



Eric Haseltine

Changing
the Way

We Change

Why Change Agents Fail

As a senior executive in fields as diverse as Aerospace, Entertainment and Intelligence, I've learned a hard lesson about people and organizations everywhere: they seldom learn from previous failures. To make matters worse, most people not only repeat past mistakes, but fail to learn that they've failed to learn from the past so they go on making the same mistakes over and over again.

For example, CSC, the company that invented the term “re-engineering,” found that 85% of the companies that attempted to re-engineer their business processes failed to achieve any gains. I've personally seen multiple such efforts crash and burn in an organization, only to see still more attempts to fundamentally change the business fail. Even though management routinely conducted post-mortems to pinpoint reasons for the failures, they typically came up with answers such as “requirements creep,” (constantly changing goals for the project) or “inadequate human capital” (workers who didn't know what they were doing). Such answers were valid up to a point, but they described symptoms of an underlying problem, rather than deep causes of the problem. Therefore, attempts to control “requirements creep” and to improve “human capital” on the next big re-engineering project were about as effective as treating a brain tumor with aspirin: the headaches went away for a while, but the fundamental problems remained.

Similarly, attempts in the public sector to tackle problems such as the federal deficit fail time and time again, in part because champions of these ambitious campaigns try to address historical problems—such as poor “voter education”—that are problems to be sure, but the not the deep, core problem that torpedoed the effort.

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And what is the core problem that dooms most attempts to bring about far reaching change, whether inside a company, government or a society? As a neuroscientist and Psychologist, I believe the core issue is that change agents seldom understand what really makes people alter their behavior. Managers learn in business school that we change through role modeling by leaders, incentive programs that reward change, education programs that explain the need for change and by getting “buy-in” from all “stakeholders.” These motivators are all highly desirable—even necessary—to bring about change, but they are far from sufficient.

Jean Monnet, father of the European Union, succinctly described the missing ingredient in most campaigns to change the status quo: “People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognize necessity when a crisis is upon them.” Serving as the first deputy director of the League of Nations, Monnet learned this lesson the hard way when he tried to get European allies to cooperate on economic matters after World War I. In the 1920’s, France and England in particular quickly forgot what had united them a few years earlier and went right back to pursuing independent economic goals. As a result, the two nations were poorly prepared for Hitler two decades later.

In the midst of World War II, Monnet concluded that the only way to prevent future wars was to get Europeans to fundamentally change the definition of “we” vs. “they”—to go from independent European states, to “Europeans.” He believed that only such a spirit of “supra-nationalism” would prevent countries on the continent from continuing their two thousand year tradition of killing each other. So Monnet began to draft a framework for economic and political unification of Europe as early as 1943. But even when the war ended in 1945, Monnet, then France’s top official for rebuilding the country’s economy, did not pursue supra-nationalism because the prevailing feeling in Europe was that the crisis had passed. Monnet bided his time. His opportunity to redefine “we” vs. “they” in Europe came in 1950 when, fearing a westward expansion of soviet communism in Europe, the United States applied intense pressure on Britain and France to rearm

Germany to serve as a bulwark against Russian aggression. France in particular—having repeated the post-World War I mistake of fostering resentment in Germany by taking control of most of Germany’s coal and steel production—was extremely nervous about the prospect of a rearmed Germany. So Monnet proposed to unify France and Germany’s coal and steel industries as a way to mollify Germany while retaining some measure of control over the recent adversary’s coal and steel. Eager to avert a looming crisis, France swiftly adopted Monnet’s proposal, and the European Coal and Steel Commission (ECSC), which encompassed industries of France, Germany, Luxemburg, Belgium and Italy, opened its doors for business two years later.

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The ECSC was the first step toward economic and political union of Europe, paving the way for the creation of the European Common Market in 1957, and the full European Union in 1992. Acknowledging Monnet’s pivotal role in promoting supra-nationalism, John F. Kennedy wrote to Jean in 1963, “under your inspiration, Europe has moved closer to unity in less than twenty years than it had done before in a thousand.”

How the Brain Decides to Change Its Ways

Although Monnet understood the importance of role modeling, incentives, “buy-in” and other “critical success factors” for bringing about change as well as anyone, he did not apply these techniques unless a crisis created the right atmosphere for change. By adopting the wait-for-the-right-time principle, Monnet took advantage of the way the human brain naturally decides when and how it will change behavior. (Incidentally, the EU now faces another crisis that will either pull its institutions even closer together to combat, or risk breaking the union apart completely.)

Our brain evolved into its current form about 50,000 years ago, an era when our ancestors faced extreme risks. Human life expectancies were only about 25 years in those days, owing to constant pressures from malnutrition, disease and violence. Such pressures lead evolution to etch two, automatic, unconscious scripts deep into our brains: 1) conserve as much energy as possible because you never know when you’ll eat again and 2) avoid all unnecessary risks because the world is risky enough without you sticking your neck out.

The first script biases us against making big changes in our lives, because such changes consume energy. Our brains eat up 20% of our daily calorie consumption, and solving hard problems—such as a figuring out how to adapt to radically new environments—doubles

the brain's energy consumption. On a subsistence diet, our ancestors might have starved to death if they thought too much—or so our brains believed. Thus, our brains naturally protected us from “wasting” energy by making thought provoking changes seem undesirable. Following this script, our brains are only moved to change when dire threats—such as drought and starvation—make the risk of inaction greater than the risk of an action like migration.

The second neural script made an assumption that was usually correct—that tried and true ways of doing things were just that: tried and true. So making changes—especially big changes—sacrificed known rewards for unknown benefits. Better to stay the course, our brains believed, and continue to believe to this day. Physical anthropologists and brain scientists believe that our brains are virtually identical to those of our Paleolithic ancestors.

So, modern humans basically have a 1.0 release brain operating in a 50.0 world. For most modern humans, especially those living in Europe, North America and East Asia, life is not extremely risky, and life expectancy is fast approaching 80 years. But the hard-wired scripts in our brains don't know that, so these neural programs continue to execute below the level of consciousness, automatically biasing us against changing our behavior except in times of emergency.

A simple rule of thumb that sums up this principle is that we seldom change when we are in our comfort zones, but often change when we find ourselves in discomfort zones.

The story of how medical science figured out that bacteria cause disease provides a compelling illustration of the discomfort zone principle of change. The first doctor to find proof that germs cause disease was Ignaz Semmelweis, a 19th century Viennese obstetrician who conducted painstaking research into the causes of death from childbed fever. Semmelweis's statistical analysis conclusively demonstrated that hand washing and other antiseptic techniques that killed germs greatly reduced the incidence of infection and disease from child birth. But Semmelweis died alone and discredited in an insane asylum because contemporary doctors entrenched in a comfort zone of prestige and authority refused to believe they were killing their patients through something they couldn't see—and, of course, their own poor hygiene.

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In contrast, the scientist who ultimately proved the germ theory of disease, twenty years later, did so by operating in contemporaries' discomfort zones. Instead of confronting doctors with their bad behavior, Louis Pasteur confined his initial research into the relationship between germs and disease to France's food and beverage industry.

Starting in the 1860s, Pasteur worked with farmers and distillers who came to him in crisis. First, French distillers were losing money because an unknown agent was spoiling their fermentation process. Others in France were in deep trouble from spoilage of beer, wine and milk. The silk industry in France nearly went bankrupt due to a disease in silk worms called pebrine. Finally, an outbreak of anthrax beset France's sheep farmers. Responding to each of these crises by applying meticulous scientific methods, such as microscopy and use of control groups, Pasteur proved that bacteria or viruses caused each of the outbreaks. Armed with an understanding of the underlying cause of disease, Pasteur recommended hygienic measures that resolved the farmers' and distillers' crises. At the same time, the French scientist accomplished what Semmelweis failed to achieve earlier in the century: to prove that germs cause disease.

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Applying the Discomfort Zone Principle Today

The spectacular successes of two Frenchman, Monnet and Pasteur, show two ways to bring about fundamental and important changes in the human condition. The first, following Monnet's lead, is to sit on a big idea until a crisis makes it actionable. Pushing a proposal in the absence of such a crisis is, in the words of a former aerospace colleague, "like pushing a wet noodle up a greased Teflon hill."

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The second method for bringing about major change, inspired by Pasteur, is to sell your big ideas exclusively to people who are in the midst of a crisis right now. As the pace of change accelerates in the flat, over populated, high tech world we live in, there will be no shortage of such crises to occupy visionaries who are passionate about changing the status quo. Cyberspace will experience one major attack after another as hackers and cyber criminals find the global network an increasingly appealing target. America's rust belt will get rustier as manufacturing jobs continue their

inexorable trek offshore. Energy prices are bound to rise steeply as oil production begins an inevitable decline with the depletion of the finite resource. The list of crises is long a getting longer, providing change agents ample opportunity for focusing their efforts where their labors will be appreciated and embraced.

The bottom line is that—as urgently as some things need to be changed—we should stop wasting time and energy trying to change those things if the time is not right and focus on the many things that are ripe for change. Even then, you may have to convince the world that the time is ripe. Witness the struggle for Civil Rights or women’s suffrage, great and complicated tasks even when the cause was right and the leadership inspiring. So mere mortals who are not extremely skilled or lucky should play the odds, find a cause that is ready for you—there are so many that can change the world, or a corner of it—and stick to the philosophy implied by a joke I learned while serving as a Psychotherapist at a community mental health center in California.

Question: “How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?”

Answer: “Only one. But the light bulb really has to want to be changed!” 🗣️

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Eric Haseltine, Ph.D., is a former intelligence officer and entertainment executive who was formally trained as a neuroscientist. He has applied new discoveries about the human brain to diverse fields such as aerospace technology, virtual reality, special effects, and most recently, intelligence and national security matters.

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