



## The Elephant and the Rider: Engaging in Challenging Change

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Whether it is change in our personal or professional lives, true lasting change is difficult. Why is it so difficult? According to Chip and Dan Heath (2010) in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, the main hindrance is that our brains have two independent systems that are always working and can fiercely disagree. The first system is the emotional side. This side is instinctive; it feels pain and pleasure, but wants comfort. The second system is the rational side. This side is contemplative; it ponders and scrutinizes and wants change. There is a natural tension between these two that can result in stasis.

This tension is captured by the psychologist Jonathan Haidt in the analogy of the Elephant and the Rider. Think of the tiny Rider holding the reins on an immense Elephant. The Rider appears to be in charge, but everyone knows the Rider's control is tenuous because the six-ton Elephant is so much larger and stronger. If the Elephant is not motivated, they are not going anywhere; if the Elephant is overexcited, a rampage can follow. In this analogy, the Elephant represents our emotional side and the Rider our rational side. The Elephant must be engaged in order for any movement to take place, but the Elephant's energy needs to be guided by the Rider's planning and direction in order to get to a desired destination.

The Heath brothers draw additional lessons from this analogy. The Rider control, (i.e., self-control and self-supervision), needed to keep the Elephant engaged in learning new activities is an "exhaustible resource." Significant change can quickly exhaust people, especially when that change requires people to alter behaviors that have become automatic and easy. This exhaustion interferes with creativity, persistence and impulse control, exactly the mental muscles needed for change. So what sometimes appears to be resistance or laziness is quite the opposite; people have worn themselves out trying to make a change and revert to their old ways out of exhaustion. As a result, the Heath brothers suggest that real change must occur in small increments.

In addition, those increments need to be very clearly spelled out. If the Rider does not provide specific directions, the Elephant is likely to go in circles until it finally stops moving. "What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity" (Heath & Heath, 2010, pg. 17).

The Heath brothers provide three guidelines for engaging in challenging change:

1. Direct the Rider: When trying to engage others in change, appeal to their Riders. Share bright spots with them that show how the proposed change can create better outcomes. Clearly describe the destination toward which you are working. Provide clear directions for getting there through a step-by-step plan.
2. Motivate the Elephant: People must be emotionally engaged in order to fully cooperate in change efforts. Start by “Finding the Feeling”. People need to know why they should care about the change. Tell stories about what the proposed change will accomplish that speaks to their feelings. Engage people in immediate short-term steps toward that change and celebrate every small victory along the way. Ensure these victories by teaching necessary skills and constantly acknowledging and celebrating every effort.
3. Shape the Path: There is another Heath brother pearl of wisdom: “What looks like a people problem is often a situation problem” (pg. 3). It is not always the people who need changing, sometimes it is the circumstances under which they operate. Look for environmental tweaks that can make it easier for people to engage in the change. Make the change in small incremental steps. Always allow opportunities for repeated practice of a new skill or process so it becomes easy and automatic before adding another new step. Too much change at once usually results in reversion to old and comfortable practices. Finally, sometimes the change has to start with a small group first because many people feel more comfortable joining a change than being in the vanguard of a change. Have you seen the video “[One Lone Nut](#)”?

Dramatic change can be achieved even with a lack of resources and power if you can apply these guiding principles. So motivate your Elephant, direct your Rider and start shaping the change you want to see!

#### References

Heath, C. & Heath, D. (2010) *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*. NY: Broadway Books.



## School Tool: Tools for Facilitating Change

If you are intrigued by the Heath brothers’ ideas about how to support meaningful change, visit their [website](#) to learn more. On their [Resource web page](#), you can download their “Switch for Organizations: The Workbook” and other change tools for free.



Interested in the concept of Shaping the Path and why it is worth trying to start a small change by yourself or with a small group? Watch this video on “[Leadership Lessons from the Dancing Guy](#)”. It may inspire you!



## Bright Spot!

This month our Bright Spot comes from one of our Advanced PBIS Coaches, Brett Sloane from Valley Cottage Elementary in Nyack.

**The Bright Spot:** A student at the school was exhibiting highly problematic behavior on the bus and not responding to any of the consequences. Serious consideration was being given to permanently removing the student from the bus. However, the staff decided to implement a new set of strategies based on positive behavioral supports. According to the coach, "What a turnaround!! His behavior on the bus improved dramatically and he became a model bus student!"

**The Practices:** How was this accomplished? The school team engaged the student in monitoring his own behavior while they focused on acknowledging him for what he was doing well. The student first worked with the team to develop his own positive behavior plan for the bus. As he implemented the plan he checked in with an adult daily on his progress. Initially he received tangible rewards for meeting his goals but now the acknowledgements and his own pride are sufficient motivation for maintaining his success.

### What We Can Learn From This:

- Teaching students to set their own goals, and then giving them strategies to monitor their success in meeting those goals, produces positive immediate outcomes that can have long-term consequences.
- Creating structures that ensure positive student-adult interactions is an important part of effective behavior interventions.

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Do you have questions for the RSE-TASC? You can contact us at 914-248-2289 or [rse-tasc@pnwboces.org](mailto:rse-tasc@pnwboces.org).

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