

PHLD 605: Course Assignment 2

Critical Analysis of *Our Iceberg is Melting*

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Our Iceberg is Melting: Changing and Succeeding Under Any Conditions by John Kotter

and Holger Rathgeber is billed as a tool to help employees at all levels within an organization wrap their heads around the idea of organizational change.

It uses the allegory of a colony of penguins on an iceberg that need to make dramatic changes to their current existence to ensure the continued success of their group. The penguins are anthropomorphized with characteristics of typical individuals one would encounter in any organization during a period of change. The book is less concerned with ethical decision making than with the management of change processes and the roles of individuals within that process. Ultimately the allegory provides eight steps to consider in the process of change, which I found completely devoid of an ethical component.

The eight steps that form the core of the book, offer a process to follow but do not move the individual or the group of individuals along any sort of developmental path ethically or morally. The eight steps are:

1. Create a sense of urgency
2. Pull together the guiding team
3. Develop the change vision and strategy
4. Communicate for understanding and buy in
5. Empower others to act
6. Produce some short term wins
7. Don't let up
8. Create a new culture

This book presents no ethical theories other than espousing a generally democratic process of broader community engagement in a change processes clearly led by management. The practices presented are of a generic change management nature and offer little of additional interest to public health change management or public health ethics.

The Sinclair/Kohlberg paradigm does not align with the thrust of the book as the book deals with the actions of individuals in managing a change process and less with the moral and ethical reasoning behind any of the decisions. The book is written from a leadership team perspective and focuses more on the human (penguin?) interactions that are required in order to move an organization (or penguin colony) forward through a change process. A cognitive-development approach as proposed by Kohlberg is not at all addressed in the structure of the book. There is no moral change or growth cited in any of the other characters (penguins) in the book as part of their participation in the process. As such there is little opportunity to connect it to the ideas illustrated in "Have we got the cart before the horse?" or the concepts in "Cowboy Values."

I think this book would benefit (or perhaps it is another book entirely?) if there were some discussion or focus on the role of ethics in organizational change. For example, in looking at the leadership and cultural ethical values and how that influences management approach to organizational change, we could learn a great deal about how best to manage and guide organizational change. From the text "Our Iceberg is Melting," we can, for example, extrapolate to the Kohlberg paradigm and state that the authors adhere to a Stage Four/Stage Five approach to organizational change. From my perspective, it would be interesting to further explore the influence of the ethical paradigm on approaches to organizational change.

The applicability of the book to those working in public health, will depend on their level of comfort with generic organizational change processes within organizations and their level of sophistication. As an individual with considerable background in community and organizational change, I found the book very simplistic and found that it contributed nothing to my overall

understanding of, or ability to participate in or lead change processes in a professional environment.

In public health, where almost all of us in Canada work within government structures, any change is generally imposed by higher level management (reorganizations, budget cuts, change in priorities, etc.) and those of us in middle management or on the front lines are generally expected to adjust practices to a “new reality” but we have very little impact or opportunity to guide the processes of change outside of our own small teams. This book provided a leadership team perspective on change management and provided no additional insight on how to impact or influence that change if you were outside of the leadership team- which is this reality for the majority of us working in public health. We are required to manage change within our own teams but ultimately have little opportunity to influence or participate in the change processes.

This is not a book about ethics. It is a book about generic change management practices and as such of limited usefulness in understanding ethics in a public health context. Frankly the extremely large font and illustrations of penguins made it overly simplistic. While the authors cite this as a positive in their book, I would categorically not recommend this book to anyone working in public health – especially those working in the public health sciences such as medicine or epidemiology. The language used is overly simplistic, bordering on condescending and would not be viewed favourably by my community of peers. In the field of managing organizational change in public health, there are many excellent examples. In my practice, I have used an excellent 2005 document by the National Health Service in the UK that is clear, professional and precise. It covers many of the same concepts at the text under review

but in a language that I feel would be much more acceptable to professionals working in public health.

There is some excellent writing in the field of public health ethics that clearly explores the common ethical issues faced by those of us working in public health that would be far more relevant than the text to the unique and distinct challenges that we face in decision making and activities in public health practice. Recent work by Faden and Sirine, Childress and Buchanan (and others) provide a clear and concise overview of ethical issues commonly faced in public health practice. I have learned a great deal from reading these articles and exploring the complexity of concepts with colleagues also working in public health.

In short, I did not find *Our Iceberg is Melting* of particular relevance to anyone interested in public health ethics. This is a book that provides a fanciful and easy to read story using penguins and their life on an iceberg to attempt to parallel the processes of change that organizations may face and it does not examine the ethical component of that change in anything but the most glancing terms.

From a more general perspective, and aside from any direct applicability to the field of public health, individuals interested in introducing basic concepts in organizational change within their professional environments may have some interest in the book. The approach and 8 steps presented in the book are very generic and as such widely applicable to various professional environments. It may appeal to an organization with a very large workforce with a variety of educational levels and help create a central story to which people may relate. However, I would hesitate to recommend it broadly. I think politicians, civil servants and other community leaders working in not-for-profit, community service, local corporate, political and

professional training roles would be better served by finding resources more specific to their particular milieu, and ones than can address the specific organizational change issues that they may face.

Ultimately, while a short and mildly entertaining read about penguins on an iceberg, the allegory did not resonate with me from a public health or personal perspective. I found the lessons related to organizational change very simplistic and without any great merit for those working in public health or with an interest in exploring ethical concepts.

References

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