Some counter-intuitive ideas to set **lasting change** in motion

When realizing a successful transformation becomes an uphill battle, it is often because it is managed in a way that does not drive people to modify their routine. Indeed, people's heads and hearts must be in agreement. Otherwise, all the goodwill in the world is not enough to prevent them from returning to their old reflexes.

The effects of change are too often short-lived.

Some psychologists compare the emotional brain with a horse, and the rational brain with a rider. If the horse does not want to move, or if it wants to continue to move in a given direction, the rider will have a great deal of difficulty going another way. Conversely, if the rider does not give clear directions, the horse will likely be confused and may even turn in circles, before finally heading back to the stable.

This metaphor sheds light on the three main obstacles to establishing lasting change successfully:

Lack of understanding

Those who initiate change are usually generous with explanations. Why is change necessary? What benefits will be derived from changing? The reasoning is clear. And yet, ***how* to change is addressed more rarely**. The benefits of being more attentive to customers are obvious. But what do you do if customers don't say anything? Or if they make contradictory demands? And how do you continue to fulfill productivity objectives? Etc. In the absence of concrete answers to these questions, many give up and return to their habitual ways of doing things.

Lack of desire

People may understand the reasons for change, agree on the need to change and know what is expected of them, but not be able to motivate themselves enough to actually do it. The problem here is caused by a phenomenon that is impervious to rational arguments, that is, **our heads tells us we need to change, but our hearts say the opposite**. For example, IT support department technicians who love being called in to solve "emergencies" are not motivated to deliver flawless solutions!

Lack of perseverance

Finally, change is never easy, and real effort is often required to modify ingrained habits. Enthusiasm about the expected benefits mus be drummed up from the very start. But when success is long in coming, **managing frustration and disappointment** is just as critical. Otherwise, people are likely to no longer find the energy needed to continue to keep their behavior under control.

To overcome these difficulties, the authors of *Switch* propose a very pragmatic approach inspired by behavioral psychology. Rather than trying to change people's attitudes and beliefs, they recommend working directly on their behavior. Indeed, the phenomenon of "cognitive dissonance" makes human beings adjust their beliefs to be consistent with their actions, ultimately embedding change.

Pragmatic measures are needed to embed behavioral changes.

1. **Stop explaining** why people should change
2. **Accept that you can't solve** every single problem
3. Set **lower ambitions**
4. Act on the surrounding **environment**
5. Prepare for **failure**

Some helpful tips

- Prefer observation to logical demonstrations
  e.g.: Microsoft developers learned to integrate the needs of end-users better by observing the latter in real-life situations. In this way, they were able to observe customer navigation problems first- hand, whereas they had remained unconvinced by logical explanations.
- Provide a "script" specifying the main change initiatives
  e.g.: Simply providing a user's manual on how to fill in expense sheets was sufficient for one company to get employees to hand them in on time. What appeared to be reticence was actually caused by the perceived complexity of the task.
- Set "black and white" objectives that leave no room for guessing
  e.g.: A "zero defect" objective short-circuits questions about the level of acceptable "non- quality."

"Choice no longer liberates, it debilitates."

The Paradox of Choice, Barry Schwartz, Harper Perennial, 2005.

First tip
Stop explaining why people should change

When business leaders decide to undertake a transformation, they have generally already gone through a whole thinking process to identify the need for change and chosen a given solution. They are thus naturally tempted to use the same line of reasoning to convince the rest of the organization to follow along. However, rational explanation usually generates only superficial agreement, and is rarely followed by concrete action.

The mistake lies in believing that reason alone is enough to trigger change. In *The Heart of Change*, John Kotter and Dan Cohen report the fruitless efforts of a team assigned to reduce the purchasing budget of a manufacturing company. The underlying reasoning for this initiative was incontrovertible, as a simple calculation showed that getting rid of some well-identified dysfunctions would save the company a billion dollars over five years. Yet, nothing changed, until the day the team had the idea of piling up on a table a sample of each of the 424 types of gloves used in-house, and showed that the price of the same pair of gloves varied from $5 to $17. The team then asked each division manager to calculate what that signified. The resulting shock was salutary. **Triggering a powerful emotional impact was enough to get the ball rolling where sophisticated reasoning had failed.**

> It is better to explain how to change than why.

Another mistake is to construct arguments based on your own concerns. Decision-makers naturally worry about driving change in the right direction. Those in charge of implementation certainly appreciate explanations that help them feel confident about the decision made. **But they mainly need to know what to do**, and with sufficient precision to be able to take steps without wondering how and without second thoughts. The new finance director of the America Latina Logistica (ALL) Brazilian railway chose this highly pragmatic approach to guide the investment decisions of line managers. He defined four clear and simple rules to follow. For example, "prefer a rapid return to a potentially higher return later". By providing a "script" to follow, he succeeded in putting an end to the hesitation that had paralyzed people since the company started running into trouble.

Appeal simultaneously to the head and the heart

The head and the heart do not always agree when it comes time to make a change. When the two are opposed, the emotions generally win, often supporting the continuation of old habits.

Rational Brain = The "rider"	Emotional Brain = The "horse"
Reasons and analyzes	Acts and expends energy
Prefers the best solution according to rational criteria, taking the long run into account	Prefers the solution that is simplest and most effective in the short run
Focuses on solving problems	Focuses on attaining the goal
Hates ambiguity and uncertainty	Hates complexity and effort
Becomes paralyzed if a good choice does not emerge	Becomes exhausted if the road is too hard
Controls emotional reactions, so long as it has the energy	Moves things forward, if it knows where to go, if the goal is stimulating and the path is easy

Based on ***Switch***, Chip Heath, Dan Heath, Broadway Books, 2010.

Second tip
Accept that you can't solve every problem

Change is generally designed to solve a problem. People therefore naturally start by focusing on the root of the problem. However, they quickly realize that problems are rarely isolated, but are part of a complex system, in which improving one dimension may deteriorate another. The more the problem is analyzed, the more insoluble it seems. The risk of paralysis is great.

Rather than focusing on analyzing the problem, the authors of *Switch* recommend starting with behavioral psychology. **Without trying to understand the root causes of the problem, priority is placed on how to change the situation.** This approach was used by the director of the *Save the Children* association in Vietnam in the nineties. Multiple factors – bad sanitation, general poverty, lack of drinking water, illiteracy – made childhood malnutrition in the countryside seemingly insurmountable. Jerry Sternin realized that these problems could not be eradicated. He started by seeking cases of children in good health despite the unfavorable context. In the process, he discovered that the mothers of healthy children fed them four meals a day instead of the two traditional ones, which young bodies tolerate better. They also added sweet potato sprouts to their diet – a product traditionally considered too "poor" to give to children, but which added valuable nutriments to the diet of these infants. These ideas could be easily transposed to other families. Thanks to careful observation and testing, a major change was made, benefitting over two million children.

> Relying on a few successes is more effective than trying in vain to solve all problems.

The Approach

- **Temporarily set aside searching for the root of the problem**
  e.g.: An HR director who wants to improve the frequency of managerial feedback to employees stops trying to explain why feedback should be more frequent.
- **Identify what works**
  e.g.: The HR director identifies three managers distinguished by their regular feedback.
- **Exclude exceptions**
  e.g.: One of these managers spends an exceptional amount of time with his subordinates, and is excluded from the study.
- **Analyze successes**
  e.g.: One manager set up a "speed-feedback" system to give two-minute feedback on specific topics. Another defined an "open door" policy allowing employees to ask for feedback when they needed it, etc.
- **From these findings, identify best practices that could be replicated**

Third tip
Set **lower ambitions**

To trigger real change, managers are often told to establish very ambitious objectives which force people to do things differently. General Electric made spectacular productivity improvements using such stretch goals. However, this approach must be used sparingly, as people are often unable to sustain such gargantuan efforts over extended periods.

When a transformation has trouble getting off the ground, managers are advised to lower the bar. Indeed, small victories often facilitate the implementation of greater changes to come. This is one of the keys to successful coaching. For example, when people are used to working in silos, simply telling them to systematically collaborate is doomed to failure. Yet, setting up a few cross-company projects can be enough to get the ball rolling.

In the same spirit, it is helpful to **underline that the road to travel is fairly short, or even that people have already come part of the way.** A financial advisor used this approach to encourage indebted households to improve their financial situation. In addition to extending the payment schedule, he negotiated with banks to accept immediate reimbursement of a high proportion of debt principal. Although this may seem illogical from a financial standpoint, it is remarkably efficient in supporting the effort over time. As people clearly saw they were getting closer to their goal, they were able to stay motivated.

> Easily attainable objectives can trigger a virtuous circle.

Tip

When change is difficult to measure, as is the case when it comes to behavioral changes, establishing an arbitrary scale can be very helpful in directing efforts.

- **Ask the employee to imagine what he or she feels would be an ideal situation.** Assign this objective a "10."
- **Ask the person where he or she currently stands.** The answer will probably not be "0." Some progress has thus already been made, which is encouraging.
- **Regularly check up on progress.** Take the time to write down observations on these occasions, comparing the current situation with the past. You can thus show the employee that his or her efforts are paying off and that he or she is right to persevere.

Examples

Some fairly simple moves can sometimes trigger spectacular changes. For example:

- Reorganize the office layout to facilitate collaboration
- Put up a visible "do not disturb" sign when performing critical tasks to minimize the risk of errors
- Draw colored lines on the shop floor to designate hazardous areas and thus improve safety
- Install telephones that ring progressively louder to encourage Customer Service to answer calls faster
- Establish an "individual update" schedule to encourage regular feedback
- Allow employees to spend two hours a week on projects of their choosing to foster initiative

Fourth tip
Act on the surrounding **environment**

Behavior is often thought to result from conscious choice. However, it is a fact that our actions are influenced as much by many external factors as by deliberate decisions. In consequence, simply modifying the circumstances is often sufficient to change behavior, without even pointing out the need to change. For example, banks managed to keep people from forgetting to take their bank card by simply redesigning automatic cash distributors to oblige them to retrieve it before receiving the cash.

The influence of the environment on behavior is often neglected.

A few simple measures can help to trigger lasting change by making it more natural. For example, one IT service firm transposed a rule taken from airline companies to shrink the product development cycle time. In a plane, during the critical takeoff and landing phases, those in the cockpit are prohibited from talking, except for strictly professional purposes. In the same way, the IT company established "silent hours" from 9 to 12 a.m. three times a week, during which people were not allowed to meet or interrupt their colleagues. As a result, productivity soared, and even overtime was reduced.

Tip

The concept of failure is often subjective. What is interpreted to be resistance to change is often caused by the fact that those concerned do not value the behavior expected of them.

Helping such individuals acquire a better self image in this new context is a way to overcome this challenge.

e.g.: An accounting firm had trouble instilling the concept of customer service. The CEO realized that the disciplined image employees wanted to convey was not good for customer relations. So he developed an "empathetic accountant" image with which employees could identify. This helped them change their behavior without having to compromise their identity.

"Everything can look like a failure in the middle."

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Fifth tip
Prepare for **failure**

Change is rarely a linear progression toward the desired goal. Progress occurs in fits and starts, with occasional backsliding, and is consequently generally slower than hoped. If people become too discouraged, they risk giving up altogether. Faced with unexpected obstacles, the simplest and easiest choice is often to fall back on old habits.

The path to successful change is never a straight line.

This risk can be mitigated if failure is seen from the very start as an integral part of the change process. The author of *Mindset* stresses the importance of developing a culture in which effort and experimentation are just as valued as the acquisition of skills or successful results, in order to help people persevere when faced with setbacks. Some students were asked to participate in an experiment which illustrates this point. One group was told that the brain works like a muscle and that failure is the exercise that helps it become stronger. The academic results of this group were far superior to those of the control group which was not sensitized to this phenomenon. Indeed, those in the experimental group experienced setbacks as learning opportunities, and were motivated to try even harder. IDEO, the global design leader, institutionalized this mindset by posting the U-shaped learning curve in every one of its offices. Company employees thus have a graphic reminder that everyone goes through ups and downs, which helps them remain optimistic and motivated in the face of adversity!

Understanding why change efforts fail

MANAGERS OFTEN BELIEVE...	BUT ACTUALLY...
Employees resist change	They do not understand what is expected of them
Employees lack the courage to change	They are exhausted because too much is asked of them in terms of adaptability and self control
Employees choose not to change	They are in an environment that does not motivate them to change