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"Rebels at Work is the essential guide to rocking the boat. From the trenches, Lois Kelly and Carmen Medina outline how to gain credibility, pitch ideas, navigate politics, manage conflict, and maintain sanity."

—Adam Grant, Wharton professor and
New York Times bestselling author of *Give and Take*

REBELS AT WORK

A Handbook for Leading
Change from Within



Lois Kelly & Carmen Medina

“This valuable handbook is chock-full of charts, guidelines, stories and advice to help people make positive change in big companies—and to have fun doing it. It is an indispensable guide for both rebels and those who manage them.”

—Diane Hessian, Chairman, Communispace

“An excellent guide for anyone interested in creating grass roots change in a large organization.”

—Brian Fitzpatrick, Software Engineering Manager, Google

REBELS AT WORK

Ready to stand up and create positive change at work, but reluctant to speak up? True leadership doesn't always come from a position of power or authority. By teaching skills and providing practical advice, this handbook shows you how to engage your coworkers and bosses and bring your ideas forward so that they are heard, considered, and acted upon.

Authors Carmen Medina and Lois Kelly—once rebels themselves—reveal ways to navigate your workplace, avoid common mistakes and traps, and overcome the fears that may be holding you back. You can achieve more success and less frustration, help your organization do better work, and—most important—find more meaning and joy in what you do.

Lois Kelly, an author and marketing strategist, counsels executives and creative teams in large corporations such as FedEx, SAP, Sapient, USAA, Dunkin' Donuts, and many others.

Carmen Medina was one of the highest-ranking women at the Central Intelligence Agency during 32 years of service. She now speaks and writes about cognitive diversity, how to think better in general, and how to be a rebel at work.



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REBELS AT WORK

by Lois Kelly and Carmen Medina

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Production Editor: Matthew Hacker

Copyeditor: Jasmine Kwityn

Proofreader: Eileen Cohen

Indexer: Ellen Troutman Zaig

Cover Designer: Mark Paglietti

Interior Designer: Monica Kamsvaag

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Preface

If you're reading this book, you're an idea person. When you see something that isn't right at work, your mind starts thinking about what *could* work. You want to make things better.

Maybe you've tried to get the powers that be to see the value of your ideas and haven't made as much progress as you'd like. Or worse, you've been told that you're rocking the boat too hard and your ideas aren't welcome, thank you very much. Talk about frustration, when all you're trying to do is make things better. "What am I doing wrong?" you wonder. "What does it take to change things around here? What can I do differently?"

Or, perhaps you are an idea person who has been reluctant to speak up at work because you're just not sure how to go about proposing a different way of doing things. You may be younger than most people, new to the organization, or have less formal education than your coworkers. You wonder how to be taken seriously and how to propose new approaches without jeopardizing your reputation or your job.

We used to be you. We struggled with the same questions and challenges. We made a lot of mistakes and learned the hard way about what it takes to introduce new ways of doing things at work, which is why we wrote this handbook. We wish someone had given us practical advice on how to create positive change early in our careers. "Imagine," we wondered, "what we might have been able to do if we had had a practical guide for changing things at work, a handbook with observations and advice about how to navigate the workplace and avoid common mistakes and traps."

Carmen worked at the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Lois worked for big companies and marketing agencies. While our careers couldn't have been more different, our observations of what it takes to be a successful change maker, or what we call a good rebel, have been remarkably similar. (See [Chapter 1](#) for details on what we mean by "good rebels.")

Since we met at an innovation conference in 2010 and found we share a passion for helping good rebels inside all types of organizations, we have spent thousands of hours interviewing and writing about good rebels in all walks of work, from all

over the world. All of their stories and advice, while distinct, are similar. Together, we share the following characteristics:

- We want to make things better at work.
- We believe the best ideas come from the people doing the work.
- We can't bear the thought of working at a job without possibilities for change and growth.
- We don't want to become angry or complacent or get thrown under the bus.
- We need and want help from other people like us.

Whom This Handbook Is For

We didn't write this book for managers, although we suspect many managers will find much that is useful in it. We wrote this book for the people doing the work, especially for those who care about doing their own jobs as best as they can and who want to help their organizations, companies, or government agencies do better as well.

Organizations being what they are, people often have to wage a minor insurgency to have their voices heard. That's one of the reasons we call ourselves (and others like us) rebels at work.

If you're one of the millions of people who are employees, we hope this handbook helps you become a positive force for change at work.

We don't want to suggest that we're somehow anti-management. Far from it. Both of us have had plenty of opportunities to manage and lead. But when we decided to write this book, we made a deliberate choice to focus on the challenges facing employees who want to improve their place of work and don't have the official authority, power, or influence to call the shots.

What's in This Handbook

This is the handbook we wish someone had given us. It's full of practical ideas, useful checklists, and valuable questions. It offers caring advice on what to do tactically, as well as how to manage yourself so that you grow and avoid burnout.

Here's a summary of the highlights in each chapter:

1. Good Rebels, Great Work	Good versus bad rebels	What change do rebels make?	In a world without rebels	
2. What Makes Me a Good Rebel?	Born or made?	Rebel tendencies	Accidental rebels	
3. Gaining Credibility	Understanding your boss	Developing your rebel alliance	Being trustworthy	
4. Navigating the Organizational Landscape	Knowing how things work	Why people say no	Work politics	
5. Communicating Your Ideas	What's at stake?	The vital 10%	Gauging reactions	
6. Managing Conflict	Types & stages of conflict	Tactics for useful disagreements	Making controversy productive	Conflict, riot acts, anger
7. Dealing with Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt	Minimizing the 10 most common rebel fears		Managing doubts so they don't manage you	
8. A Guide to Rebel Self-Care	Heeding the warning signs	Retreat, reset, restore	When to let go	Finding the right boss
9. Am I Becoming a Bad Rebel?	The rebel arc	Avoiding bad rebel behavior	Bad rebel doing good	
10. Give This Chapter to Your Boss	What motivates good rebels	Creating a safe work environment	Giving rebels the right work	Providing support and coaching
Afterword				
Resources	Essential questions	Handy lists	Recommended reading	Glossary

How to Use This Handbook

There are a number of ways to approach this book:

Read and reference

We invite you to read the chapters that appeal to you in the order that appeals to you, and encourage you to come back when you're about to shake things up at work again. Most of us have periods at work when things are going smoothly and our rebel skills aren't needed. But when you're about to take on a new challenge, please reread the especially relevant chapters before doing anything rash.

Start a rebel book club

There are "Questions to Ponder" at the end of each chapter. You might consider reading this book with a group of like-minded rebels and discussing the questions after each chapter, particularly within the context of your own workplace. For the more ambitious, use the questions as a jumping-off point for a rebel training curriculum for your organization.

Join us

Be part of the [Rebels at Work community](#). You'll find good rebel profiles, additional resources, videos, a signup form for our newsletter, and frequent blog updates based on what we're hearing and learning. You can also join in the conversation on the Rebels at Work [Facebook page](#) and on Twitter. We both use the [@RebelsatWork](#) handle, as well as our personal Twitter accounts. Lois is [@LoisKelly](#), and Carmen is [@milouness](#).

What You'll Learn

In reading this book, you'll find out how to:

- Achieve more success and less frustration
- Earn a reputation for having great ideas versus a reputation for being difficult
- Advance your career and avoid being sidelined (or thrown under the bus)
- Help your organization do more meaningful work

- Be authentically who you are versus trying to fit your work style to someone else's style
- Find more meaning and joy in your work

Will You Pay It Forward?

Figuring out how to create change differs in every work situation. There is no proven methodology that fits every situation. (If only.) If you find this book helpful, would you do us a favor?

Would you please reach out to other rebels and share what you're learning and offer some support, emotional and tactical? During our research, we have found that rebels at work are a generous, compassionate tribe, intent on making a difference and helping one another succeed and stay true to themselves in the process.

Together, let's write the next chapter about work where change makers are as vital to success as any technology or process or highly paid executive. Maybe even more so.

Not everyone in an organization needs to be a rebel, but every organization has and needs its rebels.

Adelante!

Conventions Used in This Book

The following typographical conventions are used in this book:

Note

This element signifies a tip, suggestion, or general note.

Warning

This element indicates a warning or caution.

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How to Contact Us

Please address comments and questions concerning this book to the publisher:

O'Reilly Media, Inc.
1005 Gravenstein Highway North
Sebastopol, CA 95472
800-998-9938 (in the United States or Canada)
707-829-0515 (international or local)
707-829-0104 (fax)

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Acknowledgments

This book belongs to the many who have shared their stories, advice, and research, and who have been willing to listen to our ideas and help us make them better. Rebels are always learning, and so many have taught us so much during the process of writing this book, often in surprising ways.

Deep appreciation goes to editor Stuart Horwitz who got us to a first draft, and editor Deb Cameron who got to us to the finish line, and to those who read the first draft of the book and provided such honest, thoughtful suggestions, including Helen Bevan, Hugh Boyle, Maria DeCarvalho, J. Peter Donald, Christine Flanagan, and Janet Fitzpatrick-Wilks. Equally valuable were the reviewers who read the second draft: Cindy Alvarez, Curt Klun, Dawn Nott, Julie Soderland, Tiffany Wan, and Ayse Wiediger.

Thanks to all those who have shared their stories at RebelsatWork.com and to Peter Vander Auwera of Corporate Rebels United for being crazy enough to cohost a 24-hour online Rebel Jam with us.

A WORD FROM LOIS

I would like to give a big thank you to my amazing corporate clients who keep saying, “Yes, let’s try it.”

I am especially grateful to have married Greg Matta, who told me on our first date that he was a maverick and a feminist. Thirty years later, I treasure his kindness and encouragement to take more chances. That my sons Ian Matta and Greg Frishman are as supportive of me is a gift. That they are also rebels fills me with optimism.

A WORD FROM CARMEN

I want to thank my mother, Alicia, who went back to get her college degree in her mid-40s because that was the only way to get ahead at work. Her coworkers called her a pistol—another euphemism for a rebel at work.

I also want to acknowledge all the lessons I learned from my colleagues in my 32 years at the CIA. I want to thank the members of the Rebel Alliance—you know who are—and also the managers and mentors who guided and corrected me along the way. I didn’t always follow your counsel, but I always appreciated it.

Good Rebels, Great Work

Good rebels just want to do great work.

We want to improve things that aren't working and that put our organizations at risk. Our motivation is not personal glory but introducing new ideas that can benefit our coworkers, customers, or community members. The greatest calling for rebels is helping our organizations evolve from what they are to what they can become, finding thoughtful ways to examine new ideas, identifying when and how to move on them, and taking the first step to get to a better place.

We realize the term “rebel” is loaded, so we'll explain what we mean. At the most basic level, good rebels are *for* creating new, better ways to do things, while bad rebels just rail *against* what isn't working. It's easy to complain but much harder to figure out what could be done differently.

A few years ago, we created a chart that shows the difference between good and bad rebels (see [Table 1-1](#)). It has been downloaded more than 100,000 times and has shown up in tweets and presentations around the globe.

We believe it's popular for three reasons. First, it summarizes common behaviors of rebels. Second, it refutes the “troublemaker” label that managers sometimes slap on thoughtful people trying to make positive change. And, perhaps more complex, it shows that many who start off as good rebels get so disillusioned that they end up joining the dark side, even though they started with good intentions. The frustration of trying to get people at work to listen and agree to sensible new ideas can become so acute that good rebels can become pessimistic, point fingers, or become angry and obsessed.

One note about the chart: while it's useful, it can also oversimplify matters. Many of these attributes are on a continuum. At some point in your rebel journey, obsession with your idea may well be necessary, although we don't think obsessive behavior is a good long-term strategy for any rebel. To get management's attention,

there may be times where vocalizing problems in public forums is more effective than slowly building agreement by socializing ideas with people individually.

Table 1-1. Bad rebels versus good rebels

Bad rebels	Good rebels
Complain	Create
Assertions	Questions
Me-focused	Mission-focused
Pessimist	Optimist
Anger	Passion
Energy-sapping	Energy-generating
Alienate	Attract
Problems	Possibilities
Vocalize problems	Socialize opportunities
Worry that...	Wonder if...
Point fingers	Pinpoint causes
Obsessed	Reluctant
Lecture	Listen

Who Are These Good Rebels?

Just who are these good rebels and what changes do they strive to make?

We've talked with hundreds of rebels over the past three years. They began their journeys when their concerns grew so acute that they felt compelled to act. Most would never consider themselves change agents, innovators, and certainly not heroes. They would, however, say they are people who care deeply about their organizations, coworkers, and people their diverse organizations serve, from customers and students to patients and citizens.

While some rebels make big, company-wide gestures, many more create small-scale changes. Here are some examples of rebels working in many contexts and roles:

- An administrative assistant, frustrated by coordinating meetings and decisions among vice presidents, invites other admins to a monthly brown bag lunch. They sit down to figure out better ways to manage their bosses' time and bring about organizational change from their sphere of influence.

- Exhausted by the layers of bureaucracy involved in approving innovation programs, a government manager sends a tweet asking the 1.35 million agency employees to pledge to do one small thing to improve the organization's effectiveness. Employees make 189,000 pledges on the first annual National Health Service (NHS) Change Day, unleashing creativity and improvement ideas throughout the United Kingdom.
- A 25-year-old communications manager, thrilled to be working for a law enforcement agency whose mission he greatly admires, sees new ways to use social media to help the agency fulfill its mission. When he raises new ideas, his bosses and the legal department cite complex and inane regulations. He wonders whether the government wants talent or obedience. He shows his bosses the risks of *not* adopting new ways of communicating and slowly gains support.
- A policy analyst shares ideas for improving the way a government agency carries out its mission. Her boss listens quietly but then advises, "Just keep your mouth shut and in 20 years you'll be in the position to make the changes you think are so important." The analyst resigns, convinced that no progress will be possible in her organization.
- After presenting an industry-changing technology idea to the executive team three years in a row, the sales director of a wastewater engineering company stops advocating for his idea internally. During the next six years, he continues to talk with clients and gather ideas to improve the concept. Ten years later, the company introduces the new system, which is a big success.
- A military officer rises through the ranks, modernizing approaches to leadership and professional development. He retires early, realizing that the top brass promote people with whom they feel comfortable. Those who rock the boat to create change don't make officials feel comfortable, and as a result, are unlikely to reach the highest ranks.

As rebels, our stories are different, but we have much in common. [Table 1-2](#) shows some tactics and behaviors that successful rebels use and cultivate.

Table 1-2. Secrets of successful rebels

Tactics: Actions to achieve a specific end	Behaviors: How you conduct yourself, especially toward others
Tap into the brilliance of others, knowing that no one can create meaningful change alone.	<i>Stay positive: optimism inspires others to join them in fixing problems.</i>
Align ideas with the organization's goals. The more important an idea is to an organization the more likely it will be adopted.	<i>Judge ideas, not people. Steer conversations away from personalities to focus on ideas and their merits.</i>
Show how the benefits of change are commensurate with the costs of change.	<i>Learn from anger: consider what triggers anger and avoid spiraling into emotional drama.</i>
Use conflict productively: glean insights from disagreement and conflict to learn how to refine and advance an idea.	<i>Respect others and consider different viewpoints.</i>
Let ideas breathe, giving people time to absorb a new idea and consider its implications.	<i>Know when to walk away, weighing the importance of the idea and the personal and professional costs of persevering.</i>

In a World Without Rebels

For those who may doubt that rebels have a vital role to play in society, we invite you to reflect for a moment on what the world would look like without rebels.

We don't have to look far for examples.

We teach our children about the importance of free speech and the dangers of "groupthink," encouraging them to read novels like George Orwell's 1984, in which the Ministry of Truth's real mission is to falsify historical events. Lois Lowry's *The Giver* portrays a world where pain, fear, intense love, and hatred have been eliminated. There's no prejudice because people all look and think the same. Yet evil lurks because people all look and think the same.

Nonetheless, in our schools and workplaces, groupthink is rewarded. Those who question decisions and advocate for different ways are often ignored, ostracized, or fired. (Two of our most popular blog posts relate to employees being thrown under the bus.¹)

Yet without rebels, our systems, companies, schools, churches, government agencies, and healthcare organizations become rigid and sometimes even dangerous.

1. See "Techniques for Throwing Corporate Rebels Under the Bus" and "When You're Thrown Under the Bus at Work: Part Two."

Kids are teased, and sometimes bullied, for being different. Government managers obsess about protecting their budgets and headcount and lose sight of what citizens need. Companies don't see—or ignore—emerging trends and fail every day, putting people out of work.

The dangers of a world without rebels are often more specific, as well.

In 1986, engineers at the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) warned that critical components in the Space Shuttle Challenger had a potentially fatal flaw and would not function well in cold temperatures. On a cold January morning, NASA officials decided not to heed the engineers' concerns and approved the launch. Within 73 seconds of takeoff, Challenger broke apart, killing its seven crewmembers, while an estimated 17 percent of Americans watched on television. A subsequent investigative commission appointed by then President Ronald Reagan found that NASA's organizational culture and decision-making processes greatly contributed to the catastrophe. The good rebel voices had not been heeded.

Responding to the ignition switch crisis that led to the recall of millions of vehicles, General Motors (GM) CEO Mary Barra publicly stated that the company's corporate culture had helped suppress the voices of employees alarmed about safety issues. Speaking up at meetings was not safe. In 2014, the auto manufacturer admitted that it knew about an ignition switch safety issue for more than 10 years before it issued a recall. In the interim, at least 54 crashes occurred and up to 100 people died. As 2014 unfolded, General Motors issued 47 more recalls covering more than 20 *million* vehicles.

Rebels inside Eastman Kodak foresaw the demise of photographic film and created initiatives to get into digital photography. Kodak leaders, happy with the profits of film and the comfort of the familiar, did not provide sufficient support to these initiatives. Not only did thousands lose their jobs, but the heart of a once-vibrant community was torn apart.

How could this happen when people inside these organizations knew about the risks? Welcome to a world where rebels are shunned and authorities cling to the status quo, resulting in irrational decisions and unfortunate outcomes.

Following an internal investigation, GM CEO Mary Barra said, "The lack of action was a result of broad bureaucratic problems and the failure of individual employees in several departments to address a safety problem.... Repeatedly, individuals failed to disclose critical pieces of information that could have fundamentally changed the lives of those impacted by a faulty ignition switch."

GM is not alone, or again, you might not be reading this book. Resistance to change, clinging to the status quo, and bureaucracy are pervasive, despite the pace of change in the modern world.

ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE: WE DON'T REALLY WANT YOUR IDEAS

New York University researchers Elizabeth Morrison and Frances Milliken refer to this phenomenon as a culture of “organizational silence.” In their article, “Organizational Silence: A Barrier to Change and Development in a Pluralistic World” Morrison and Milliken show that although organizations may verbalize openness to new ideas, most organizational cultures send implicit and sometimes explicit signals to employees that they should remain silent about their concerns.

“Because managers may feel a particularly strong need to avoid embarrassment, and feelings of vulnerability or incompetence, they may tend to avoid information that suggests weakness or errors, or that challenges current courses of action. And it has been shown that when negative feedback comes from below rather than from above—from subordinates rather than bosses—it is seen as less accurate and legitimate, and as more threatening to one’s power and credibility. Thus, a fear of, or resistance to, “bad news” or negative feedback can set into motion a set of organizational structures and practices that impede the upward communication of information,” explain Morrison and Milliken.

While managers may suppress good ideas, so can all the work committees, governance councils, task forces, and peer-to-peer collaborative initiatives that are proliferating as decision making becomes more distributed and less top-down. The desire to incorporate everyone’s views can suck the life out of good ideas. A once strong idea can become so watered down that it’s not particularly valuable by the time it escapes the committee work. Even worse is when valuable ideas aren’t launched in a timely way because the committee meetings stretch on for months and sometimes even years. A good idea whose time has passed is not such a good idea.

SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING

If our current workplaces were a novel, we might be tempted to stop reading. “Good grief! People’s souls are being sucked dry, and no one seems to care. I can’t take much more.” As we tried to keep reading, we’d desperately hope someone would help turn things around. “Please, get in there and solve the problems that are staring everyone in the face. Somebody do *something*.”

Fortunately, we don't live in a world without rebels. Rebels *are* in every organization, in all types of jobs, and are learning how to turn things around.

Every day, people at work reach the point where they say, "Enough." While every rebel's reason for stepping up differs, almost all start with the same uncomfortable realization: "I have to do something about this." A rebel with a cause has an important role at work. The rebel is the one who will step in and get the ball rolling, regardless of title, seniority, or experience.

Not everyone in an organization needs to be a rebel, nor will every rebel continually want to be involved in leading change efforts at work, but all organizations need rebels who have the courage, ideas, and gritty determination to make things better.

Questions to Ponder

- What attracted you to this book at this time?
- If you were more successful at creating change at work, how might your life change? How might your organization change?
- Think of someone you know who is good at getting new ideas adopted at work. Look at the characteristics of good versus bad rebels listed in [Table 1-1](#) and think about how they apply to that person. What can you learn from him or her?
- What might be possible if there were fewer bureaucratic problems where you work? What is allowing that bureaucracy to fester?
- What practices of successful rebels do you do well? Which ones are important for you to learn more about as you read this book?
- When we learn with another person, we often learn more and become more committed to making changes. Who at work could you invite to read this book with you so that you can support one another in becoming more effective rebels at work? Is there a leadership book club?

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