



Switch – how to change things when change is hard

Confession time: I have a crush on the Heath brothers, Dan & Chip. Their book 'Made to Stick' is one of my all time favourites, so when I decided to review 'Switch – how to change things when change is hard' I expected to like it. Love it is more like it. Switch is an easy to read, easily applied (to both business & personal), full of stories, well researched book. It's so good that I found it hard to keep my review short & sweet. So let's get on with it...

What do you need to change? Yourself, your team, your organization, your mind? We all know change is hard but with some fascinating insight, the Heath brothers make flicking the switch on change much more likely. Think of something you are trying to change & see if you can apply some of the principles from their book that I've explained below.



Meet your elephant & rider

Welcome to your dark side. The Heath brothers say we are all schizophrenic, that *our 'built in schizophrenia is a deeply weird thing but we don't think much about it because we're so used to it.'* The schizophrenia is our brain's two independent, radically different systems which are at work 24/7, namely our emotional side & our rational side. These two switches, which Jonathan Haidt calls our elephant (our emotional side) & rider (our rational, holder of the reins), form the premise of the book. Here's a snapshot of each.

	Elephant	Rider
Needs →	Motivation	Direction
Strength →	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gets things done Has energy Is driven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to think long term, to think beyond the moment, visionary Provides plans & directions Willing to make short term sacrifices for long term payoffs

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	Elephant	Rider
Weakness →	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be lazy, skittish. • Looks for quick payoffs vs. long term payoffs • Hungers for instant gratification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spins their wheels, navel-gazer • Analysis almost always directed at problems not bright spots (<i>even success can look like a problem to an overactive rider</i>) • Decision paralysis

So what does the elephant & rider have to do with change?

'Change often fails because the rider can't keep the elephant on the road long enough to reach the destination.' *'Changing behaviours requires careful supervision by the rider,'* & that supervision (aka self-control) is tiring. So much so that *'what looks like laziness is often exhaustion'* & *'what looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity.'*

When we focus on the rider we miss the elephant. We give direction without motivation and let's face it, the elephant is a whole lot bigger than the rider. While we like to think we can ignore the elephant in the room, it's not going nowhere, no how.

We need to reach the elephant through motivation and the rider through direction (and the more crystal clear direction the better). Eating healthier, for example, is anything but a clear direction. One of the many stories from the book demonstrate that changing behaviour resulted from incredibly specific direction, namely switching from whole milk to skim or 1% milk. When you know that milk is the single largest source of saturated fat in American diet, this is a great, practical example of a successful change effort. Eating healthy wasn't an amorphous, cloudy concept, it came down to reaching for 1% milk at the grocery store not whole milk.

So what's an elephant rider to do? The Heath brothers break it down for us.

1. Direct the rider

- **Find the bright spots** (what's working & how can we do more of it) - a successful program to fight child malnutrition in Vietnam did just that & found that moms who fed their kids the exact same amount of food each day but spread it over 4 times/day instead of 2 had healthier kids. The rider inherently has a problem focus, guide them to a solution focus by finding the bright spot.
- **Script the critical moves** – because *the most familiar path is always the status quo ... clarity dissolves resistance*. The more decisions we're offered the more exhausted the rider gets, for example research found for every 10 retirement options that were offered employee participation rate dropped by 2%. *Choice doesn't liberate it debilitates*.

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- **Point to the destination** – create what the Heath brothers call *destination postcards*, which point to an attractive destination, a vivid picture from the near-term future that shows what could be possible. Pointing to the destination stops the rider from getting lost in analysis & gets the rider to apply their strengths of how to get there while showing the elephant why journey is worthwhile. And, 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 & a strong ending & get moving.'*

2. Motivate the elephant

Knowledge does not change behaviors, *'we have all encountered crazy shrinks and obese doctors & divorced marriage counselors,'* what's critical is motivating the elephant.

- **Find the feeling** – of the 24 most common emotion words in the English language, only 6 are positive! *'In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problem or solutions in ways that influence emotions, not just thought – in other words when change works, its' because leaders are speaking to the elephant as well as to the rider.'* *'When it comes to changing the behaviour of other people our first instinct is to teach them something. We speak to the rider when we should be speaking to the elephant.'* Emotion motivates the elephant.
- **Shrink the change** - people find it more motivating to be partly finished a longer journey than to be at the starting age of a shorter one. Motivate by making people feel as though they're closer to finish than they think. Making the house *cleaner* as opposed to *clean* is an example of shrinking the change. Instead of looking for milestones look for what the Heath brothers' dad used to call inch pebbles.
- **Grow your people** - the Heath brothers say creating the expectation of failure is critical because elephants really, really hate to fail. It brings on the flight instinct. Encourage a growth mindset, instead of a fixed mindset. The business world rejects growth stage- there's no learning stage, there's plan & execute. A growth mindset is the difference between seeing falling down as failing versus learning. Early failure is a kind of necessary investment. In fact a high school principal in Georgia instituted grades A, B, C & NY where the latter stands for not yet. In other words you can't stop until you clear the bar.

3. Shape the path

- **Tweak the environment** - *'what looks like a person problem is often a situation problem & simple tweaks of the path can lead to dramatic changes in behavior.'* We are guilty of the 'fundamental attribution error' which is our to attribute people's behaviour to the way they are rather than the situation they

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are in. Make the journey easier & shape the path, which means *'making the right behaviour a little bit easier & the wrong behaviours a little bit harder.'* *'When it comes to changing behaviour environmental tweaks beat self-control every time.'* Removing the answering machines at the company Rackspace led to the straightjacket awards (being 'fanatically insane about customer service') & landed the company on Fortune's Best Places to Work list in 2008. The old behaviour (ignoring customer calls) was made harder, while the new behaviour (serving customers) was made easier.

- **Build habits** – the rider's self-control is exhaustible so it's a huge plus if some positive things can happen 'free' on autopilot. You can do this by creating *'action triggers,'* a mental plan that preloads a decision. With hard to achieve goals, action triggers tripled the chance of success (from 22% goal completion to 62%). A school that had been getting the lowest scores in the entire state of Tennessee created a habit by having staff be personal valets when the kids arrived each morning. The kids tended to come to school from tumultuous, chaotic environments, so having them quietly escorted into the building created a calming habit, set the stage for learning & created a tremendous change.
- **Rally the herd** – we're not only susceptible to peer pressure but merely the whiff of peer perception. In a study, where 3 people were in a room that filled with smoke, only 38% reported the smoke! Each individual was influenced by the others who did nothing. How to translate this into positive change? *'Don't publicize people not handing in timesheets on time rather publicize those that do.'* *'When change comes into conflict with culture, a new rule is no match for culture.'* Not only find those bright spots that direct the rider but make them public & 'contagious' because *'culture isn't just one aspect of the game- it is the game.'*

So how do you keep a successful change effort going? Take a page from animal trainers say the Heath brothers. Animal trainers reward approximation *'which is a problem for us as we're terrible reinforcers, we complain more than praise but 'Shamu didn't learn to jump through a hoop because her trainer was bitching at her.'* Change isn't an event it's a process.

Lee-Anne Ragan, MEd, BSW, ITC, is President of Rock.Paper.Scissors Inc. (RPS), an internationally renowned, award winning corporate training & entertainment company. Email us to enquire about scheduling your own workshop (laragan@rpsinc.ca).

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