**Overview of *Think Outside the Building: How Advanced Leaders Can Change the World One Small Innovation at a Time***

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From corporations to educational institutions, to governments and nonprofits, there is no shortage of people on Earth who would like to change it. And rightfully so: nations are in constant conflict, people are suffering, the global ecosystem is breaking down, and advances in technology have arguably done as much harm as good. If there was ever a time to explore how to incite meaningful and lasting change, it’s now.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter attempted to do just that in this book. Kanter is a professor at Harvard Business School, specializing in strategy, innovation, and leadership for change. She co-founded Harvard University’s Advanced Leadership Initiative and served as its director for ten years, from 2008-2018. In her 2020 book, *Think Outside the Building: How Advanced Leaders Can Change the World One Small Innovation at a Time*, Kanter shares her observations alongside real-world stories of people who have made efforts to change the world with small innovations that have the potential to inspire massive change.

**What is a Building?**

In the context of Kanter’s book, the building is a metaphor for established institutions such as schools, hospitals, churches, etc. The metaphor is meant to drive home the point that education isn’t the classroom, health isn’t the hospital, and spirituality isn’t the church—in other words, the primary purpose of the structure has nothing to do with the structure itself.

Kanter introduces the building metaphor by first giving advice on how to attack a castle, starting with the first rule: don’t try to attack a castle head on. Castles—like established organizations—have defenses, fortifications, and weapons to prevent direct attack. The castle’s inhabitants will instinctively prepare to defend their comfortable way of life. So instead of attacking castles head on, it’s best to attack them by going around or underneath them. Look for talented allies around back, or on lower floors, to help strategize the best way to work around the castle’s defenses. Find hidden tunnels and other alternate ways to reach the interior, then open the windows and welcome the fresh air (i.e., fresh thinking).

**Advanced Leadership Case Studies**

In her book, Kanter weaves numerous case studies into her observations on innovation and advanced leadership, along with snippets from interviews with advanced leaders. Each case involves a complex problem that’s filled with ambiguity and lacks a clear, singular stakeholder in charge of the solution. The challenge in each case is to find fresh approaches and engage multiple stakeholders, often across multiple disciplines. Some of the stories result in successes while others end in failures or near-stumbles. Kanter gives examples of both, as there are always lessons to be learned no matter the outcome. One example that stands out is the story of Doug Rauch, former President of Trader Joe’s.

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| Problem | Doug Rauch wanted to find ways to combat the growing issues of hunger and obesity in low-income communities. Trader Joe’s stores, which under Rauch’s leadership had become wildly successful, were primarily located in affluent neighborhoods. This prevented low-income customers from accessing nutritious food options within their budget. |
| Proposed Solution | Rauch came up with a new retail concept called [Daily Table](https://dailytable.org/about), which he decided to test in Boston. About 40% of food was being thrown out daily by grocers and foodservice, mostly due to cosmetic blemishes or confusion about expiration dates. By recovering this excess, Daily Table could provide affordable and nutritious alternatives to the unhealthy food options available in most low-income neighborhoods. It could also help the environment by eliminating these wasted greenhouse gas-emitting foods.  |
| Learnings | * **Garner community support.** In lower-income communities, outsiders are not often welcomed, and residents are reluctant to accept anything seen as charity from someone they don’t trust. Rauch had to work not to insult the communities he was trying to help.
* **Invite the right stakeholders.** When Rauch was building awareness of Daily Table, he had opportunities to speak at multiple food industry events, but he saw the most success in meetings with community members. Eventually he found allies amongst growers, manufacturers, and other suppliers. It’s important to craft coalitions comprised of people from multiple disciplines who can support the solution and ensure its success.
* **Brace for unexpected hurdles**. Between IRS approval for Daily Table’s nonprofit status, quieting local government opposition, acquiring funding, and many other challenges, Rauch encountered countless situations that had the potential to slow or stop his momentum.
* **Be passionate.** Rauch performed gut-checks throughout the multi-year process and continued to remind himself that Daily Table was important enough to keep pushing past unexpected hurdles that threatened it from becoming a reality.
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| The Result | Today, there are three Daily Table stores in the Boston area, serving nearly thirty thousand customers. In the grand scheme of things, that’s not a large number, but it’s a start to what could be a huge dent in the population of underserved individuals, as well as a shift in the way the food industry handles its food waste. Additionally, it offers the equally impactful benefit of helping the environment. Rauch has plans to scale the operation in the Boston and eventually open Daily Table stores in other cities. |

**Small Ripples Make Big Waves**

Doug Raush is one of many leaders whose case studies Kanter references in her book as she combines their stories with her lessons on advanced leadership, innovation, and change. The case studies don’t represent problems that have been completely solved, but they show progress towards solving some of the world’s biggest problems.

My biggest takeaways from *Think Outside the Building* are that societal change takes time, and it takes significant support, creative thinking, and passion to be successful at working with (or around, or underneath) established institutions to be a champion for change. As time progresses, people change, systems evolve, and technology advances. Starting small with a big idea is Kanter’s advice for changing the conversation and activating the passive to form cross-sector coalitions. Though a single innovation may start off small, it can still have massive potential. Many small innovations, when considered together, can help to open pathways that lead to changing the dominant narrative, and ultimately, the world.

Very well done. Engaging presentation and writing style. Clear description of the book. Inclusion of your personal reactions. This is terrific, may I have your permission to use this as a model book review in the future?

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