

The Elephant, The Rider and The Path

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How difficult is it to make a positive and lasting change in your personal life, work environment, and/or community? It can be difficult! Chip and Dan Heath spell out why change can be so hard for some to come by in their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. The authors use an interesting analogy of the elephant, the rider and the path, sharing several successful change stories, where individuals saw real change without a lot of resources; just a new perspective.

Why is change so hard? The latest science shows that the human brain is in conflict between the rational and emotional mind. The emotional part, (the elephant) is larger than the rational, (the elephant rider) and many times overruns the rational. The rational mind knows change is needed, but the emotional mind is easily distracted. Rationally, humans know we should eat properly and exercise regularly, but emotionally, junk food has such appeal and the couch looks so comfortable!

So how do we make long term positive change? Align the rational and emotional human minds by “directing the rider and motivating the elephant.” The third part to successful change is “shaping the path,” which means making the environment easier to make the desired change.

Although the rider is rational, can think long term, understands self-control and sees several options, he can get confused, lost and stuck overanalyzing different situations. Directing the rider means providing very clear instructions with desired outcomes, including action steps and tactics.

The elephant (emotions) needs to be motivated and inspired to take direction toward the positive change. The elephant needs to feel the need for the change. Motivating the elephant means touching their hearts. This needed change is good for you, your co-workers and/or your community; it has a higher purpose.

The path is the framework for the change. Many times we, (or your people or community) are not the problem; it is the situation that is the problem. “Shape the path” means making the environment easier to behave in the desired manner and helping build better habits. Remove barriers, provide simple instructions, pair people with mentors, have training and create peer pressure.

One of the several stories about a successful change effort was Dr. Donald Berwick's (who is now running for governor of Massachusetts) goal to save lives of hospitalized patients. Dr. Berwick, as President of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, headed life-saving procedural changes within institute-affiliated hospitals.

During a large hospital industry convention, he unveiled his plan. First, he appealed to the riders about medical errors causing thousands of preventable deaths and how, with 6 clear and proven interventions, patients could be saved. He presented a clear goal of saving 100,000 lives within 18 months! To the hospital attendees at the conference, Dr. Berwick directed the elephant (emotions), by introducing family members who had lost loved ones, because hospitals had not adopted the recommended interventions. Dr. Berwick then "shaped the path" by providing step by step instructions, utilizing support groups, sponsoring weekly conference calls, and connecting struggling hospital leaders with successful early adopter hospitals. Exactly 18 months later, Dr. Berwick announced the results: over 122,000 estimated lives were saved by hospitals changing their behavior by simply adopting the 6 proven interventions!

Although looking at real life circumstances and identifying the rider, elephant, and path may sound odd, it really is an interesting way to look at situations, where we find ourselves continuously veering off the path that we know we should take. As the rider, make a list of small steps needed to make the desired change. As the elephant, find the inspiration that will motivate you each day. Then, shape your path by surrounding yourself in an environment that will promote the habits, behaviors and mentality to make a lasting change.

At Sullivan Benefits, we have helped several clients to make positive changes in their workplace. To learn more, please feel free to contact me or any other member of the [Sullivan Benefits](#) team.