sometimes quirky) abilities, and to foster adult relationships that work.

### 4. GIVE UP CONTROL

Consider our conventional assumptions about change: Change comes from the top. Change happens in predictable ways. Change can be controlled. But experience shows that change can come from anywhere, and that it's likely to be unpredictable, messy, and, maybe most of all, unaffected by planning and management. A better metaphor for today's organization is a jazz ensemble — self-organizing, continually creating, listening skillfully, and adapting to the moment. Improvisation often operates on the edge of chaos, creating a productive, energizing tension. As educator and civil rights activist Septima Poinsette Clark once said, "[Chaos] creates wonderful thinking. I consider chaos a gift."

### 5. REPLACE JUDGMENT WITH CURIOSITY

Western education and business place a high premium on rational thinking and problem solving. We are trained from an early age to think critically and, later, to become experts and solve problems in our chosen field. This emphasis isn't wrong, but it tends to squelch an important human trait: curiosity. Spend time watching a child to reconnect with your own curiosity. Notice her openness to learning, her eagerness to explore, her sense of wonder; and notice how her curiosity leads to new possibilities and unexpected answers. Leading change effectively demands curiosity, a willingness to delay judgment, to be astonished and surprised.

## 6. JOIN THE (KINDNESS) REVOLUTION

Modern business is organized around the fundamental belief that self-interest is the most powerful human emotion — a belief that derives from the Enlightenment. Today, many practitioners, philosophers, activists, and business leaders are questioning that thinking, arguing that the human and environmental costs of self-interest have been catastrophically high. Instead, they insist, we must learn to value compassion and care in business, to cultivate connections and inclusion, and to acknowledge the inherent dignity of all people. Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, predicted this shift in mindset years ago, advocating for a “revolution in kindness.” Join the revolution!

## 7. HAVE REAL CONVERSATIONS

Organizational norms tend to favor conflict avoidance. Yet, most meaningful organizational and social change is the product of debate, difference, and, sometimes, fierce disagreement. Leading change effectively, then, means enabling productive conflict, self-awareness, learning, and mindfulness of others. Those are all essential parts of dialogue — a nonjudgmental process of inquiry and reflection that puts the “elephants on the table,” explores differences, creates empathy, and leads to common understanding and better solutions.

## 8. PAY ATTENTION TO POWER

Organizational change doesn't just happen. It's a process shaped by power. Yes, technology and markets are important drivers of change; but it's people — individuals and groups — who influence the nature of change. It's important to remember that power isn't inherently good or bad, and that acknowledging it can only serve the process of change. Effective leaders are able to think and act politically. Courageous leaders go further, calling attention to even the most subtle dynamics that subordinate and marginalize others, sharing power, and propelling change toward more respectful and empowering relationships.

## 9. TAKE A PAGE FROM ARISTOTLE

Reflecting on the general failure of the leadership “industry” to reliably produce good leaders, some scholars have returned to Aristotle for guidance. At the heart of the matter is our tendency to believe that complex problems can be solved by science and analytics. In contrast, Aristotle argued that leadership demands a more advanced form of intelligence, what he called “practical wisdom” — the ability to reflect and take action based on values and common sense. Practical wisdom is gained through lived experience, and it facilitates decision making in a world of uncertainty. The implication: Leave rational models behind, and learn to make change one step at a time, guided by your values and using whatever resources are to hand.

## 10. FIND A HIGHER PURPOSE

Each year, companies face the relentless challenge of generating more profit. But is that sustainable? There's no doubt that the need to grow has reached mythic status in today's business environment and many argue for the need to find a greater purpose, something beyond the bottom line. The late historian, Thomas Berry wrote that the “Great Work” of our time “is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.” What's your Great Work?

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*Martha Miser is founder and president of Aduro Consulting, LLC. Aduro Consulting, named for the Latin word meaning to “light” or “kindle,” specializes in leadership and change for purpose-driven companies, organizations that want to have an impact beyond the bottom line.*

*By disrupting things in a way that helps people think differently about themselves and their relationships inside their companies, our clients are more awake, more passionate, more human, and more focused — all of which leads to better business results.*

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