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Meet the MasterMinds: Charles Decker on *Lessons from the Hive*

Charles Decker is the author of *Beans: Four Principles for Running a Business in Good Times or Bad* and [Lessons from the Hive: The Buzz on Surviving and Thriving in an Ever-Changing Workplace](#). He is a Vice President at Acumentum, Inc., an electronic publishing company, and a contributing writer for *Fast Company* magazine. He was formerly a senior executive at Amazon.com.

Lessons from the Hive is a business fable based on the true story of a small company in the aftermath of a takeover by a conglomerate. MCNews talked to Decker about how change impacts an organization's people, processes, and politics, and what executives must do to keep change programs moving in a positive and productive direction.

MCNews: Why did you write about change as a business fable?

Decker: I think managing change is the biggest challenge in the workplace today, and I felt this was a gentle way to make people realize that with change comes opportunity, so, hopefully, they won't fear it as much.

The story is a universal one. And I hope the format will generate honest, non-threatening discussion about organizational change.

The characters are people everyone knows. They have to balance work and family under a lot of pressure. At the beginning of the story, the main character, Dana, is a total train wreck. But in a period of just a week, she is able to adapt and change. I think that inspires other people to think it can be done.

In the book, I talk about a self-help book but don't reveal its title. I get at least one email every day asking what the book is. Obviously there's a need out there for people to figure out how they can help themselves.

MCNews: Can you reveal the book's title to MCNews readers?

Decker: Yes. The book is *Feeling Good* by Dr. David Burns. It's about cognitive therapy: change your thinking, change your life. The way that people process their thoughts dictates whether they have a good outcome or a bad outcome. I tried to show that approach in action in *Lessons from the Hive*.

MCNews: The story isn't just about personal transformation. Isn't it also about deception in the workplace?

Decker: There was definitely backstabbing going on. The company needed to grow and change but it was all being done behind the scenes, and Dana had every right to feel deceived. The point is that change is most successful when an organization communicates honestly about change in a way that generates support from the people in the organization, rather than resistance.

MCNews: How should someone like Dana, whose company is going through significant upheaval, handle corporate politics, underhanded behavior, and deception?

Decker: Well, we always have to be aware that not everybody is playing the same game on the same playing field. The CEO character in the book does a good job of communicating about the change that is needed, and that's crucial.

Managers should be honest with employees. That sounds simple, but it never is. The tendency is to plan and implement change in secret because you think employees will bail out or won't cooperate. In fact, they appreciate being told the truth, and often come up with helpful ideas. Not only can people handle the truth, but you can't have trust without it.

MCNews: What role do new employees play during times of change?

Decker: New employees are often completely excluded from the process, which is unfortunate. That's why I wanted to celebrate the Nikki character in the book. She was a brand new employee, but she was a catalyst for transformation.

New blood can make a big difference in how a company reinvents itself. But new people don't get invited to the table. That's too bad—they offer a perspective that more jaded employees just don't have. The "we've tried that, it didn't work" attitude of old timers is a serious obstacle to change.

MCNews: Are there common behaviors you see when people are not working effectively in the midst of change?

Decker: The biggest problem is that people will attempt to sabotage change initiatives. And lots of people stonewall. Both have an enormously negative effect on morale. Much of that could be avoided with effective communication about what's going on.

MCNews: Let's say you're a consultant working on a change initiative and the client has a good communication plan. What comes next to effectively implement change?

Decker: Involve employees at every single level. We often think of senior managers as the ones that implement change. But I think the more senior people are often the most fearful. Go from a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down one.

MCNews: Why is it that change in the corporate or work environment is so difficult?

Decker: That's the \$64,000 question. I think it's because so many workers have been lied to over the years that their own history informs them that whatever happens, it's going to be bad.

It does come down to the way people process thoughts. Can change be a good thing? Absolutely it can be. But people are fearful. They think they're going to lose their jobs, their livelihoods; they're going to have to sell their homes; they're going to have to move; or maybe they fear failing in whatever new environment is coming.

Leaders should help people focus on what they'll gain, not on what they might lose.

The other problem is that a diversified team is almost never formed to help management with a change initiative. Senior management—often the CEO working in collusion with HR—takes it on. And, of course, HR departments in most companies in this country are not trusted.

MCNews: What can HR departments do to regain credibility?

Decker: The HR industry as a whole needs to look at itself closely and ask, “What role are we playing? What value do we add? Sadly, they’re looked upon as a tool of management. Most employees don’t trust them, and they don’t go to them for career advice. And the problems employees do take to HR are seldom solved.

People do need help managing their careers. But the attitude seems to be, “this is your job, do it and when you’re sick of it, find something else to do.” That’s not good enough.

HR departments are largely transaction based—they do payroll and benefits. Anything that involves helping people is an adjunct or a small part of what they do.

MCNews: Could HR become a more strategic player in the workplace?

Decker: I think it really could. HR departments that manage companies’ emails and Intranets, for example, have a great opportunity to take a more active role. Intranets can play an important part in making opportunities happen for employees. But instead, you just go there for help running your computer or to get a form.

There’s so much more they could do. Too many companies treat HR as just overhead and it becomes kind of a backwater. That’s a tragic waste of resources.

MCNews: Did you intend the story to be prescriptive?

Decker: It’s not. I think trying to create something that’s going to work for all doesn’t work for anybody. There is no set prescription—do this, follow this plan, and you will have this outcome. Every company has its own history and its own issues. Take the story for what it’s worth and create your own outcome.

Recognize that everyone in an organization is coming from a different place. They’re going to accept or reject change based on their history. There isn’t just one way to manage through change.

Diversity of style at work is something people don’t talk about very much. I think that deserves more attention. Everybody has a unique way of working, and we have to adapt change initiatives to those styles.

I don’t think it’s asking too much for change to be customized. People would like it to be neat and tidy so they can put it all in one e-mail that goes to the entire company. That’s just being lazy.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

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