

## THE COST (AND REWARD) OF LEADING CHANGE

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### THE CHALLENGE OF COST

On December 10, 1901, my great-grandmother, known as 'The Duchess' for her refined ways, set sail for the Belgian Congo. Only two weeks before she had married my great-grandfather, with whom she now sailed. In the hold were, very probably, two coffins holding their belongings. This was common practice among missionaries then: chances were high they would not return from the heart of Africa. They went to do good, but the cost for thirty-three in every hundred missionaries was premature death, primarily from malaria and sleeping sickness.

What's a good cause worth? We live in a time brimming, at least in the start-up sector, with tremendous

imagination and vitality. Many entrepreneurs love their code, their technology and their lean methodology, but ultimately they want to improve the world. Justice for refugees and trafficked victims, clean water and energy, democratic and fair financial services, safe cars, even cheap space travel: name a good cause and there's a bright-eyed start-up for it committed, very often, not just to a solution, but a cool solution.

What gets lost in the glitter is the cost.

With icons like Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Elizabeth Holmes and Jessica Alba charting a sainted course before us, and with an astonishing number of Unicorns (start-ups valued over \$1 billion) showing that venture capital is easier now to raise either from angel investors or crowd funding, we are in danger of believing that one can have one's cake and eat it too. We intend to change the world, and we intend to do so in comfort. No coffins for us, thank you.

However, access to quick capital, quick earnings or great technology do not lessen the real cost of making a difference. Every cause, good or bad, demands a price from those pursuing it. In the early stages resources are indeed a constraining factor and so the cost can be very obviously material: a tightened belt, a cramped lifestyle, grunt work, and long hours doing it.

Over time, however, the costs of making a difference have little to do with resources and almost everything to do with the human condition: for at its root, all change is social and all change is personal.



## ALL CHANGE IS SOCIAL

Theranos (founded by Elizabeth Holmes) is a Silicon Valley start-up. It promises, via much media-hype, blood-based health tests that will be easy, cheap and information-rich. During the resulting honeymoon, Holmes and her company became darlings in the tech sector. Then came a hammer-blow of scrutiny and cynical press.

Focused on technological innovation, blessed to be riding a Unicorn, Holmes clearly did not account for the social environment that houses all change, and now she is desperately trying to catch up with stakeholder questions she could have long anticipated and answered. She passes off Theranos' crisis as nothing more than the hostile reaction of competition and nay-sayers. In fact, many questions faced by Theranos simply reflect the obvious uncertainties associated with its incredible promises; for example, the viability of its technologies or the obvious challenges associated with gaining FDA approval let alone market adoption.

There is a place for determining change management best practice by learning from Theranos' mishaps. Just as importantly, however, Holmes' woes show us that the smartest and best intentioned leaders cannot perfectly implement change. Mistakes will be made and challenges will come.

There is no such thing as costless change.

As you pursue a good cause, are you prepared for the cost? The more radical your vision, the greater the stretch required for people to grasp it. Is your cause worth endless patience? Is it worth tireless, painstaking communication?

People are invariably threatened by change (even if they desire it!). Some will take out their fear on you. You will have to make tough calls to stay on purpose. Is your good cause worth the resulting hostility, relational effort, strained or lost friendships? Is it worth a tarnished reputation?

## ALL CHANGE IS PERSONAL

Because all change is social it is, at the individual level, personal and personal change is, well, personal. How intimate

are you willing to get with the cost of change? What, in your life, is out of alignment with the future state to which you're calling others? All personal change represents loss before it represents gain. It is a relinquishing of one habit before adopting another, one priority for another, one set of relationships for another, even one set of cherished beliefs for another.

Sometimes, the reality that you're calling people away from is one in which you participated and thus enabled, perhaps as a leader. Is your cause valuable enough to warrant humbling yourself, whether by way of an apology, recanting a particular approach, or relinquishing a form of privilege?

## COST AND REWARD

'The Duchess' exchanged a privileged life in Victorian civilisation for life in the jungles of Africa. The cost to her was paid in the hard currency of status, living standards, friendships, health, and to a mother, the greatest cost of all: there is an entry in her Bible, 'Baby came and left us Feb. 1 1903.'

Was it worth it? Perhaps the question needs to be put to the Congolese. With their colleagues, my great grandparents and, later, my grandparents introduced modern health care and literacy along with the Christian faith. They had deep African friendships and African names. Also, they patiently and meticulously documented the atrocities to Congolese being committed under Belgian rule. They sent their findings to the UK where they were used, in time, to bring down the horrendous rubber trade and the loss of life left in its brutal wake: as much as 10% of the African continent's population.

Easter approaches, and with it an opportune time for self reflection. By its very nature, life in this world extracts a price, whatever our pursuit. What prices have you paid recently – in health, in stress, in labour, in friendships or material well-being? What cause exacted these costs from you? When the price we pay represents an investment in a better world, the exchange becomes virtuously unequal: the cost is, in the end, not a loss but a fruit-bearing seed.



### FOR REFLECTION

What task has the Lord laid upon you that demands a price from you? In light of Hebrews 12:2 (and the preceding chapter), is it harrowing or heartening to accept that:

- 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain' (John 12:24) or;
- 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 16:25) or;
- 'Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy' (James 1:2)?