

How to Inspire and Lead Change

Change is not easy. We know it from personal experience. However, we also know it's possible. The challenge is figuring out what separates the successful attempts from the unsuccessful ones. Change in business is made even more difficult because it may involve customers, employees, and the organization as a whole. If changing a personal habit is difficult, imagine a larger audience.

According to psychologists, Chip and Dan Heath, change has traditionally been considered from two perspectives, emotional and rational thinking. The classic metaphor to distinguish between the two has been the rider (rational) and the elephant (emotional). If you can imagine that scenario, you have a rider that considers all facts and plans his or her moves. Then you have the elephant that the rider is attempting to steer. If steered correctly, the elephant will follow. However, when the elephant decides to run in a certain direction, the rider is almost helpless. Let's consider this on a personal level. If we attempt to stop drinking soda as part of a low sugar diet, a rational appeal is made by dieticians, nutritionists, and doctors to convince our rational mind (rider) that we need to stop consuming so much sugar. They may even attempt to appeal to our emotional mind (elephant) by showing us disturbing pictures of obese people and the terrible consequences of diabetes. You walk out of the session agreeing that it is time to stop consuming so much sugar. All of your intentions are to stop drinking soda, eating candy, and other sugary treats. Then you go home later that day and you see a tasty can of Pepsi in your refrigerator. All of a sudden, your elephant is all fired up, thirsty, and has forgotten every disturbing image it saw earlier that day. Your rider is trying furiously to close the refrigerator door and walk away. However, let's face it, the elephant is running and there's nothing you can do. So you have a sip. Then you refill your cup a little. Before you know it, the can is empty. And once again we are faced with the difficulty of change.

All hope is not lost though. Chip and Dan Heath suggest there is a third perspective from which we can view change that unlocks a more successful scenario – the environment. If we simply stop buying soda and destroy all existing inventory, our rider would not have to have a daily or hourly battle with the elephant. If there are no cans of soda in the refrigerator, there are no wild elephants. Tweak your environment and you make your rider's challenge significantly easier.

Applied to business, this suggests before we simply tell people to do something differently, why not consider tweaking the environment so that it supports that desired behavior. Changing habits is much easier when you are not faced with a daily or hourly temptation to do otherwise. In fact, you may even save yourself the effort of establishing unnecessary policies that a simple tweak to the environment could have accomplished. For instance, if you want your employees to recycle, don't waste time with a strict policy, simply place more receptacles for recycled products throughout the office so employees don't have to walk far to recycle. That simple tweak to the environment can help you change the habits of your team and save yourself the time and effort of establishing policies and enforcing them.

What are some changes you are trying to implement in your organization? How might you be able to tweak your environment to successfully support these changes?