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Who Moved My Cheese?

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Book Review

Matthew H. Roy

Spencer Johnson, Who Moved My Cheese? New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998.

In the tradition of *The Little Prince* and *Jonathon Livingston Seagull* comes the parable of change in *Who Moved My Cheese*. The success of these books lies in the mix between their simple recipe and deep-rooted messages. They choose mythical figures and simple themes to deliver secrets about living life to its fullest. Quirky as it sounds, we humans more readily and much less defensively embrace messages from these imaginary characters experiencing human trials and emotional traumas than their more real life counterparts. Just as the Little Prince's flower has taken on new meaning for countless generations, so too, will "the cheese." It is a delightful little book where you may find new insights into yourself and others with every new reading.

The book raises two very high-powered questions:

1. Why are you pursuing the goal (cheese) you are currently pursuing?
2. What would you do if you were not influenced by fears?

The story is about four characters who live in a "Maze" and search for "Cheese" to nourish them. Two are mice (Sniff and Scurry) and two are miniature human beings (Hem and Haw). The cheese and maze are metaphorical representations. The cheese represents what we strive for in life and the maze is where we look for what we want. The sum of both metaphors is "the rat race." In the story, the characters deal with unexpected change. One of the characters successfully handles change and writes the secrets to his success on the walls of the maze. These secrets, which we all can benefit from, Johnson aptly terms, "The Handwriting on the Wall."

The characters could represent voices inherent in each one of us or separate ways people deal with change. Sniff sees change coming early and Scurry goes into action immediately. Hem stays put and tries to resist change. Haw, the hero in the story, learns to laugh at his reactions and change the way he deals with change. These four characters are all well developed and most enjoyable to read. The characters that are much less interesting are the people introduced in the opening and closing sections. They are supposed to be meeting for a reunion and dis-

cussing what has happened in their lives. Their story represents a segue into the fable and analysis of the insights afterwards. The problem is that these two chapters come across as being far too "canned." This criticism is particularly appropriate for the final chapter. I was left with the feeling that I was served the finest Brie and when I asked for more was given some cheese whiz from a can. It's too bad that the opening and concluding chapters are not as well written as the parable, but the book is still a most worthy read.

The book's jacket and introductory and concluding chapters seem to be marketed toward a business audience. There are many quotes from top executives, the introduction is by management guru Ken Blanchard, and there is a long list of companies using the book. While this is probably a good strategy to support the steep \$19.95 charge, the book has appeal to a much wider audience. It is easy to understand and apply to any change situations. The book will be a huge success with businesses because it is time for a new metaphor to help us understand the business context of today. The machine metaphor helped shape our thinking and further the value of efficiency during the industrial age. The organism metaphor helped us envision the interconnectedness of the post-modern era. And now, the cheese metaphor will sprout a whole new language and conceptual understanding of the oft described chaotic information age.

This short tale only takes about one hour to read, but it has an impressive array of insights packed into it. They include:

- Keep things simple.
- Move beyond your fears and you feel free.
- New beliefs lead to new behaviors.
- Imagining and visioning can help you achieve your goals.
- Guard against letting the cheese take on a life of its own.
- Accentuate the positive in new situations.
- Know the difference between activity and productivity.
- Monitor the cheese so you know when it is getting old (change is coming).
- The biggest inhibitor to change lies within us.
- And most importantly, when we learn to laugh at ourselves, we have opened ourselves up to change.

The book could have been improved by first answering the question "what is my cheese?" I would have liked insights into why certain things are more important to me. Without knowing the answer to this question, it is tough to anticipate the changes that are going to have a more dras-

tic effect. Perhaps "What is my cheese" will be the next in a series of cheese stories from Johnson. I hope so. All this being said, *Who Moved My Cheese?* is destined to be a classic. Buy it to use in your business, your classes, and most importantly for your own self-development.

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Matthew Roy (roymh@sacredheart.edu) is an assistant professor of management at Sacred Heart University. His primary areas of interest include small group development, communication, and trust. He has published articles which appear in journals like the *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, *Management Decision*, and *Journal of Business and Behavioral Science*.