

Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard

Chip Heath and Dan Heath

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Review by Paul Z. Jackson

This is a curious book. Its strength is its collection of wonderful stories, clearly and simply told. They are drawn from politics, organisations and individuals – something to appeal to everybody.

And there is much to cheer those of us who have been taking a solutions-focused (SF) view of change, with a great deal of the book consisting of the Heaths' efforts to put familiar concepts, tools and techniques into snappier, stickier language (with varying degrees of joy).

They advocate looking for what works and doing more of it. "Don't obsess about the failures. Instead, investigate and clone the successes," they say. Drawing explicitly from SF and Positive Deviance, they have us identify "bright spots". A vision of a future is termed a "destination postcard". Illustrating small actions and a direct route, they report a successful health campaign that told people to reach for a jug of 1% milk instead of whole milk. They note that visible success prompts people to join in.

Their most powerful metaphor, borrowed from positive psychologist Jonathan Haidt, is the Rider and the Elephant. These represent respectively the conscious mind and the subconscious, in the tradition of Plato's charioteer and chariot. "Changes often fail because the Rider simply can't keep the Elephant on the road long enough to reach the destination." Big changes can sap our exhaustible reserves of self-control – and the old habits kick back in. It's a neat way to highlight impact and sustainability – twin grails familiar to

organisational change consultants, and they have plenty of ideas for engaging both parties.

I particularly enjoyed their brutal dismissal of “knowledge” and “attitudes” as keys to change, in favour of interactional elements. Smaller containers for food mean people will eat less. It’s easier here to change the situation than change the people, they report, echoing our conclusions in *The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change Simple* (Jackson & McKergow, 2007).

They are clearly pragmatists at heart. “For anyone to change, someone has to start acting differently,” they note, and they have grasped the kernel of SF in at least some of their case study descriptions. They highlight the value of knowing what’s wanted, not what isn’t, even in cases of violent parenting, and note that the solutions (better behaviour from the child, more caring involvement from the parent) have no logical connections to the problems (violent behaviour to the child).

Without ever quite saying it, they get it: solutions consist of improved interactions. “Just look for a strong beginning and a strong ending and get moving,” they advise. Which brings us to the curiosity: their model, which gets more elaborate chapter by chapter, seems weaker than those they have drawn upon. The milk story, for example, contains the vital ingredient of a well-chosen small action, yet still has people being told what to do. A solution-focused coach would keep the clarity of the small step, but prefer to have actions generated by people for themselves.

And their account is far from simple. They even contradict themselves when their analysis says we need to change not only the situation, but also hearts and mind, rather flying in the face of their food portion example.

Anyone who knows SF will see endless parallels with the puzzlingly unacknowledged SF work in organisations – puzzling because their strength as writers and journalists is presumably research (and they have many great examples to illustrate their points). They have found SF as therapy and they visit other stops on the landscape of positive change –

including mentions of Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Psychology and Marcus Buckingham's strengths gang. Yet no mention, for example, of SFCT or the SOLWorld network.

Less surprisingly, the equally relevant but less-well-known field of Applied Improvisation is not mentioned at all, although its primary concepts are touched upon. "You can't script every move", say Chip and Dan. You can apparently script all the critical moves, though one might wonder how you are going to know all those in advance. "Use what you've got", they improvisationally advise, commenting on a railroad transformation story.

So, I'm not sure if Switch does much to advance the philosophy or pragmatics of SF, though it may well work wonders for the marketing.

Reference

Jackson, P. Z. and McKergow, M. (2007). *The Solutions Focus: The SIMPLE way to positive change*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing (second edition).