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Switch: How To Change Things When Change Is Hard



Synopsis

Why is it so hard to make lasting changes in our companies, in our communities, and in our own lives? The primary obstacle is a conflict that's built into our brains, say Chip and Dan Heath, authors of the critically acclaimed bestseller *Made to Stick*. Psychologists have discovered that our minds are ruled by two different systems—the rational mind and the emotional mind—that compete for control. The rational mind wants a great beach body; the emotional mind wants that Oreo cookie. The rational mind wants to change something at work; the emotional mind loves the comfort of the existing routine. This tension can doom a change effort—but if it is overcome, change can come quickly. In *Switch*, the Heaths show how everyday people—employees and managers, parents and nurses—have united both minds and, as a result, achieved dramatic results: The lowly medical interns who managed to defeat an entrenched, decades-old medical practice that was endangering patients. The home-organizing guru who developed a simple technique for overcoming the dread of housekeeping. The manager who transformed a lackadaisical customer-support team into service zealots by removing a standard tool of customer service. In a compelling, story-driven narrative, the Heaths bring together decades of counterintuitive research in psychology, sociology, and other fields to shed new light on how we can effect transformative change. *Switch* shows that successful changes follow a pattern, a pattern you can use to make the changes that matter to you, whether your interest is in changing the world or changing your waistline.

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Customer Reviews

Chip and Dan Heath have once again summoned a lively writing style to present a series of compelling insights that make this book even more interesting as well as more valuable than its predecessor, *Made to Stick*. As they explain in the first chapter, "In this book, we argue that successful changes share a common pattern. They require the leader of change to do three things at once: To change someone's behavior, you've got to change that person's situation...[to cope with the fact that change] is hard because people wear themselves out. And that's the second surprise about change: What looks like laziness is often exhaustion...If you want people to change, you must provide crystal clear direction [because what] looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity."

Throughout, the Heaths work within a narrative, best viewed as a "three-part framework," as they provide countless real-world (as opposed to hypothetical or theoretical) examples and - to their great credit - also provide a context or frame-of-reference for each. Moreover, the Heaths invoke a few extended metaphors. The most important of these are the Rider (i.e. our rational side), the Elephant, (i.e. our emotional and instinctive side) and the Path (i.e. the surrounding environment in which change initiatives will be conducted). The challenge is to direct the Rider, motivate the Elephant, and shape the Path to make change more likely, "no matter what's happening with the Rider and Elephant...If you can do all three at once, dramatic change can happen even if you don't have lots of power or resources behind you." Donald Berwick offers an excellent case in point.

"Switch" oscillates between the citation of psychological research and the slightly-suspect relaying of 'inspirational anecdotes' (as is de rigeur for this genre), but is, on the whole, a worthwhile read. Coming across as a self-help version of *Nudge*, the authors wield an array of techniques to help people create change in their lives as painlessly as possible. In doing so, they indirectly provide an evidential basis for David Allen's "Next Action" mantra, as suggested in *Getting Things Done*, but their focus is neither on the "nuts and bolts" of organisational management (which can lead to meta-productivity fetishism, as many GTD converts are prone to), nor on the sort of "flying with the eagles" nonsense that keeps Anthony Robbins in a mansion in Hawaii. Instead, the authors try and strike a balance between social psychology and "change your life" blue sky thinking. For the most part, they succeed admirably, and their approach ends up leading them to more sensible suggestions than the interesting -but wacky- *59 Seconds* which itself purports to be based on hard science (or, at least, as "hard science" as psychological research can be).

Like many universities, mine is in the midst of implementing some major changes to the way we do

business, with the goal of becoming more efficient and decreasing operating costs. Recently, Chip Heath and Dan Heath's book "Switch" was provided to a number of people on campus who have responsibility for some aspects of these changes. Although I generally find business books to be disappointing at best, and irritating at worst, I started this one optimistic that it would be different. Alas, that optimism waned by the second chapter, and was completely destroyed by the time I finished the book. "Switch" suffers from the three main problems that I've found in nearly all popular business books. First, it presents claims without sufficient justification. This book focuses on techniques to facilitate change in organizations and individuals, and while it occasionally cites interesting work in cognitive and social psychology that may be relevant to the techniques suggested, for the most part the justification for the techniques is anecdotal: technique X worked at company Y in particular instance Z, and so it's obviously a valid technique that's always applicable. There's no attempt at any sort of rigorous scientific testing of such a claim. For example, in chapter 2, the Heath brothers claim that you cannot focus on why a proposed change is failing to take hold, but must instead "find the bright spots," i.e., identify the pockets where it is working, figure out why it works there, and then try to emulate the small successes elsewhere. They describe several case studies where this approach has led to successful change, including a project to improve childhood nutrition in Vietnam, and an intervention with a misbehaving ninth grader.

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