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# Wake Up, Heretics!

We Need You

Cort Dial

# Today's corporate culture is leadership-starved.

Our leadership vacuum is somewhat ironic, given that sometimes it seems like all we talk about is leaders—what makes them strong or weak, successes or failures. Skim your favorite business publications, and you'll find think piece after advice column after scientific study outlining how to lead and why it matters. Many of the pointers are good: servant leadership is indeed worthwhile, and empowering your employees is a key to peak performance.

But those strategies alone are not the path to the kind of groundbreaking leadership we not only want, but desperately need. The climb to taking charge of changing the world is only scalable via bareknuckle, boldfaced heresy.

To put another way: we need more than just leaders in the workforce. We need heroes—and the greatest heroes have always begun their journeys as heretics.

Think about it. What comes to mind when you hear the word hero? A dashing figure riding wave after wave of praise? Accolades and awards bestowed upon a champion by a fawning public? All too often, we forget that those rosy images of leaders being embraced by society come at the end of the story, if at all.

Swept up in the fairytale, we fail to remember that the real heroes have always begun as disrupters and outsiders whose threats to the status quo left them out in the cold, not hoisted on shoulders or thrown parades. Early heroism isn't a party. It's lonely. It's also the only way human beings collectively move forward. Together, we're all counting on the man or woman whom we probably won't even believe at first, and their willingness to put it all on the line.

This manifesto is an urgent message for all of you sleeping rebels out there, waiting to shake up current realities with your big ideas. You're heretics, and it's time to wake up.

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# Heresy is Nothing New

Heretics have been challenging norms for centuries. The best leaders in history—including Galileo, Christ, Jefferson, Lincoln, Anthony, Churchill, the Dali Lama, Einstein, and King—expressed ideas that were at odds with generally accepted opinion.

Galileo is an especially compelling example. The Father of Modern Physics embraced heliocentrism and Copernacanism—the idea that planets revolve around the sun instead of the earth—and set out to prove the controversial theories with data he gathered via telescope. He published his evidence in *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. That's when all hell broke loose.

Galileo's claims defied more than just the prevailing opinions of the scientific community of which he had become a preeminent member. His ideas contradicted the Church—a dangerous transgression in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Inquisition tried Galileo and found him “vehemently suspect of heresy.” He entered house arrest, where he penned the profoundly influential *Two New Sciences*, and remained there for the rest of his life.

It's worth noting that Galileo was a devout Catholic until the day he died. He was an insider-outsider—a member of the collective he challenged. That can be more difficult than being an outsider-outsider—someone entirely new with entirely different ideas. When you question the beliefs you have either implicitly or explicitly accepted, your new position may be understood not merely as different, but as a betrayal.

Corporate heretics in particular should be cognizant of these unique quandaries that accompany creating change from within. You have more in common with Galileo than you may have realized.

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# Burn Him! He's a Witch!

Galileo's story has important implications for us today, but I can also offer an example that will undoubtedly land closer to home. In my early days as a performance coach, I was invited to speak to a group of about 600 executives about performance, safety, and health. I had about 15 minutes. I decided to make three key points.

**1. It is unacceptable to harm people in the pursuit of business results.** No human life or limb is worth better productivity or higher profits. At the time, this was considered preposterous—not because those in charge relished the idea of hurting anyone, but because workers had been dehumanized and their lives were seen as an accepted cost in the success equation.

**2. Numerical injury goals have no place in the management of health and safety.** Health and safety are about people, and the minute you turn people into numbers, you've stripped them of their humanity. Plus, numbers alone cannot get you the results you want.

**3. You can't actually measure the keys to performance because the keys to performance are people.** At the time of my talk, most in business were focused on the wrong things, like technical processes and data. I urged my audience to see that peak performance was becoming increasingly about leading and inspiring people—not perfecting systems or protocols.

I thanked my audience and told them I had a few minutes for questions. I was greeted with stony silence. No applause. No hands even tentatively raised. Finally, after what felt like hours, a man halfway to the back of the room stood up, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted, “Burn him! He’s a witch!” His colleagues in the auditorium began howling with laughter.

But the story doesn’t end with me being laughed offstage. A senior leader in the firm joined me near the podium. He told me that he hadn’t agreed with a single word I’d said. Then, he offered me a job.

## How to be a Heretic Wherever You Are

My willingness to speak truth—no matter how provocative—closed some doors for me, but it opened even better ones. So how do you rebel in skyscrapers and conference rooms? There are nine fundamental concepts that underpin successful heresy in the business world. Effective corporate heretics understand and practice the following:

**1. Being a heretic is a high risk/high reward venture.** First and foremost, understand that “hereticking” (yes, I’m aware it’s not an actual word; stay with me) is a high risk/high reward proposition. In my case, being a heretic allowed me to leap frog many of my colleagues who chose to play it safe and climb the proverbial corporate ladder.

This is a serious risk: a heretic who does not understand and apply what is outlined in this manifesto is likely to find hereticking unrewarding and possibly even career suicide.

**2. Provide a solution to unsolvable problems.** Heretics know, see, or have something worth hereticking about. As the heretic, you can see how your paradigm is capable of solving today's unsolvable problems, but it's unlikely that others will.

To be heretical, your new idea or paradigm must be something that flies in the face of convention and violates currently accepted principles, practices, and rules. The community in which you operate must deem your vision not only impossible, but ludicrous to even propose. The best heretical ideas are those that cause the practitioners of the current paradigm to scream, "Burn him! He's a witch!"

**3. Understand paradigms.** A heretic must understand paradigms in the first place—how they form, how they shift, the role the heretic plays in the process and the key roles others play. Without this knowledge, I would have been as lost as an explorer without a map. A great resource for better comprehending paradigms is *Future Edge* by Joel Arthur Barker.

**4. Be articulate.** Heretics have to be able to articulate their new idea in plain language—what's different about it, how it solves unsolvable problems. In short, be able to explain why your paradigm should replace the current one. Write a thesis paper, an article, or a proposal that

describes your idea. Develop your skills and become a powerful advocate of your vision. Hire a professional editor and speaking coach to help you hone your pitch. If you don't know any, ping me—I know a few good ones.

**5. Be ready for a long battle.** My definition of commitment is “an intentional choice to eliminate any choice other than moving forward.” Heretics are committed to their new idea. Some have gone to their grave—literally—fighting for their new paradigm. Some never see it realized.

It took the Catholic Church over three centuries to accept Galileo's model of our solar system. In my case, it's taken decades for some of the most heretical ideas I've put forth to be accepted. For example, in the chemical industry during the late 1980s, I was asserting that it was no longer acceptable for us to harm people or the planet in pursuit of business results. A quarter of a century later, one would be crazy to suggest anything but.

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**6. Understand and manage resistance.** Heretics expect resistance. It's fundamental to the heretical game. Your new idea is going to upset the apple cart. Expect your boss, her manager, and even his manager to resist your idea. It will send those most proficient in the current paradigm "back to zero," as Arthur Barker puts it. In other words, they'll be novices like everyone else if your paradigm becomes accepted. You're a threat to what is currently considered common practice and knowledge—and that scares people. Expect even to be ostracized and ridiculed by people who you thought were your teammates.

By putting forth a new idea, you've declared your secession from a group and are now an outsider. Your challenge is to get a critical mass of your ex-groupies to step outside and join you. A great source of wisdom in this arena is John P. Kotter's book, *Leading Change*.

**7. Find a sponsor.** Those of you who've read my book, *Heretics to Heroes*, know that in my career, I had a number of sponsors who advocated for me, put me in positions to develop me, and when necessary, protected me from my harshest critics. These people loom large in my life—I would not have accomplished much of anything without them.

Find someone in an influential position and enroll him in sponsoring your movement. Look for open-minded candidates to sponsor you, and have the courage to approach them with your new idea. At some time in her journey, every heretic will face a powerful foe. Having a powerful sponsor in your corner is invaluable in those moments.

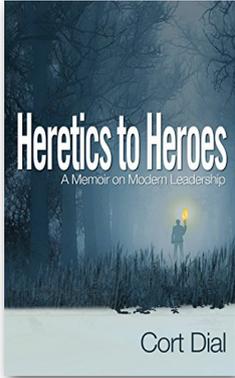
**8. Find some sooners.** Be on the lookout for like-minded people who appreciate your idea and who are willing to help you experiment with it and develop it. These will likely be people on the edges of the current paradigm who have very little invested in it and subsequently little to lose by supporting you. Sooners can be an invaluable resource to a heretic as they shoulder the burden of the more tedious tasks while you're busy advocating for your idea and dealing with resisters.

**9. Have faith in yourself.** The best advice I can offer you about believing in yourself is to quote Thomas Khun's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, written over half a century ago:

*"The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by the problem-solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the old paradigm has failed with a few. A decision of that kind can only be made on faith."*

A corporate heretic has faith in her judgment and the courage to act on that faith in the face of strong resistance. **It's far from easy. But the best among you won't just rise to the challenge—you'll enjoy it.** 📌

# Info



**BUY THE BOOK** | Get more details or buy a copy of [Heretics to Heroes](#).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | For 30 years, Cort Dial has asked tough questions and delivered raw answers to leaders of some of the world's most powerful companies. By guiding individuals through frank self-evaluation, personal change, and the pursuit of extraordinary performance, Cort creates All-In™ Leaders, high achievers who recognize the power of human connection. Based in Austin, Texas, Cort is a performance coach, an inspiring speaker, and facilitator of corporate events that disrupt stale processes and push entire organizations to rethink how to understand their business, motivate their people, and create better results.

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