

Changed for Good:

How to Make Change Happen

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Whether we are talking about our health, careers, education, or happiness, if we aspire to grow and improve, we must change. The challenge is that change is hard. Have you ever set a goal to lose weight? If you have, you are in good company. Americans spend over \$60 billion on products and services related to weight loss every year (Sifferlin, 2017). While it is difficult to obtain reliable figures on success rates, the available evidence indicates that a high percentage of people who set out to lose weight regain the weight they lost (or more) in a relatively short period of time (Brown, 2015; Ingraham, 2015). Have you ever made a resolution to floss regularly? Many people do. However, in a recent study, only 30% of those surveyed said they floss daily and over 32% reported that they never floss at all (Sternberg, 2016)! These results certainly highlight the challenge of making change in our lives, but do not fear. All is not lost. While change is difficult, if you understand how it works, you can make change a whole lot easier.

The Essence of Change

There are three parts to achieving change, and all three are necessary if you are going to successfully initiate and maintain change (Heath & Heath, 2010)

1. **Direct the Rider**—Provide the rational side of our brains with clear direction and specific guidance about what to do.
2. **Motivate the Elephant**—Provide the emotional side of our brains with the inspiration to change and the encouragement to stay on track.
3. **Shape the Path**—Modify the environment so that change is easier.

Direct the Rider

In the absence of a compelling reason to do otherwise, people almost invariably avoid change and stick to what they believe has worked effectively in the past. One of the most fundamental impediments to change is that people don't see the need for it. "Our brains are positive illusion factories! Only 2 percent of high school seniors believe their leadership skills are below average. A full 25 percent of people believe they're in the top 1 percent in their ability to get along with others. Ninety-four percent of college professors report doing above-average work" (Heath & Heath, 2010, p. 114). We are very good at convincing

ourselves that things are just fine the way they are now. Consequently, if you want to initiate change, you have to convince the rational side of the brain that there is a strong case for a different course of action.

Once you establish a compelling goal, you have to provide specific guidelines on how to get there. This clarity is imperative because, while the rational side of the brain excels at such things as analysis, reflection, organization, planning, self-control, contemplation of the future, and strategic thinking of all kinds, if we allow ambiguity and uncertainty to linger, we increase the likelihood of getting immobilized by deliberation or wandering around in circles indefinitely hoping to stumble on solutions. That is why vague initiatives to "be more creative," "get healthier," or eat "x" number of "servings" of vegetables per day don't help. If you are not clear about what to do, you meander aimlessly for a while or you don't do anything at all.

Fortunately, we don't need every detail scripted. The most important instructions we need are guidelines on how to get started. As Chip & Dan Heath (2010) emphasize, "When you're at the beginning, don't obsess about the middle, because the middle is going to look different once you get there. Just look for a strong beginning and a strong ending and get moving" (p. 93). If we have someone guiding us as we begin to make change to help assure that our actions are effective, that is even better.

Finally, the most powerful arguments for change are ones that we generate ourselves. If you have ever provided your child (or anyone, for that matter) with advice in a particular area on a consistent basis, you know that people usually don't like being told what to do, even if it is a good idea that is in their best interest. If you can introduce a dilemma, ask questions, and gently frame a discussion so those who would benefit from a change arrive at the need for it (and/or a plan to bring it about) themselves, you will generate much greater conviction for the change because they will "own" it.

Motivate the Elephant

It is not enough to have an intellectual understanding that a change is necessary. If you want to make change happen, you also have to appeal to emotion and generate the fire that ignites action. Neither

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understanding without motivation, nor passion without direction establish productive actions that lead to sustainable change.

In order to invest in change, we have to believe that we can make change happen. We have to feel that we are up to the challenge, and that the task is not too daunting. We all dread a task that appears overwhelming, so we need reassurance that the change we are undertaking is manageable. If we feel our efforts are futile, we tend to quit.

We can spur ourselves and others into action through negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and shame or through positive emotions like joy, pride, and love. But, it is important to understand that they achieve different ends. Negative emotions lead us to flee, avoid risk, defend, or rush into action. They narrow our focus and thinking. Conversely, positive emotions lead to more sustained action and creative solutions because they promote openness and flexibility. As a result, if we are seeking change that involves mindful action in response to complex problems, we want to engage positive emotions.

To maintain motivation even when the road gets rocky, we need to employ the strategies of “creating small wins” and “shrinking the change.” When we create small wins, we establish attainable goals on the way to a more challenging goal. It is like setting the timer for five minutes and seeing what you can accomplish when cleaning a messy room instead of just staring at the considerable challenge of the entire room. We can also shrink the change by celebrating that we are already part of the way to a large goal. Interestingly enough, people are more motivated to be part of the way to a larger goal than just beginning a smaller one. These strategies are valuable because they build momentum and create confidence that we can attain our goals.

Related to the creation of small wins, reinforcement is essential. If you see someone making the change, reinforce even the smallest progress. It is incentive to keep going.

We also promote motivation by appealing to our best selves. Our identity (what we stand for and who we consider ourselves to be) is at the root of all of our behavior. So, when moving toward a difficult change, if we can establish that attaining our goal reinforces our best selves (or who we aspire to be), it will generate motivation toward that goal.

Finally, to maintain momentum in the midst of difficult change, it is important to prepare for failure. Failure is inevitable, so we need to embrace and establish the mindset that it is a natural and productive part of the process of change rather than a reinforcement of the futility of our efforts.


Shape the Path

In order to realize change, we must not only appeal to our hearts and minds, but also create an environment that

supports the change we hope to see. One way of shaping the path is by creating “action triggers.” Essentially, action triggers are cues that initiate the behavioral routines that are consistent with the change we want to see. So, for example, if we want to exercise at the gym every morning for 30 minutes, we could establish dropping off the kids at school as the action trigger that cues us to go to the gym after completing the drop-off. Creating habits that are automatic, by-pass conscious decision-making, and avoid taxing our limited willpower is valuable because it leaves us with more self-control to apply in other places.

One of the most well-documented findings in psychology is that “behavior is contagious” (Heath & Heath, 2010, p. 227). This fact can be used to support the change we hope to see. If 80% of one’s staff completes a task that is part of the desired change, publicize it so that everyone knows. Those among the 80% feel validated and those in the 20% want to join their colleagues. Of course, if a small percentage complete the task that is part of the desired change, you would not publicize it. Instead, you would clarify how to accomplish the task, appeal to emotion, and set them up for success.

Promoting Change at Benchmark School

From the time students arrive at Benchmark School to the time they graduate, our students are learning the tools, strategies, self-understanding, and personal qualities that facilitate change by implementing them every day across the curriculum. We are helping them to be mindful, confident, creative, strategic, knowledgeable, persistent, and resilient self-advocates who explore, design, and create. We teach them to recognize that “change isn’t an event; it’s a process” (Heath & Heath, 2010, p. 253) as we prepare them to embrace whatever change is necessary to succeed in a complex and ever-changing world. 

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