Who Moved My Cheese?

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**Introduction**

Spencer Johnson was born in Mitchell, South Dakota in 1940. He graduated from Notre Dame High School of Sherman Oaks, California in 1957 and received a B.A. degree in psychology from the University of Southern California in 1963. He also received M.D. from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and medical clerkships at the Mayo Clinic and Harvard Medical School (“BookBrowse.com”). After that, he was working as Medical Director of Communications for Medtronic in his early career. He served as the original innovators of cardiac pacemakers; Research Physician at The Institute for Inter-Disciplinary Studies, a medical-social think tank; consultant to the Center for the Study of the Person and to the School of Medicine of the University of California, and Leadership Fellow at the Harvard Business School (“BookBrowse.com”). Now he is an advisor to Harvard’s Center for Public Leadership and Chairman of Spencer Johnson Partners, which is a firm that puts his books to work, partnering with organizations to help them to develop in a successful way.

*Who Moved My Cheese?* was written by Spencer Johnson, M.D. and was published in 1998. Spencer Johnson, M.D. is known as one of the most respected authors and a New York Times bestseller (“Sterling International”). Since 1975, he has been engaged in writing books and works with a co-author, Kenneth Blanchard, and his books show how to deal with changes in everyday life (“Shelfari! Read. Share. Explore!”). Other than *Who Moved My Cheese?*, he has written many bestselling books; *The One Minute Sales Person, Yes or No: the Guide to Better Decision, the One Minute Manager* (“Sterling International”). His books are translated into twenty-six languages, such as Spanish, Korean, and German (“Shelfari! Read. Share. Explore!”). In Japan, over 4.5 million copies of *Who Moved My Cheese?* has sold and recorded as the #1 bestselling book which is written by a non-Japanese author (“BookBrowse.com”).
Major media, including CNN, ABC, NBC, the BBC, New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Associated Press and United Press International, Reader’s Digest, and Business Week pays attention to Spencer Johnson’s work (“Self Improvement and Business Training Store-Mind Perk”). This is because his work has the great influence on people. He writes books to help readers to enjoy changes by using simple solutions. According to him, people tend to think about things too much with complex beliefs and be afraid of unexpected changing although the things are simpler than they think. Because people are afraid of changing, the fear makes them disable from coping with the situations. In the book *Who Moved My Cheese?*, he explains how to cope with changing which is essential in any field, at work and at home. Therefore, millions of people read his books and improve the quality of life.

**Overview**

*Who Moved My Cheese?* is a very motivating and captivating story about how to cope with change and the best way to embrace change as a resource. The simplicity of the story makes it easy to follow and interpret the main points and messages. The overall message of the book is very beneficial and useful for just about anybody who reads it. The characters and objects that are used in the story can be related to real world perspectives, which stimulate analogies that can be made to embrace the overall message of the story. This book can appear very simple, but the deeper meaning of the messages presented is extremely valuable and useful in all aspects of life.

The basic plot of the story is very easy to interpret and it stays consistent throughout the entire book. There are four main characters in the story that each represents different attitudes that can be taken with change. The first two characters that are introduced are the two mice named “Sniff” and “Scurry.” These two mice are very simple minded and embrace change as it
comes, without putting too much thought into how to deal with change and simply reacting to the
events that occur. The next two characters that are introduced are both Littlepeople named
“Hem” and “Haw.” Littlepeople are just as small as mice, but they act and look like regular
people today. Littlepeople tend to embrace change much like regular people do, they tend to be
hesitant and can often over-think things when sudden change occurs, and a lot of times they
don’t really know what to do. Each day, the four characters enter a maze in search for cheese.

Before the story begins, it is mentioned that the “Maze” represents where you spend time looking
for what you want and the “Cheese” represents what we want to have in life, which can be just
about anything. These analogies are very important for interpreting the main messages in the
story.

As the four characters continue to search for cheese in the maze, which is shrouded by
mystery and uncertainty, they eventually find a very large amount of cheese in one of the
sections of the maze. The characters are very happy and begin to enjoy life very much, as every
day they return to the same part of the maze to eat their cheese. And suddenly, without warning,
the cheese goes missing. This is where a lot of messages can begin to surface because of the
different reactions that occur between each character. The two mice, Sniff and Scurry,
immediately leave the cheese-less part of the maze and Sniff begins to sniff out a new direction
in search for cheese with Scurry, who begins to scurry to new sections with hopes of finding
another large deposit of cheese. Hem and Haw, however, interpret this change in a very different
way. Their emotions begin to spiral into denial as they refuse to accept this change. They try to
return to the same spot each day, in hopes of the cheese coming back to the same spot, but to
their disappointment, the cheese remains missing. They continue to have this attitude for a very
long time, until Hem begins to understand that they must embrace change in order to restore their
happiness. Hem, on the other hand, refuses to embrace this change, and his denial continues to escalate, as his sanity declines when he continues to return to the same spot day after day, hoping for the cheese to return. He is angered by Haw’s new attitude towards reacting to the change, and it causes Hem to continue is unproductive outlook.

Haw then continues in search of new cheese on his own, as Hem refuses to change. After many days in the maze in search of new cheese, Haw eventually finds a section of the maze filled with more cheese than he has ever seen before. It’s filled with his favorite cheeses as well as some new cheese that he has never seen or tasted before. Also at the new location, Haw sees Sniff and Scurry enjoying themselves with the new cheese. He can tell that they have been there for a while as their attitudes towards the change that took place led them to the new area in the maze much sooner than Haw. The story ends with Haw feeling extremely happy and proud of himself for finding the new cheese, and dealing with the change that took place. He can only hope that Hem will eventually learn to embrace the change and will also find the new cheese.

The overall message from this story can prove to be extremely useful in the real world today. Some of the most important messages that can be taken from the story are the ones that Haw writes on the walls of the maze as he realizes how to cope with change and how he used the change to avoid confusion and find new cheese. Many of the messages that he wrote were while he was on his journey in search of the new cheese. Near the end of the story, Haw writes a summary of what he learned on one of the walls of the new cheese location in the maze. The summary read:

“Change Happens: They Keep Moving The Cheese
Anticipate Change: Get Ready For The Cheese To Move
Monitor Change: Smell The Cheese Often So You Know When It Is Getting Old

Adapt To Change Quickly: The Quicker You Let Go Of Old Cheese, The Sooner You Can Enjoy New Cheese

Change: Move With The Cheese

Enjoy Change!: Savor The Adventure And Enjoy The Taste Of New Cheese!

Be Ready To Change Quickly And Enjoy It Again & Again: They Keep Moving The Cheese” (74). Together, these lessons that Hem learned collectively formulate the overall message of the story: Change is inevitable, it is important to anticipate it, accept it, and embrace it. If this attitude is taken during times of change, it will lead to success.

In order to apply the message of the story to real world situations, it is important to make the connection between the objects and characters in the book. As mentioned previously, the Maze represents where you spend time looking for what you want and the Cheese represents what we want to have in life. It is important to keep these analogies in mind when reading the story in order to see how the attitudes of the characters can be interpreted in real world situations. When looking at each of the characters, we notice the four main approaches that can be taken with change. When looking at Sniff, this character represents the kind of person that can see change coming, or can “sniff” out change. When looking at Scurry, this character is the kind of person that would immediately go into action as soon as change takes place. The Littlepeople at the beginning of the story vastly underestimated these two characters, being that they were mice and their intelligence was not as high as the Littlepeople’s intelligence. However, the lack of intelligence ended up helping the mice, as they merely reacted to the change and immediately began searching for new cheese. As for the Littlepeople, Hem possesses the passive attitude; he refuses to accept the change and puts himself into denial, which only makes the situation worse.
Haw represents the ideal attitude needed to embrace change at the end of the story, where at the beginning he represents Hem’s attitude, thus creating a change in himself. Haw’s attitude towards change demonstrates the lessons learned in the story, which is what leads the reader to benefit from these lessons learned.

This story is a wonderful example of how change can affect the attitudes that we have and it shows some of the various ways in which we cope with change. The message is best expressed through the simplicity of the story, which makes it suitable for readers of all ages and abilities. This story expresses very valuable lessons that can greatly benefit everybody who experiences change in their life. Accompanied with the simplicity of the story, the attitudes and objects used in the story can help the reader relate to the story through their real world experiences. This book represents the ideal method to demonstrate and teach an extremely valuable lesson that anyone can use to help their life.

**Cheese in relation with other theoretical models in Organizational Behavior**

Throughout *Who Moved My Cheese?* different types of change surfaced. Lewin’s change model is the first in which we see, and then later looking at the writings on the walls we can see both John Kotter’s eight steps for leading organizational change and organizational development. First evaluating change comparatively to Lewin’s model we see that each member of the book (Hem, Haw, Sniff and Scurry) relate differently if at all.

The three parts to Lewin’s change model are unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. The unfreezing stage of change focus’s on replacing the old behaviors or methods, and motivating individuals to change. This helps show the need for change and why it is valuable. Hem, who never moved from Cheese Station C, was unable to unfreeze his current behavior and process.
The second stage is changing; this is where the actual change occurs. The last stage is refreezing, where you fully integrate the behavior into the organization. It helps when the behavior is reinforced. When looking at the remaining characters, we see Sniff and Scurry who were able to immediately move on from the change in Station C when the changed to continue looking for more cheese. They refroze their behavior change when they found the new cheese.

However Haw went through a longer process then his mouse counterparts, but he was able to see the light. The stage that took Haw the longest was the unfreezing stage. He needed not be afraid of what was going to happen after moving on, rather just do it. Once Haw pushed away his fear, he was capable to understand the change that needed to occur, by keep moving until he found his goal. Then after he completely rid himself of fear he was able to refreeze his current attitudes and actions.

Throughout the course of Haw’s search for new cheese, he would stop and write on the walls of the maze in an effort to convey the message that an individual or an organization must accept that change happens, adapt to the change and enjoy the process of change. The handwritings also served as a guide for Hem if he ever moved on from the old cheese. These handwritings on the wall included seven different phrases; change happens, anticipate change, monitor change, adapt to change quickly, change, enjoy the change, and be ready to change quickly and enjoy it again and again. The writing on the wall provides the reader with a systematic process that can be used to approach change and is very similar to two different Organizational Behavior models, John Kotter’s eight steps for leading organizational change and organizational development.
John Kotter believes that senior management makes a host of implementation errors regarding change and therefore he proposed an eight-step process for leading change that recommends how managers should sequence or lead the change process. Kotter’s eight steps for leading organizational change includes establishing a sense of urgency, creating the guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change and anchoring new approaches in the culture. Kotter’s steps and the handwriting on the wall in Who Moved My Cheese? contain many similarities regarding the process of change. For simplicity, Kotter’s steps and the handwriting on the wall can be broken into three groups that have similar systematic steps.

The first three handwritings were change happens, anticipate change and monitor change. These steps are very similar to Kotter’s steps of establishing urgency, creating a guiding coalition and developing a vision and strategy. These groups both provide a ground to begin to deal with change with a positive and productive mind frame. The next group of handwritings include adept to change quickly and change. Both of these relate to Kotter’s steps of communicating the change vision and empowering broad-based action, which embraces encouraging risk taking and creative problem solving. These groups of behaviors are the most important steps of the model because they include the individual or group actually committing to changing. The final groups consist of Kotter’s steps of generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more changes, and anchoring new approaches in the culture. These steps provide simple reinforcement for the parties involved with changing as well as provide a mind frame for the future. The same exact ideas from the last three steps of Kotter’s steps to leading
organizational change are found in the last two handwritings on the wall; enjoy change and be ready to change quickly as well as enjoy it again and again.

A second model of change that holds similarities to the handwriting on the wall in *Who Moved My Cheese?* is the model of organizational development. The process of organizational development is based on applying behavioral science principles, methods and theories adapted from numerous fields including psychology, sociology, education and management. The process includes four steps. The first is diagnosis, or identifying the problem and its causes. Second is the intervention phase, which includes beginning an intervention that can solve the problem. The Third step includes evaluating whether the intervention is working, and the fourth step is a feedback step that investigates what the evaluation suggests about the diagnosis and effectiveness of how the intervention was implemented.

This four-step systematic process is a generalized version of the handwritings on the wall. The handwritings begin with the procedure of anticipating and monitoring the possibility of change as a way to identify that change is occurring. Then, the handwritings move towards an intervention phase that involves the actual behaviors of changing. Next, the organizational development model consists of evaluating the intervention that was put into place. The handwritings on the wall suggest monitoring change before the actual change occurs, which could be problematic since monitoring an intervention of change would probably give more useful insight to the process of change rather than monitoring the situation before changing occurs. Lastly, organizational development involves a feedback step as a way to investigate the intervention in place, which is not explicitly stated in the handwritings on the wall. Although one could suggest that the handwriting on the wall of monitoring change at the beginning of the
series could potentially be used as a way to evaluate past processes of change and their effectiveness.

Comparing these three models shows that the handwritings on the walls hold similarities with other Organizational Behavior models such as Kotter’s steps to organizational change and organizational development. However, when reviewing all of the models it appears that organizational development serves as the most systematic process of confronting, handling and learning from change.

**Implementing the Story in the Work Place**

*Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson is a short but very valuable book that is good for any type of business to implement the author’s story into their work place. Managers and employees are able to identify themselves with one of the characters, Sniff, Scurry, Hem, or Haw. It can help the company in to deal internally with their workers or externally with business partners or future business partners. This is a very popular book among companies because there are numerous scenarios that businesses can apply this story to when it comes to dealing with change.

The scenario that this could be implemented to is when a business has a process that is creating good profits, but on the outside, there are technological advances that are being created and other companies are starting to use these in their business. A reason why a company would resist to trying new technology is because they believe what they have been doing is doing well, so why change? Their process of doing business has become old Cheese and they were afraid to look for new Cheese. This shows characteristics of Hem, who just wants to stay where he is because it’s what he knows and is a safe way that works. In the long run, by not changing with
the times, this could cost the company’s competitive edge and could result in a dramatic drop in
profits because other companies are taking their business. What the business should have done to
prevent this lost was to be like Sniff where they should have kept themselves in check and sense
what changes are going on around them. Then they should have taken action, like Scurry, where
once they sense changes in technological processes, they would change the way they did their
processes. Now that the company has seen the cost of their actions towards the business, it is still
not too late to take action. The company can be like Haw. The company is at first resistant to
change, but then they can be open-minded and see that change can be good and have fun with it.
The company can learn from their mistake and be able to change for the good of the company
and create an optimistic vision, new Cheese, for the employees to work towards.

Another scenario that a company may want to use this story is when they need to lay off
people in the company. This is a trend that is happening today, and if companies can give their
employees one last gift, it would be this. It allows the employee to see that they are going to deal
with change no matter what and that they need to realize that their Cheese has moved. This story
gives them a better way to cope and deal with this change. They need to move with their Cheese
and not be like Hem and just wait to see if their Cheese comes back. They can’t be afraid of what
the future will hold but embrace it instead. By getting past their fears, they will come to realize
that there is New Cheese to be found in the job world. By becoming a Haw, instead of a Hem,
unemployed workers will be able to create a picture for themselves and pursue a goal. By having
this vision, they will be able to do well in job interviews and find better jobs for themselves.

This is a book that every work place should read because it applies to every level of
worker in the work place. It allows employees to reflect on what character they identify with and
how they deal with change. By being able to see what type of worker they are, they can
understand and can change for the benefit of the business. It also applies to managers or leaders, in where they can understand how their workers think and be able to take actions according to how their employees think.

**Summary**

The business world is ever changing. Nothing in life will stay constant forever thus we need to learn how to adapt to change. Spencer Johnson, M.D. relays a simple story about the pursuit for cheese yet manages to capture a greater meaning. Change is unavoidable and business professionals can either be proactive with change just like Sniff and Scurry or not adapt well to change like Hem and Haw. The way a business handles change is a key element to the success of the business. Businesses should always keep in mind the 6 quotes Haw wrote on the maze wall which are change happens, anticipate change, monitor change, adapt to change quickly, go through the process of change, enjoy change, and be ready to change again.

Businesses especially right now with the downturn of the economy must be even more flexible with change. Ideally businesses should anticipate change so that they aren’t taken off guard when change does occur. When Haw and Hem realize there is no more cheese at Station 3 they become shocked and don’t know what to do next. I believe this situation has occurred in many cases with US companies during the past three years of the financial crisis. This dramatic change in the economy led to bailouts of banks, a terrible housing market, and a collapse of the stock market all around the world. US companies didn’t anticipate such a dramatic change in the economy and that was the initial mistake.

One of the quotes written on the maze was, “If you do not change, you can become extinct.” This statement is true of every business. Companies that do not change will have a high
chance of failure. For example, small businesses that do not change when large retail stores are built usually go out of business. Many people see change as negative when in fact it should be considered positive. People have a fear of stepping out of their comfort zone and the possibility of failure. The fear people experience from change is always more intense in a person’s mind than what actually happens in real life.

The biggest key any business can make is to enjoy change and to be ready to change quickly over and over again. Change usually scares people because of the unknown and once businesses get past the fear then change can be very exciting. Companies who enjoy change will be even more successful. For example, when Ham decides to go back in the maze to look for cheese again and he realizes once he put his fear aside he began to have fun.

This story has impacted the way I approach change and how to handle change. Change can be very difficult to deal with because it forces people to step out of their comfort zone. I’ve learned that I need to be more willing to accept change and let go of the old. Speaking in terms of the book I have a tendency to hold onto the old cheese when I should really be letting go of the old cheese and enjoying the new cheese. This story has also opened my eyes to notice change in all aspects of life including school, friends, family, and work.
Works Cited


