

How to Change Anyone's Mind

By Jonah Berger

Everyone has something they want to change. Employees want to change their bosses' minds, and leaders want to transform organizations. Salespeople want to win new clients, and startups want to revolutionize industries. Parents want to change their children's behavior, and political canvassers want to sway voters.

But change is hard. We pressure and coax and cajole, and often nothing moves. Could there be a better way?

When trying to change minds, organizations or even the world, we often default to a particular approach: pushing. Boss not listening to that new idea? Send them another PowerPoint deck. Client isn't buying the pitch? Remind them of all the benefits. When people are asked how they've tried to change someone's mind, my own research finds that the overwhelming majority of the answers focus on some version of pushing.

The intuition behind this approach comes from physics. If you're trying to move a chair, for example, pushing usually works. Push it in one direction and it tends to go that way. Unfortunately, people and organizations aren't like chairs; they often push back. Instead, it helps to look to chemistry, where there's a proven way to make change happen fast: Add a catalyst.

Catalysts convert air into fertilizer and petroleum into bike helmets. But most intriguing is the way they generate change. Instead of adding heat or pressure, they provide an alternate route, reducing the amount of energy required for reactions to occur. Rather than pushing, they remove barriers.

This approach is equally powerful in the social world. I've spent over 20 years studying the science of change, interviewing leaders to understand how they change organizations and helping some of them do it. I've learned from superstar salespeople how they converted customers, from a hostage negotiator how he got hostage-takers to surrender by understanding what they sought to accomplish, and even from a Jewish clergyman who helped a white supremacist renounce the KKK.

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Again and again, the same approaches emerged. Instead of giving people more facts, figures or reasons, smart change agents find the hidden obstacles preventing change and mitigate them. Instead of asking what might convince someone to change, catalysts start with more basic questions: Why haven't they changed already? What's stopping them?

There are five recurring barriers to change, but each can be overcome with the right strategy.

Reduce reactance. People like to feel like they're in control—in the drivers' seat. When we try to get them to do something, they feel disempowered. Rather than feeling like they made the choice, they feel like we made it for them. So they say no or do something else, even when they

might have originally been happy to go along. Psychologists call this negative response “reactance.”



A study of college students showed that exposing the gap between their attitudes toward water conservation and their actions encouraged them to take shorter showers.

Photo: Getty Images

Decades of consumer behavior research shows that people have an innate anti-persuasion radar. They’re constantly scanning the environment for attempts to influence them, and when they detect one, they deploy a set of countermeasures.

To avoid getting shot down, allow for agency. Guide the path but make sure people feel like they’re still in control. Smart consultants do this when presenting work to clients. If you share just one solution, the clients spend the meeting trying to poke holes in it. To shift this mind-set, good presenters often share multiple options. That way, rather than focusing on flaws, the clients focus on which option they prefer, which makes them much more likely to support moving forward.

“ To change people’s behavior, highlight the gap between what they would recommend to others and what they themselves are doing. ”

Another way to reduce reactance is to highlight a gap between someone’s thoughts and actions, or between what they would recommend to others and what they themselves are doing. A clever pharmaceutical executive in one of my courses told me about a colleague who was wedded to a failing project. She asked him what he would recommend if someone at a different company was considering doing something similar. Given all the information we have now, he acknowledged, it wouldn’t make sense. Then why are *we* still doing it? she asked. The colleague shuttered the project a month later.

Highlighting such dissonance encourages people to try to resolve it. In the 1990s, researchers at the University of California campuses at Berkeley and Santa Cruz used this idea to get students to save water during a shortage. They asked some students to encourage their peers to take shorter showers, while completing a survey on what water-saving steps they themselves were

taking. Then they timed the student volunteers' showers. Exposing the gap between students' attitudes and actions reduced their water use by more than 25%.

Ease endowment. Research on everything from investment choices to political incumbency demonstrates that people are over-attached to the status quo, what social scientists call the "endowment effect." We tend to stick with things we know and have used for a long time. Most of us eat the same food we've always eaten, buy the same brands we've always bought and donate to the same causes we've always supported.

Part of the challenge is that the status quo usually isn't that bad, or else people would have made a change. An analogy can be made to injuries. Which do you think causes more pain: breaking a finger or spraining a finger? The answer might surprise you. It turns out that milder injuries may inflict greater pain overall, because unlike serious injuries, people are less likely to take active steps, such as surgery, to speed recovery. Milder injuries thus don't get addressed and become nagging injuries that never quite go away.

Change agents combat this phenomenon by bringing the costs of inaction to the surface, helping people to realize that sticking with the status quo isn't as cost-free as it seems. A financial adviser I know tried everything to convince one middle-aged client that keeping large amounts of money in a low-interest savings account instead of investing it more ambitiously for retirement wouldn't benefit him in the long term. He liked things as they were and refused to see the upside of change. Finally, she started giving him regular updates on how much he was losing monthly compared with inflation and higher-return investments. That worked.

" Instead of demanding a major change, start by asking for less or breaking the change down into chunks. "

Similarly, IT consultants often resort to encouraging employees to upgrade to new machines by saying that they will no longer support the old ones, leaving employees to fix their own problems. The technique doesn't force people to switch, but makes it easier for them to see the cost of doing nothing.

Shrink distance. When new information comes in, people tend to compare it to their existing views to see if it is a close enough match to consider. Psychological experiments going back 50 years have found a "zone of acceptance," an area close enough to people's existing beliefs that they'll consider new information. Incoming content that is too far away from their current perspective falls into a region of rejection and gets discounted.



Uber overcame customers' natural resistance to riding with strangers by gradually changing their expectations.

Photo: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg News

Doctors deal with this issue when trying to get patients to change to healthier behavior. Sure, an overweight person *should* walk a mile every day, but for someone who hasn't worked out in months, that's a big ask. One solution is to start by asking for less or breaking the change down into chunks.

A doctor I spoke with a few years ago was dealing with an obese truck driver who drank three liters of Mountain Dew a day. She knew that telling him to quit cold turkey would fail, so she asked him to try just two liters a day. He grumbled but made the switch. Then, on the next visit, she asked him to cut it down to one liter a day, and only after that succeeded did she suggest cutting the soda out entirely. The trucker still drinks a can of Mountain Dew now and then, but he's lost more than 25 pounds.

Product designers talk about such gradual shifts in behavior as stepping stones—a way to make a big shift feel less daunting. Uber's initial model didn't depend on persuading people to take a ride in a random stranger's car. That's exactly what Mom told you not to do. The company started instead by making high-end black-car service more accessible. Only after that gained acceptance did they move down-market to UberX, a cheaper nonluxury option. If Uber had asked people to make such a big change from the beginning, they probably would have failed. It was too far from what people were used to.

Alleviate uncertainty. Change usually involves some level of risk. Will a new product be better than the old one? Will a new initiative really save money? Research published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* by three University of Chicago researchers in 2006 found that there is an “uncertainty tax.” People in the study were willing to pay \$26 for a \$50 gift certificate, but when they were asked how much they'd pay for a lottery ticket that would win them either that same \$50 gift card or a \$100 one, they were only willing to pay \$16, a 40% drop. The uncertainty made them undervalue something that was objectively worth more.

To ease uncertainty, lower the barrier to trial. Don't just tell people that something is better; allow them to experience it themselves. In the mid-2000s, people didn't understand cloud storage and worried that it would be difficult to use or that they would lose their work. So [Dropbox](#) became part of a vanguard of app firms giving away a version of their service for free. The appetizer helped people to resolve their uncertainty and encouraged them to pay to upgrade to a better version. It helped Dropbox to build a billion-dollar business.

“ For big changes, sometimes hearing from one person isn't enough. ”

Honda Motor Co.'s Acura division took a similar step in 2008. The luxury brand wasn't as trusted or well-known as its rivals, so Acura partnered with the high-end W Hotel chain to offer guests a free ride anywhere in town in an Acura. Guests might not have known about or liked Acura, but if they needed a ride somewhere, why not get one for free? The rides removed uncertainty and, according to the company, resulted in tens of thousands of new Acura buyers.

Uncertainty can also be reduced by making things reversible. A few years ago, my girlfriend and I were considering getting a dog. A local shelter had an adorable pit mix puppy, but we weren't sure we were ready. Would we be home enough? Could we give her enough exercise? There were too many unanswered questions. We started to leave, but then a nice volunteer interjected: “In case it helps, we have a two-week trial period.” Today that girlfriend is my wife, and our dog

Zoë is an integral part of our family. The trial didn't reduce the upfront costs of taking Zoë home—food, shots, a crate, etc.—but it did remove the uncertainty.

Find corroborating evidence. For big changes, sometimes hearing from one person isn't enough. You can follow up multiple times with new information, but the listener is still faced with a translation problem. Sure, you think something is the right course of action, but you're just one person. How do they know what you're saying is right?

There's strength in numbers. That's why substance-abuse counselors use group interventions. Hearing from multiple loved ones at the same time often provides enough proof to drive action. Corporate boards wait to adopt new practices until they've been adopted by several peer institutions. Doctors wait to adopt new drugs until multiple colleagues start using them. And companies wait to adopt supply chain technologies and management strategies until they've been piloted by a number of other firms.

In my own research, I found that the incidence of people signing up to use a new website was almost directly proportional to the number of [Facebook](#) invitations they received. Invites from two people led to almost double the sign-ups from a single invite; sign-ups were even more likely when multiple invites came in quick succession. As the adage goes, “if one person says you have a tail, you laugh and think they're crazy. But if three people say it, you turn around to look.”

Whether you're trying to convince a client, change an organization, disrupt a whole industry or just get someone to adopt a puppy, the same rules apply. It's not about pushing harder or exerting more energy. It's about reducing barriers to action. Once you understand that, you can change anything.