



**Social Change in the Workplace:** Inviting Students to Explore Change-Making Possibilities

**Discipline:** all

**Type:** single lesson

**Time Commitment:**

75 minutes

**Category:** UN Sustainable Development Goals

**OVERVIEW:**

Students often feel overwhelmed by seemingly intractable societal challenges such as climate change, structural racism, and poverty. Inviting students to explore frameworks and stories illustrating positive social change helps them understand how they can contribute to solving complex problems. Examples of different kinds of change-making also helps students identify ways to contribute that align with their own interests and gifts. This tool introduces students to the “tempered radical” framework and a set of social change contributors to help them imagine ways they can advance positive change in their current and future workplaces.

This tool was contributed by Rebecca Watts Hull, Asst. Dir., Faculty Development for Sustainability Education Initiatives, Center for Teaching and Learning: [rwattshull@gatech.edu](mailto:rwattshull@gatech.edu).

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

Students complete a reading on “tempered radicals” in the workplace for homework, identify several key strategies for leading change in the workplace, apply one strategy to a desired change on campus, and reflect on the kind of role they might play in workplace change-making, in a future profession.

**STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

**After completing this lesson, students will be able to:**

- Describe three strategies for advancing change as a “tempered radical.”
- Provide examples of effective campaigns to win cultural and operational changes within major corporations.
- Identify at least one kind of role they are excited to take on to contribute to positive social change in a current or future workplace.

## Tool Instructions:

1. **Preparation:** Assign Debra Meyerson's article on [Tempered Radicals](#) as homework. Reading it will require an estimated 30 minutes. If your course uses a particular platform for reading responses (Perusall, Ed Discussion, Padlet, etc.), direct students to respond to at least one of the discussion questions (listed below) on that platform before they come to class. If you do not typically use a discussion tool in this way, consider an alternative way to ensure that most students will complete the reading before class (e.g., let students know there will be a one-question quiz at the beginning of class).
2. **Transparency and Engagement:** Open the class discussion by inviting students to share their thoughts about your reason for assigning the reading. What is the connection between the course content and a reading about leading change in the workplace? Depending upon the size of the class you might use "think-pair-share," discussion at tables, or whole group discussion. For tips on facilitating discussion effectively, see this [resource](#).
3. **Reflection:** Invite students into a time of personal reflection and ask them to record their responses for their own later reference (electronically, in notebooks, as a discussion post, etc.). Have them reflect on and record their responses to these prompts: 1) describe a future workplace you think you will inhabit at some point, as a professional; 2) imagine a change you might want to make in that setting/organization; and 3) describe how you could use ONE of the workplace strategies described by Meyerson ("clarify the issue and the movement," "focus on internal culture," or "actively solicit support") to advance the change you seek, in that context.
4. **Share out:** Depending upon class size and dynamics, invite students to share their responses at their tables, in pairs, or with the whole class. Encourage students to think through why a particular strategy might be more effective in one situation or workplace than in another (how does context matter?).
5. **Application:** In small groups or pairs, share the following task with your students: 1) identify a change you all agree would make Georgia Tech a better environment for student learning and wellbeing; 2) Review Meyerson's strategies and select TWO you feel would be most effective for advancing the change you identified; and 3) briefly sketch out a plan for using those strategies to win the change you seek, and be prepared to justify why the approach you have selected is likely to be effective (drawing on the evidence presented by Meyerson in the article).
6. **Extension and Reflection:** Change-making involves many forms of leadership, including many people who contribute "behind the scenes." Understanding that we all can contribute to change-making that draws on our personal strengths and preferences can help students see themselves as change leaders. Share with students the "Social Change Contributors" list below. Provide several minutes for students to reflect on the roles that feel like a good fit for them. Use a poll tool such as [slido.com](#) to have students share their responses and then share the results so students can see the range of social contributor role preferences in the room. If time permits, ask volunteers to share what they feel is the best fit role for them, and what that role might look like in a future workplace they are likely to inhabit.

### Suggested discussion questions:

- In the article, Dr. Meyerson describes many “under the radar rebels.” Which of the examples she provides resonated with you most, and why? Which example do you feel is most relevant to the type of workplace you expect to inhabit in your future profession?
- Identify the three strategies Meyerson describes for advancing collective action in the workplace. Which of these approaches have you encountered or learned about? Describe the context of social change where you experienced one of these strategies.
- Based on what you’ve learned from the article, provide an example or two of actions Georgia Tech students can take to advance the kinds of changes they would like to see on campus.

### References:

Meyerson, D. E. (2008). *Rocking the boat: How tempered radicals effect change without making trouble*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Meyerson, D. (2004). The tempered radicals: How employees push their companies—little by little—to be more socially responsible. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 1-23.

## Social Change Contributor Framework

**Weavers:** I see the through-lines of connectivity between people, places, organizations, ideas, and movements.

**Experimenters:** I innovate, pioneer, and invent. I take risks and course-correct as needed.

**Frontline Responders:** I address community crises by marshaling and organizing resources, networks, and messages.

**Visionaries:** I imagine and generate our boldest possibilities, hopes and dreams, and remind us of our direction.

**Builders:** I develop, organize, and implement ideas, practices, people, and resources in service of a collective vision.

**Caregivers:** I nurture and nourish the people around me by creating and sustaining a community of care, joy, and connection.

**Disruptors:** I take uncomfortable and risky actions to shake up the status quo, to raise awareness, and to build power.

**Healers:** I recognize and tend to the generational and current traumas caused by oppressive systems, institutions, policies, and practices.

**Storytellers:** I craft and share our community stories, cultures, experiences, histories, and possibilities through art, music, media, and movement.

**Guides:** I teach, counsel, and advise, using my gifts of well-earned discernment and wisdom.

*Created by Deepa Iyer (Solidarity Is and Building Movement Project)  
Available for individual and organizational use with attribution*