

Five Ways to Make Change Easier

Chip Heath and Dan Heath



February 16, 2010 There's a simple reason that change efforts are difficult, and it's not that people are lazy or resistant or stupid. Change is hard because it disrupts behaviors that are on "autopilot." If you were forced to start brushing your teeth with your opposite hand, you'd struggle. When you ask your employees to start acting in a new way, they'll struggle, too. But here are five ways you can ease that struggle:

1. Find your bright spots and clone them. Psychology tells us that we're wired to look at the negative. In times of change, we tend to obsess about the problems we're having, but we need to flip that mentality and search out the "bright spots"--the early signs that things are working. Once we find them, we can clone them. Let's say you've launched a new sales process, and the results have been mixed. Two sales reps have doubled their sales, five others are neutral, three others are down, and one is threatening to quit.

Most managers would spend their time dealing with the four struggling reps. Instead you should go study your two "star" reps. What are they doing differently? If you understand how they're succeeding, you can spread their practices to others. When undertaking any change, ask yourself: What are we doing right now that is working, and how can we do more of it?
2. Shape the environment to support you. Consider Rackspace, an internet hosting company. Early in the company's history, founder Graham Weston was frustrated with the company's poor customer service, so he asked where he could find the phone queueing system. (That's the gizmo that picks up the phone and says, "Press 1 for worthless info, Press 2 for a directory of unfamiliar names, and Press 3 to repeat these options.")

Once he found it he unplugged it. "When a customer calls, that means they need our help, and we've got to answer the telephone," Weston said. What happened? The support reps started answering the phones, of course! By changing the environment, Weston changed his team's behavior. How can you change your team's environment to make it easier for them to change?
3. Get behavioral. One of the main mistakes leaders make is that they articulate a new vision but don't translate it into terms that people on the frontlines can execute. We talked recently with an entrepreneur who wanted his employees to have a "mindset of customer service." If you're an employee, when you hear that, all you hear is "buzzword, buzzword, buzzword, jargon, jargon, jargon." What are you supposed to do?

A big-picture vision is great for building morale, but successful change demands specificity, so show people exactly what's expected of them at the behavioral level. Don't ask people to adopt the "customer service mindset," instead, say, "If a customer asks you where a product is, don't just point in its direction--take the time to walk them to it location."
4. Conserve self-control. There's some fascinating research in psychology that demonstrates that self-control is exhaustible--like a muscle. We've all experienced this,Äyou have a stressful day at work so when you come home you snap at your partner or you have one drink too many.

You burned up your self-control at work. And this is critical for change, because all change requires self-control. Not just in the sense of resisting a temptation, like a cookie or a drink, but in the sense that you have to manage your behavior deliberately. One implication of this is that you shouldn't pile on too much change at once, "don't pick a handful of New Year's Resolutions and don't overhaul every aspect of people's routines at once at work.

5. Use the power of social pressure. If a third of your employees aren't filling out their expense reports on time, make sure they know that two-thirds of your employees ARE getting it done! Social norms are powerful. For instance, you might have seen those signs in hotel rooms that urge you to reuse your towels to "save the earth."

A group of researchers changed the signs to say, "Most people in this hotel reuse their towels at least once during their stay." Immediately, towel reuse rates went up 26 percent, and laundry bills went down. If the social norm is in your favor, publicize it. If it's not, then you need to protect the minority that supports your change. Consider carving out a space, "an offsite space or even a dedicated conference room where your change advocates can meet and collaborate to escape the negative social pressure.

Change takes time. It took months or years for people to learn the "old way" of doing things, so what makes you think they can shift overnight? Stumbles are inevitable, but if you're patient, the new behaviors will kick in on "autopilot," and the change that was once met with great difficulty will become effortless. (Until your next change....)

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