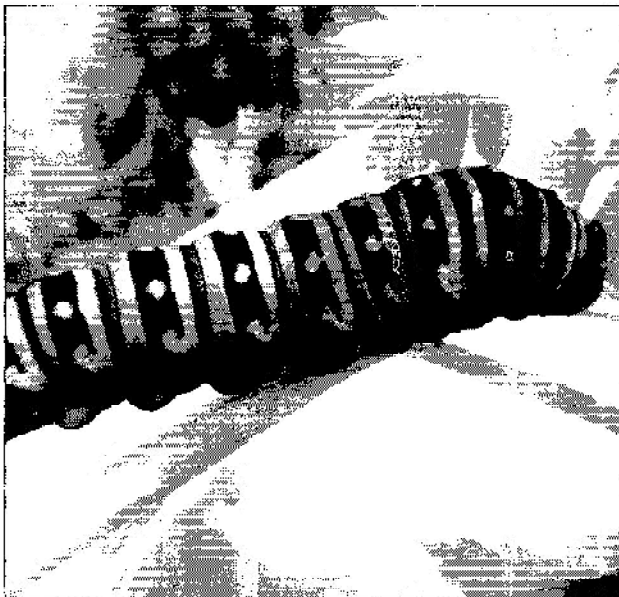


The Caterpillar

Transformation isn't always as glorious as it's made out to be.



Harvard Business School professor Anthony Athos was prolific and influential. He co-authored *The Art of Japanese Management* with Richard Pascale,¹ popularizing the 7-S model that has become one of the most useful tools for looking in an integrated way at how prepared an organization is to carry out its strategy.²

James Champy, co-author of the revolutionary book *Reengineering the Corporation*,³ admired Athos for his brilliance and for his wisdom. “Tony was perceptive, deep, and a realist,” Champy has said. “He understood organizational dysfunction so well that it pained him, and he eventually stopped consulting.”⁴

When Athos appeared at the Masters Forum, he used the lens of the caterpillar’s metamorphosis into a butterfly to make an important point about transformational change:

What about the caterpillar? You’re going about your business, you’ve got all these little legs and they all can walk and you don’t fall down and you know how to eat green leaves. You’re really good at it; you’re just fat and furry and you’re really a competent caterpillar. And then somebody comes along and tells you its time to transform yourself. The caterpillar says, “Why would I want to do that?”

And he weaves this little thing around himself, and as the light goes down, every time he weaves the little thing more, he begins to notice that his legs are falling off, and that he’s drying out and rotting, and at some moment it all goes black. But when the butterfly emerges — finally, there is a flutter, unless something goes very wrong — he doesn’t even remember the caterpillar at all. You’ve got to get that.⁵

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It’s easy to get excited in an abstract way about transformation. Here’s the business philosopher Peter Koestenbaum linking it to greatness:

[T]he pursuit of greatness is what makes life worth living, or dying for. . . . Let me give you a second word to use: transformation. Greatness has to do with the seduction, the attractiveness of transformation: "What would it mean if I were to shift my primary value from being ordinary to extraordinary?" This is the hero's journey. ⁶

In organizations, that kind of abstract excitement about transformation has been referred to as "planning euphoria." But making it happen is another matter. Athos's caterpillar provides a nice metaphor for what it's like to really transform.

If you want to sink into the metaphor, author Susan Weed takes the specifics a little farther: "Within that cocoon, the caterpillar does not just lose a few legs and grow wings, the caterpillar melts down. The caterpillar actually turns to goo or slime, and then has to rebuild into a butterfly." That's a valuable antidote to euphoria, important to remember particularly when you're asking others to undertake deep change.

Athos's other point, the one about which he says "You've got to get that," is perhaps a bit less obvious. Psychologists tell us that any change, even one acknowledged to be for the better, can bring with it a deep sense of loss, even grief. Most of us want, in some deep way, to remember the caterpillar. We don't say, "I weigh a hundred and seventy-five pounds now," we say, "I've lost thirty pounds!" We don't want people just to say, "You run such an efficient, friendly office," we want them to acknowledge the work and ingenuity and perseverance it took to make it that way: how much worse it was before.

And that's something that people always fear about organizational transformation: that all they have accomplished, all they've been through, personally and professionally, will be forgotten or at least disregarded, leaving them to wish they had remained as competent caterpillars.

Leaders, by their natures, often have an inherent desire to change things just to make them different. To leave their imprints on their organizations. The distinguished psychoanalyst and Harvard Business School professor Abraham Zaleznik has written:

Leaders tend to be . . . people who feel separate from their environment. They may work in organizations, but they never belong to them. Their sense of who they are does not depend on memberships, work roles, or other social indicators of identity. And that perception of identity may form the theoretical basis for explaining why certain individuals seek opportunities for change. The methods to bring about change may be technological, political, or ideological, but the object is the same: to profoundly alter human, economic, and political relationships. ⁷

Profound, transformative changes may be the order of the day, and leaders may need to make them. But it is unwise to forget the caterpillar while doing so.


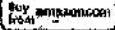


NABOKOV'S BUTTERFLIES

The novelist Vladimir Nabokov was a passionate lepidopterist. He wrote the following for students in a literature class he taught at Cornell.⁸

Transformation is a marvelous thing. I am thinking especially of the transformation of butterflies. Though wonderful to watch, transformation from larva to pupa or from pupa to butterfly is not a particularly pleasant process for the subject involved. . . .

In the last hours, the pupa splits as the caterpillar had split—it is really a last glorified moult, and the butterfly creeps out—and in its turn hangs down from the twig to dry. She is not handsome at first. She is very damp and bedraggled. But those limp implements of hers that she has disengaged gradually dry, distend, the veins branch and harden—and in twenty minutes or so she is ready to fly. You have noticed that the caterpillar is a *he*, the pupa an *it*, and the butterfly a *she*. You will ask—what is the feeling of hatching? Oh, no doubt, there is a rush of panic to the head, a thrill of breathless and strange sensation, but then the eyes see, in a flow of sunshine, the butterfly sees the world, the large and awful face of the gaping entomologist.

NOTES & LINKS

- ¹ Athos, Anthony, and Richard Pascale. *The Art of Japanese Management: Applications for American Executives* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981)  Among other things, Athos also coauthored the influential 1993 *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Reinvention Roller Coaster: Risking the Present for a Powerful Future," with Pascale and Tracey Goss. 
- ² You can read more about the 7-S Model in Waterman, Robert, Thomas Peters, and Julien Phillips. "Structure is Not Organization — The 7-S Framework." *Business Horizons* (June 1980), and at many websites, including www.mindtools.com [READ >](#)
- ³ Champy, James, and Michael Hammer. *Reengineering the Corporation. A Manifesto for Business Revolution (Revised Edition)* (New York: Collins Business Essentials, 2003) 
- ⁴ Dearlove, Dess, and Stuart Crainer. "Whatever Happened to Yesterday's Bright Ideas?" *The Conference Board Review* (May/June, 2006) [READ >](#)
- ⁵ Athos, Anthony (with Richard Pascale). "Reinvention." Presentation at The Masters Forum (September 9, 1995)
- ⁶ Koestenbaum, Peter. "The Leadership Diamond." Presentation at The Masters Forum (September 14, 1993). You can read more of Koestenbaum's thoughts at www.pib.net [READ >](#)
- ⁷ Zaleznik, Abraham. "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" *Harvard Business Review* (March-April, 1992) 
- ⁸ Nabokov, Vladimir, in "Nabokov's Butterflies: On Transformation." *The Atlantic Monthly* (April, 2000) [READ >](#)