



## Chip Heath | Executive Summary

There comes a time when we look around and notice something needs to change. At that point, culture gives us some conventional wisdom that's actually fairly depressing. "Change is futile. You can't teach an old dog new tricks. People resist change."

It occurred to me at one point that conventional wisdom can't necessarily be true. After all, two of life's biggest changes, having a baby and getting married, are causes for joyful anticipation. We throw parties in preparation for the arrival of a new baby, and we have elaborate wedding celebrations.

Yet, other changes are maddeningly and frustratingly difficult. If you've ever tried to go through an exercise program, you know that not all changes are easy. If you've ever tried to change a routine in your workplace, you know that not all changes are easy.

We are not all resistant to change. We're schizophrenic about change because part of us really does want to change, even as another part of us pushes back against it.

### The Elephant and the Rider

Psychologists for years have talked about the analytical side of our brains that contemplates the need for change, but there's also the emotional side of our brain that is impulsive. My favorite description of this discussion is by a psychologist named Jonathan Haidt. He describes the emotional system that loves comfort and responds to impulse as a giant elephant. He then depicts the analytical side of our brains as a tiny human rider atop the elephant.

Now some of you in the past may have heard the voice of the elephant, "Go ahead, eat the whole quart. You're halfway there already!" Or, your elephant may have encouraged you to check your text messages while driving down the highway. Now, in those examples the elephant is a bad advisor, but the elephant doesn't always lead you astray. Your elephant also tells you true and useful things. Sometimes the elephant says, "Wouldn't it be cool to...? Wouldn't it be cool to organize all of the world's information and put it at our fingertips?" That's the elephant that has made Google a successful business.

The elephant is not always the villain, and the rider is not always the hero. But what is true is that change happens when both of these aspects of our brain are motivated to go down a path at the same time in the same way.

For that to happen, we want to provide the rider side of ourselves (analytical side) with direction. You don't want the rider thinking about should I stay or should I go. You want the rider thinking, "How do I get there?"

You want to provide motivation for the elephant. You need the elephant's strength and passion for a long journey. No one starts a marriage proposal with a PowerPoint slide deck and a twelve-tab spreadsheet of the tax consequences of being married. Yet, we start our change efforts in the workplace and the community like that. We think that we can have a conversation with the rider and produce change. But notice that we get married because of a deeply felt emotional need. Providing direction to the rider *and* motivation for the elephant is the secret for successful change.

### Find the Bright Spots

The analytical side of our brain loves problems. There have been dozens of research studies on this in the psychology literature. If you show people two pictures and one is a negative awful scene, and the other is a pleasant, happy scene,

people will spend more time looking at the negative awful scene. If you ask sports fans, “how did your teams do,” they will spend more time talking and assessing the games their teams lost than the games they won.

What if we occasionally looked at what’s working instead of only seeing what’s broken?

At some point, you’ll face a situation where you will encounter difficulty with a coworker or loved one. The question is, can you find bright spots in the relationship to isolate and evaluate?

As change leaders, we need to provide direction for the rider and motivation for the elephant. One tool for doing that is to look for the bright spots and to copy them.

Action Plan:

- ✓ Over the next week, instead of focusing on trouble spots at work, look at what’s happening well. Write down what you see. Is anything that’s working repeatable somewhere else?
- ✓ As leaders, we seem inundated with expectations of negative reactions to change. Take some time to consider the sorts of change your people would enjoy. What are they? How can you help your people to make desirable adjustments?