



The secret to successful change

by William D. Eggers and Chip Heath

Authors Bill Eggers and Chip Heath recently talked about the topic of organizational change, particularly as it relates to government, as part of a discussion moderated by Deloitte Research. This article is an adapted version of their conversation.

Chip Heath: It's not accurate to simply say that people "resist change." Typically part of us embraces change and part of us doesn't. One part wants a better beach body come summer, but another part wants that Oreo cookie. For years psychologists have talked about the difference between the analytical brain, which plans for a change and thinks it through, and the emotional side that's attracted to the Oreo cookie, or to the comfort of the existing routine.

I love the analogy from Jonathan Haidt at the University of Virginia. He imagines the analytical side of the brain as a tiny human riding on top of a big, emotional elephant. I love this metaphor because it gets the relative weights right. If you think you're going to think your way into change, that's the tiny rider struggling against the big emotional elephant. In any direct contest of will the elephant is going to win. It's got a six-ton weight advantage.

Bill Eggers: The public sector is the place where change can be most difficult.

You have politicians who come into office every four or eight years who want to make big changes. They have grand plans, but they don't think about the appetite for change on the other side of the table. They don't put

themselves in the position of the folks in the bureaucracy who are being asked to implement these changes. The political mind generally embraces risk because it must during a campaign, whereas the bureaucratic mind is more wary of risk. The last thing a senior civil servant wants is to end up in the newspaper, because it's usually for something bad.

Just as Chip's example of the rider and the elephant can be used to illustrate the relationship between the analytical and emotional motivation for change, we can also use it to understand the relationship between leadership and a bureaucracy. The political leadership is quite small but desires change, while the bureaucracy is quite large, and slow to alter course.

CH: In this balance between the rider and elephant, we typically attempt to motivate change almost exclusively by talking to the rider. Think about public health in the United States. We have warnings on cigarette packs saying, "Cigarette smoke contains carbon monoxide." Who does this appeal to, the rider or the elephant? It's a purely logical appeal to the rider.

But Canada slaps on a photo that takes up half the cigarette pack with a vivid image of yellow teeth, and the caption, "Smoking makes your teeth yellow." What could work better to change the behavior of a sixteen-year-old who's thinking of taking up smoking?

Too often we start off our change efforts with a 35-page PowerPoint deck filled with graphs and statistics. That's a great appeal to that analytical rider-side of our brains. But it's not particularly effective at providing the motivation for change on the emotional elephant-side.

BE: Back when we were trying to put a man on the moon, someone asked a janitor at NASA headquarters what his job was and he said, "I'm helping to put a man on the moon." It was the emotional appeal of doing something big that drove this massive change

effort. The initiative attracted thousands, not only government employees but also contractors and university people. Everyone involved felt themselves a part of this vast, important mission. If you want to get big things done, mission appeal is a key element.

CH: You've got to do a little bit for both sides of the brain. Analytical appeals alone don't work, but neither do purely emotional appeals.

A lot of the political discourse in this country today is about anger, a feeling that we're going down the wrong path. But if there's no clear direction for the analytical side of our brains, for that rider on the elephant, then you end up spinning your wheels and getting frustrated. Bad things happen when emotions are heightened but there's no clear path in front of you.

BE: Clarity is important. Too many conflicting goals can lead to chaos.

CH: We see that over and over again in organizational change initiatives in the area of public health. Our national "food pyramid" has got all the resources and expertise of the federal government targeted towards helping Americans eat better, yet I defy anyone to look at the food pyramid and come away with any idea about how to improve your diet.

Imagine instead if the government had spent the last three years promoting two ideas: First, every time you sit down to eat, fill up half your plate with fruits and vegetables, and it almost doesn't matter what you put on the other half. Second, give up one sugared soft drink a day. It turns out the typical American would lose 7 to 10 pounds in a year if they drank one less sugared soft drink per day.

The government could have changed our health landscape with those two simple rules. But they ended up with a very complicated, complete, relevant, textured plan. You can almost see the experts doing high fives when they came up with the food pyramid because they had covered the complete dietary system.

Yet it didn't change anybody's behavior. What we have to avoid when we're working with government agencies or business organizations is the change equivalent of the food pyramid.

BE: You might wonder why this happens so often. With IDEO, a private design firm, it's usually the case that between their first prototype and what they actually take to market, the design has changed 180 degrees. Failed prototypes help them hone in on a good, workable design. For every iteration, they test a prototype out in the real world to see how real people use it. IDEO's approach to design is to fail small, fast, and early.

In most government programs, however, people spend years writing up some complicated bill without any clear idea of how it will work in practice. They haven't conducted the necessary testing, prototyping, and focus groups to see what's going to change behavior. The result is a bill that is big, complicated, and, too often, not achieving its intended goal.

I like the idea of "shrinking the change" because you can do a lot of smaller things that build up to something bigger. Oftentimes the best way to get something big done is by breaking it into smaller chunks over a period of time.

CH: The prospect of change is paralyzing when we think it's too big and pervasive. No one goes straight from the first date to

marriage. It's a progression of first steps and you gradually experiment your way into that relationship. Yet when we try to do public or corporate changes, we try to come up with the whole plan at once. That's scary to the elephant. And yet by shrinking down that change and talking about the critical moves, you're providing direction to the analytical rider and motivation to the elephant.

BE: I've talked to Chip and his brother Dan about how to apply their framework to the international fiscal crisis facing government and this movement towards austerity we'll be seeing in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and all over the world. It's a hard change because people are going to have to give up things they've long become accustomed to. We can't afford them anymore.

Like the Heath brothers, Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels says it's important to focus on the small things because it changes the culture. After a few small wins, people start looking for cost savings in different areas, and they're able to see their ideas getting implemented. You start to change the culture by finding all these small bright spots. What you're also doing is shrinking the change. The size of the fiscal gap means there will have to be big changes, but once people get into a habit of looking for cost savings, the big changes will be easier to accept.

About the authors

William D. Eggers, Deloitte Services LP, is the director of public sector research at Deloitte and the author or co-author of numerous books on government reform. His next book, *The Solution Revolution: How Business, Government, and Social Enterprises are Teaming up to Solve Society's Toughest Problems*, will be published in September 2013.

Chip Heath is the co-author, with Dan Heath, of *Switch*, a bestselling book on change.



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