Our Iceberg Is Melting

by John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber
A Book Review by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tipchan Wongchanta

Reminiscent of Spencer Johnson’s Who Moved My Cheese, Our Iceberg Is Melting of John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber impressively sheds light on the theme of change through a fable of a penguin colony in Antarctica. Its simple storyline of penguins living on the iceberg that has potential to break apart subtly unfolds the hard truth of the timeless war between resistance and adaptation to change we humans of all walks of life have, one way or another, been experiencing.

A renowned expert on leadership and change at Harvard Business School, Kotter together with Rathgeber firmly grasped my attention right through some two hours while reading his award-winning book of how change is usually perceived and managed. The authors made me realize one unfortunate truth: that many of us are not really dissimilar to those little creatures when faced with change, mostly too quick to resist to it. I could imagine the actual people around me in the role of some characters like Fred, Alice, Louis, Buddy, the Professor, and NoNo.

The air of the penguin colony is indeed electric with confusion and conflicts as very few penguins can spot change and are ready to get complacency down and adapt to it while many others are unfortunately headstrong enough to believe that their iceberg will never melt. To them, everything will always be the same, and those who talk about change are “insane.” Moreover, the book’s setting in the cold Antarctica is intriguingly used as an irony. Underneath those huge mountains of cold and spine-chilling iceberg burns the incessant heat of conflicts and mistrust among penguins of different temperaments, beliefs, and behaviors.

Against all odds and/or chaos that cannot but cruelly rob us of peace and good living, the book however boldly suggests the eight steps for any leader to deal with resistance to change. Thanks to the human integrity and instinct to survive. The eight magical steps that await all readers to explore in details are:

1. Create a sense of urgency.
2. Pull together the guiding team.
3. Develop the change vision and strategy.
4. Communicate for understanding and buy in.
5. Empower others to act.
7. Don’t let up.
8. Create a new culture.

This fable of penguins is, in short, not really as simple as it appears. It conceals some very important insights for all of us to experience. As I am fully aware that change is a natural (not a single minute passes without change) and the nature of change keeps changing everyday, I will definitely use this book in my literature class so that my students can experience the surprise the book entails and, more importantly, learn how to live with others wisely, harmoniously, and peacefully, especially amid the wind of change we experience in the world and particularly in Thailand today.