

# BEST PRACTICES

FROM GERRY HOFFNER...

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NEWSLETTER

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## Changing Minds: Just How Hard Is It?

*"All leadership comes down to this: changing people's behavior." - Alan Deutschman in Fast Company ("Change or Die," May 2005)*

Changing people's behavior is the most important challenge for business leaders competing in unpredictable environments.

*"The central issue is never strategy, structure, culture, or systems," asserts Dr. John P. Kotter, a retired Harvard Business School professor who specializes in leadership. "The core of the matter is always about changing the behavior of people."*

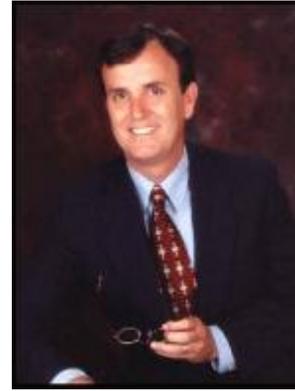
What works—and why is change so incredibly difficult?

A *Fast Company* article, "Change or Die" (May 2005), reveals that when faced with a health crisis like heart disease, only one in nine individuals makes the necessary, lifesaving changes required to live longer.

Minds are hard to change, yet so many aspects of our lives are directed toward doing just that. We face a supplier who needs to respond more quickly, a subordinate who must perform a task differently, or a peer who should recognize the importance of our project and commit to it. We clearly acknowledge the need for others to change their minds and act differently. We also know we need to change our own minds at certain times.

Many of us are professionally involved in the business of changing people's minds. A CEO, executive, or team leader must convince and secure commitment; a salesperson must close the sale and persuade consumers to think differently about new product features; consultants and coaches must change minds to motivate groups and individuals to perform more effectively for improved results.

Why are our brains wired in a way that seems to resist change so tenaciously? In their book *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (2001), authors Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey describe the process of resistance



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and our body's and mind's natural tendency to revert to what they're used to doing—a process called *homeostasis*.

In this new millennium, with ever-increasing discoveries about the brain, has cognitive neuroscience discovered clues to what is required to help people change their way of thinking so they can modify their behavior? Professor Howard Gardner, a lifelong researcher and expert on the mind, believes we've reached this point:

*"Of all of the species on earth, we human beings are the ones who specialize in voluntary mind change: we change the minds of others, we change our own minds. We have even crafted various technologies that allow us to extend the sweep of mind change: powerful mechanical artifacts like writing implements, televisions, and computers...In the coming decade, mind changing will continue and, in all probability, accelerate." —Changing Minds, 2004.*

What must we understand about the brain to better grasp the process of changing others' minds? And what happens when we try to change our own mind to employ and sustain new behaviors?

## 7 Levers to Change a Mind

Leaders must consider several critical factors to changing someone's mind. Gardner has identified seven levers used to change minds:

1. **Reason:** When we are trying to persuade others, reason plays a pivotal role—especially among those who consider themselves educated. Most businesses rely on analysis and logical processes when making decisions. The rational approach involves identifying relevant factors, weighing each in turn, and making an overall assessment.
2. **Research:** The scientific approach collects relevant data and analyzes it in a systematic manner (often statistical) to verify or cast doubt on promising trends. Research needn't be as formal as this, however. It may entail identifying events and forming judgments as to whether they warrant a change of mind.
3. **Resonance:** While reason and research appeal to the cognitive aspects of the mind, *resonance* applies to our emotions. Appealing to one's feelings and creating emotional resonance are among the more powerful means of changing minds. Resonance is often achieved after one hears reason and research arguments, but it may occur on an unconscious level. As a

relationship of trust or connection to the mind-changer develops, one is persuaded to change.

4. **Representational Redescriptions:** This term describes what happens when a change of mind becomes convincing in several different ways that reinforce each other. For example, a PowerPoint presentation may present the same concept using percentages, bar graphs, and other graphic images, all of which explain the same key concept in distinct ways.
5. **Resources and Rewards:** So far, the possibilities for mind-changing lie within reach of any individual whose mind is open. It is sometimes more likely to occur when resources are available. In psychological terms, this is known as *positive reinforcement*. Ultimately, however, unless the new course of thought is congruent with the other criteria—reason, resonance, and research—it is unlikely to last beyond the provision of rewards.
6. **Real-World Events:** Wars, terrorists, natural disasters, and economic depressions can influence mind-changing. On the positive side, so can prosperity and peace. It is easier to convince a nation to go to war after a terrorist attack, even when the facts are lacking.
7. **Resistances:** The six factors involved in changing minds have thus far been positive. It is unrealistic to assume that you won't encounter resistance—the strong force that negatively affects mind change. In our early years of life, we change our minds frequently to develop, learn, and become competent. Research demonstrates that changing minds becomes more difficult with age. We develop strong views and perspectives that are resistant to change. Any effort to understand the process of changing minds must take into account the power of resistance.

A mind change is most likely to occur when the first six factors operate in concert (they are coordinated and congruent), and when resistance is relatively weak. Conversely, a change of mind is unlikely to occur when resistances are strong and the other factors fail to point strongly in one direction.

## Changing Minds in an Organization

Getting people to replace one frame of mind with another is harder still when you're working with large groups. Gardner, a MacArthur Fellow "genius" award winner, has studied what works for heads of state and corporate CEOs: *"When one is addressing a diverse or heterogeneous audience, the story must be simple, easy to identify with, emotionally resonant, and evocative of positive experiences."*

When change is introduced to an organization's members, leaders will experience greater success when they:

1. Make good use of narrative, telling stories to which people can relate.
2. Present data using as many of the seven levers of change as possible (for example, facts *and* emotions).
3. Express a clear understanding of areas of resistance.
4. Achieve emotional resonance with people whose "buy-in" is required for successful change.
5. Give people opportunities for ongoing support and dialogue.

## 1. The Power of Stories

Stories can be a key element in changing minds. In a story, you have a main character, ongoing activities to achieve a goal, a crisis, and a resolution.

Leaders must analyze the current situation, determine what needs to change, and envision an altered state of affairs. They must then create a convincing narrative and present it to those whose minds they hope to change.

Success will depend on various factors, including the effectiveness of the narrative, the ways in which it is convincingly conveyed, and the extent to which leaders and those around them actually embody the presentation. The more personal and authentic the story, the more people will identify with common themes.

## 2. The Power of Variety

One's level of familiarity with a concept determines how we successfully process and accept it. Delivering the same content in multiple forms is a powerful way to change people's minds, which may explain the popularity of PowerPoint presentations.

People must not only hear the message, but also see it—often in the form of images, graphs, and diagrams. For example, many motivational speakers use music, humor, and strong emotional stimulation to deliver their messages and inspire action.

Using more than one delivery method gives people an opportunity to form mental representations in their preferred learning mode. Some people do well with logical arguments, while others require an emotional connection.

## 3. The Power of Resistance

When it comes to changing someone's mind, Gardner says, *"The biggest mistake people make is not understanding the other's resistances."* Each of us has ingrained beliefs (*fundamentalism*). We are committed to maintaining our opinions (the status quo). For some, this is a defense mechanism, and any attempt by others to change our thinking would come at the expense of self-esteem.

What *never* works when trying to change someone's mind is a direct assault on his or her point of view. When you go in determined to change someone, you're triggering defensiveness.

Gardner advises us to pay attention to unspoken cues and listen carefully to the other's perspective: *"Try to put into your own words tentatively, not threateningly, what you think the other person's concerns are,"* he says. *"Most people will appreciate your efforts if you say, 'It seems to me you're saying such and such.' Then they can answer, 'Well, no, that's not exactly what I'm saying.'"*

Even the most eloquent argument is likely to fail if you lack insight about the person you're trying to sway. The real trick is to take the other person's perspective. Once you understand someone's resistance, you can try to find a common solution.

## 4. Appealing to Emotions

Emotional persuasion isn't taught in business schools, nor does it come easily to the engineers, scientists, lawyers, physicians, accountants and managers who run organizations. Most CEOs have higher educations and are trained in statistical analysis to a degree that allows them to make sound decisions. They must then convince others, using as many methods as possible—not just the facts.

According to Dr. George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, *"Concepts are not things that can be changed just by someone telling us a fact. We may be presented with facts, but for us to make sense of them, they have to fit what is already in the synapses of the brain. Otherwise, facts go in and then they go right back out. They are not heard, or they are not accepted as facts."*

Minds rely on frames, not facts, according to Lakoff and other experts. Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world, part of the cognitive unconscious, and they exist outside of our awareness.

Because of the way the brain learns, messages have a better chance of being retained when our emotional centers are engaged. When individuals experience a positive emotional resonance with the person trying to

change their minds, they're more easily persuaded—a phenomenon that can occur even in the absence of reasonable facts to support change.

## 5. The Power of Ongoing Communication and Support

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, according to Newton's Third Law of Motion. In organizations, this reaction often takes the form of avoidance, resistance, and exceptionalism.

Change feels more natural when you have participation and engagement at all levels. Your goal? To introduce ideas into the mainstream, without excessive use of authority. When more people can contribute to finding solutions and helping each other, there is a better chance of achieving real behavioral change. The more people communicate and support one another, the easier it is for everyone to stay on track.

Change initiatives are more likely to fail when there are no ongoing discussions or support. This is why 90% of cardiac patients revert to unhealthy habits after their heart attacks, despite overwhelming evidence that points to a need for change. In one 1996 study by Dr. Dean Ornish, president of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in Sausalito, California, 77 percent of heart patients managed to sustain behavioral lifestyle changes and avoid surgery after three years by participating in a twice-weekly program that offered support and training.

In summary, changing minds is not easy, but there are clear methods for increasing the probability of effecting real behavioral change. Provision of coaching services is highly recommended to support change initiatives.



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