

Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard by Chip Heath and Dan Heath

Book Review

Mindy Coates Smith

I Heart Change

For most people, change is difficult.

I learned this the hard way when the youth team at my church and I decided to switch up some programming in the high school Sunday morning experience and kids revolted, threatening to start a petition within the group to get things changed back to the “old way.” This was hysterically amusing to me, first because we are not a government agency, and second, last time I checked circulating a petition was not the best way to handle relational conflict. But perhaps more importantly, I was shocked at the strong resistance to change.

Admittedly, I sit on the opposite end of the spectrum of most people on this issue – I love change. To me the absolute worst reason for continuing to do something is because “We’ve always done it this way.” In fact, this usually motivates me to push for change even more. But over the years I have seen how hard change is for many people and have learned that there are better ways to approach change than my preferred rip-the-band-aid-off technique.

Recently a colleague introduced me to a book entitled *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. This colleague and I had joined forces on a project that we were both passionate about and that we thought was a great opportunity for our church congregation to participate in. Unfortunately, the timing was not quite right to engage in the project. Although this was disappointing, I learned a lot along the way, especially about change.

If I thought it was difficult for high schoolers to adjust to a shift in programming, I had no idea what we were up against in the change-resistant forces of a church congregation with over fifty years of history. For a change-lover like me, I am inclined to give up; why spend time rearranging the chairs on the Titanic? Yet there is a richer, deeper lesson to be learned that comes from a commitment to relationship even when it feels like my perspective is overlooked. The book *Switch* helped me see past my frustration with change-haters and to understand the

process of change in a different way. Here I would love to share with you some of the main research findings and implications of the book and what I learned along the way.

The Elephant and the Rider

The basic thesis of *Switch* is that by uniting the rational mind (that craves change) and the emotional mind (that loves comfort), dramatic and sweeping change can take place despite having few resources and little structural authority. The authors describe the emotional side as an Elephant and the rational side as its Rider. The Rider seems to be in control holding the reins, but many times it is actually the Elephant who calls the shots. Anytime the Rider and the Elephant disagree on which direction to go, it is inevitably the six-ton Elephant who will get his way when push comes to shove. While it might be easy to place blame on the Elephant, both parties have benefits and challenges of their own. The Rider is able to think long-term and can see past instant gratification, yet at the same time the Rider has a tendency to overanalyze and spin his wheels, leading to a lack of clarity that ends up taking the Elephant in circles. The Elephant, while he may be lazily looking for an easy payoff, embodies a strong emotional instinct. In the end, the strength of the Elephant is what gets things done.

The changes we made to the high school Sunday morning program involved a shift in the teaching time from a large group lecture style curriculum to small group discussion-based learning. I could list reasons all day long for why this was a better use of our teaching time: an opportunity to build deeper relationships, an increase in real-life application of the material, even the cognitive structure of adolescent brain development. Yet these appeals to the Rider were no match for the Elephant, who was more interested in the comfortable large group setting that involved donuts, flirting and falling asleep during the lesson. Somehow we had to get the Elephant and the Rider to move together. To do this, *Switch* suggests ways to Direct the Rider, Motivate the Elephant and Shape the Path.

Direct the Rider

The key to Directing the Rider is twofold: *follow the bright spots* and *script the critical moves*. First, the Rider is a visionary and is willing to make short-term sacrifices for long-term payoffs. By looking for the bright spots in the things that need to be changed, a more organic solution can be found. So many times in ministry it is easier to determine the things that are not going

well. We vividly remember the fall kick-off that was barely attended or the teaching that ended up creating more confusion. Yet more likely than not, there are plenty of things that are going well. The idea here is to find those bright places – the parent meeting that miraculously connected volunteers to families or the genius e-newsletter that created faith conversations at home – and build on those successes. We might be frustrated when 38% of students have not turned in camp forms on time, but what worked for the 62% whose forms were completed? In times of change the bright spots need to sparkle in order to ignite hope.

Second, sometimes change is difficult because of decision paralysis. When there are so many choices, even excellent options, the simple act of making a decision can be overwhelming. So much so that it seems easier to not make a choice (and not make a change). Instead, provide direct easy-to-follow instructions. By scripting these critical moves we can create a simple path that provides step-by-step instructions towards the greater vision. Eating healthy is a great goal but can be ambiguous and feel unattainable. Yet eating a salad a few times a week is an actionable item that guides the eater toward the greater goal.

Before making the sweeping change we did in the Sunday morning program, it would have been wise for us to stop and find what was working in the old model. One bright spot was the sense of community that students felt by having the teaching time together in one large group. By switching to small group teaching, students felt fragmented. We also lacked judgment in scripting the critical moves, since there wasn't really anything that was scripted! We had reasons for the change, but we did not lead students into the change step-by-step. We certainly could have avoided a lot of heartache.

Motivate the Elephant

The most important thing about the Elephant is to keep it moving, which requires motivation that comes from the confidence that change is attainable. The elephant can get super lazy super fast, so it is imperative that the Elephant is persuaded to move ahead. Heath and Heath describe this as “finding the feeling,” noting the difference between the processes of ANALYZE-THINK-CHANGE and SEE-FEEL-CHANGE. Remember, the Elephant is driven by emotions, especially positive emotions like joy and fun. Many times we introduce change from a good news / bad news perspective, hoping the bad news outweighs the good. For example, “Unfortunately we will not be going to the water park today, but we set up a sprinkler instead.”

Finding the feeling is like distracting a toddler when she is headed the wrong way. Jingle an enticing toy in her direction and suddenly she forgot about the glass of water she was about to knock over.

In addition to finding the feeling, the authors suggest to “shrink the change.” This involves breaking the big change into bite-size pieces of little changes. Once the tiny changes begin to feel like mini-victories, the next steps seem more attainable. This method is especially helpful for the change-averse. It is even more effective if somehow through the smaller victories the bigger change becomes their idea. If I had more patience in the Sunday morning program change, we could have set up opportunities for students to meet in small groups at other times and promoted a positive experience. Then through numerous conversations with students and volunteers, we could have pitched the idea to get their feedback. This would have allowed them to have a voice in the process, instead of feeling like it was an us-against-them situation.

Shape the Path

So far we have seen that the Rider needs direction and the Elephant needs motivation. The final part of the process addresses shaping the path. If we want people to change, we can provide a clear assignment (Rider) and boost their determination (Elephant). Finally we can also make the journey easier by tweaking the environment. We already do this on a daily basis in ministry. We put the couches on the front row of the youth room instead of begging kids to sit closer. We provide food at almost every event or program to make the parent schedule a bit more manageable. Now we just need to apply this ingenuity to specific areas of potential change.

By tweaking the environment we can also influence people into building habits. This is why there is a Starbucks on every corner of Los Angeles and consequently why many of us find ourselves in one almost every day of the week. In our high school Sunday morning program, we eventually tweaked the environment to be more conducive to small group teaching times by providing comfortable rooms to meet in. Over time students came to value the relational attention they received as a result of a smaller group. We could have eased this transition by making the small group meeting rooms a highlight of the change from the beginning.

Worth the Wait

For the Sunday morning program we eventually found common ground between the change-lovers and the change-averse. Since our method of ripping-the-band-aid-off left students feeling fragmented and uncared for, we adjusted our change to include one Sunday a month with everyone together. This helped rebuild some of the relational capital that we had lost with students since they felt that we had pulled a fast one on them.

Since this negative experience of change, we have been much more sensitive to the needs of our group when things need to switch. We consider the Elephant and the Rider and we view change as an ongoing journey of teeny-tiny influences in direction, rather than dramatic transformation all at once. The change-lover in me still winces at this slower technique, but I've learned my lesson: long-term change is worth the wait.

Action Points

- Identify a time you have made a change that didn't work so well. Using the ideas from *Switch*, what could you have done differently to introduce the change?
- What is one big change you are planning to make in the next six months? Take that change and break it down according to the principles from *Switch*. Identify the points of consideration that need to be made for the Elephant, Rider, and the environment.
- Before you attempt your next big change, consider getting your team together to read *Switch* and develop a plan based on insights from your discussions of the book.