

THE POWER TO CHANGE

How many times have you tried to change a behavior – either your own or someone else's? Things go well for a week or two and then for no good reason the old patterns of behavior take over again. No matter how important or desired the change may be, it just doesn't seem to happen.

You're not alone. In my experience coaching agents and insurance executives, creating positive, lasting change is one of the top three areas people want to work on. Understanding and managing change is critical, whether you want to make a personal or organizational change, help an employee change or overcome a potential client's reluctance to changing insurance brokers.

When it comes to changing behavior, the odds are nine to one against you. When presented with the choice of changing their lifestyles or risking premature death, research shows us that only one in ten recovering coronary bypass patients make and sustain the lifestyle change their doctors say is imperative.

Why – even when the motivation is as powerful as life itself – is it so hard for us to change?

Why Change Is So Hard

Basically, it comes down to how we're hardwired. The processes within our mind and body are programmed to maintain the status quo.

Years of life experience shape our beliefs and behaviors. We develop default tendencies which are the way we tend to perceive and react to certain situations, circumstances and the environment around us. Our default tendencies fire without us consciously noticing them, and we go on doing the same things we've always done, with the results being pretty much the same as well.

There is a part of our brain called the Reticular Activating System (RAS) that is always scanning our surroundings for things that are problematic, familiar or "out of

place.” It always tries to make sense of what we see in a way we can understand it. The challenge for us is that our default tendencies get us to notice and perceive the same things over and over again. The RAS picks that up as something familiar and continues to point out these common situations/concerns/frustrations over and over again. Without interrupting this system, you will literally see the same things repeatedly; you won’t ever see things differently.

That’s why even the most compelling facts seldom motivate people to change. Take politics as an example. You can give liberals and conservatives the same set of facts. Each side will interpret the same facts to support their own beliefs. For us to make sense of the facts, they have to fit what is already in the synapses of the brain. Otherwise, facts go in and go right back out again.

In the business setting, people tend to resist change for a number of reasons:

- **People are afraid of the risk** – Making a change requires a leap of faith. You decide to move in the direction of the unknown on the promise that something will be better for you. But you have no proof. Taking that leap of faith is risky, and people will only take active steps toward the unknown if they genuinely feel that the risks of standing still are greater than those of moving forward in a new direction.

- **People feel connected to other people who are identified with the old way** – We are social beings. We become and want to remain connected to those we know, those who have taught us, those with whom we are familiar – even at times to our own detriment.

- **People fear they lack the competence to change** – This is a fear people will seldom admit. But sometimes, change in organizations necessitates changes in skills, and some people will feel that they won’t be able to make the transition very well. They don’t think they, as individuals, can do it.

- **People feel overwhelmed** – Fatigue can really kill a change effort, for an individual or for an organization. If, for example, you believe you should quit smoking, but you've got ten projects going and a sick family member, it can be easy to put off your personal improvement project. If an agency is under a lot of pressure due to market conditions or some other factor, people may resist change just because they are tired and overwhelmed, perhaps at precisely the time when more radical change is most needed.

- **People feel the proposed change threatens their identity** – Sometimes change on the job gets right to a person's sense of identity – their sense of self as a professional. One example might be a CSR who is being asked to focus more attention on sales. If she prides herself on her customer service skills and has a fundamental, but unspoken belief that sales is "sleazy," she is going to resist the change.

- **People have no role models for the new activity** – Most agency owners have the vision to create new possibilities that do not currently exist. Most people don't operate that way. For them, seeing is believing. Without clear demonstration that an idea works, they have trouble buying in to the change.

What It Takes To Succeed

The traditional tactics of facts, fear and force don't produce sustainable change. Facts alone will not motivate someone to change. Fear only works for a short period of time. The harder you force change, the more people resist.

The key to creating sustainable change is:

- **Believing that the change is possible** – Belief, or at least hope, that the change is possible is the first step; without it, it is difficult to move forward. If you've been struggling to make the same change for a while now and haven't been successful, you are probably running short on optimism. One way to get "unstuck" is to reflect back on a time in your life when you were successful in your effort to make a change. How did you make it work? How can you apply that experience to this situation? Another option is to

connect with someone who has successfully made the change you're trying to make. Seeing evidence that the change you want is possible is one of the fastest and most powerful ways to get inspired.

- **Having a support system in place** – Research study after research study shows that the single most important factor in achieving change is the relationship(s) you have in place to support your goal. Find a coach, mentor, a colleague, or community of like-minded professionals. When you are trying to create a change, you need someone who understands and supports your goal, believes in you, encourages you, celebrates your progress and holds your feet to the fire when necessary. When it comes to making a personal or organizational change, many successful business owners are reluctant to reach out for help. They feel they ought to be able to get it done on their own. While understandable, that kind of thinking stops many entrepreneurs from broadening and sharpening their skills. Even Tiger Woods, the undisputed best golfer in history, doesn't go it alone. As good as he is, he continues to turn to a coach when he wants to make a change in his game or fine-tune a skill.

- **Recognizing what you are losing** – Let's say the change you want to make is to stop losing your temper. Recognize that the old behavior (losing your temper) served a real purpose in your life. It helped you blow off steam and relieve the stress that builds up in you during the course of the work day. If you want to learn how to control your temper, you'll need to find a different way to blow off steam.

- **Knowing what you are gaining** – It is hard to give up old behaviors. No matter how much we may dislike them, they're as comfortable as a pair of old-worn slippers. The key is focusing on what you're gaining as a result of the change, not what you're losing. What you're gaining has to be clear, and it has to be significantly more appealing than what you're losing,

- **Get the skills you need** – Every kind of change is about learning new skills. Practicing those new skills over and over creates new pathways in the brain. With prolonged practice, they become automatic.

- **Repeat, repeat, repeat** – You will go backwards and forwards. Slipping back is normal not a sign of failure. While you are creating new neural pathways in the brain, the old ones still exist in your brain. Until the new ones become completely second nature, stress or fear can make us revert back to our old patterns. Eventually, the new pathway becomes automatic.

- **Identify short-term wins** – Put your ultimate goal on paper – as well as what you will gain when you achieve it. Putting it on paper and keeping it in front of you on a daily basis brings it closer to reality. Establish two to three short-term wins. Achieving these short-term wins is a huge emotional lift. These early victories nourish the change effort and build momentum. As you begin to see results from your new habits and skills, you start to change how you think.

Mastering Change

Change is inevitable. Some changes will be our own choice; others will be forced upon us. When you master the skill of change, you exponentially increase your ability to achieve your full potential, to succeed regardless of conditions, and to move through life with greater ease and enjoyment.

When you are a child, almost everything you do is behavior-based learning. You are in a constant state of learning. The brain easily adapts to change. Your ability to adapt and change comes easily.

As adults, we need to work at it. As we age, the cumulative weight of experience makes it more difficult to change. Unless you work on it, brain fitness begins to decline around age 30 for men and a little later for woman. The key is keeping up with the brain's ability for learning; when you stop learning and using the machinery, it starts dying.

Many adults haven't learned a new skill in 15 or 20 years. We equate a busy, active professional life to learning. If you're a CPCU, reading your trade journals or taking a seminar on a new policy form isn't learning. You are already an expert in that field. Keeping the brain in shape and its ability to adapt to change requires taking on something that's outside your expertise and requires a different form of intelligence. Take on a challenge like learning a foreign language or playing a new instrument – something that you know you're going to be really bad at for a while. That's how you exercise your brain's ability to continue learning and adapting.

Think of change as a constant state of learning – what you do to remain successful and become more successful – not as what you'll have to do when your success runs out. If you practice change, you keep up your ability to change, and you are ready when opportunity presents itself.

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