

Making Change Stick - Session Guide



Welcome. The information within these pages could improve your ability to make change stick, for good. Because sometimes it's easy, but other times it's a full-on slog.

We've all got something we want to change, whether in ourself, our organisation, or the world at large; and I hope these insights will help you to turn any slog into effortless ease.

Most changes should be simple: Once you've figured out where you are, and where you'd like to be, you can work out how to get from one to the other. There are risks to be considered and avoided, and you need to select the optimum route – but we're generally more than capable coming up with something which will work.



Then, you add people to the mix (even if that's just you), and it quickly gets complicated. One of the reasons, is the way that we think.

Our Two-Part Thinking

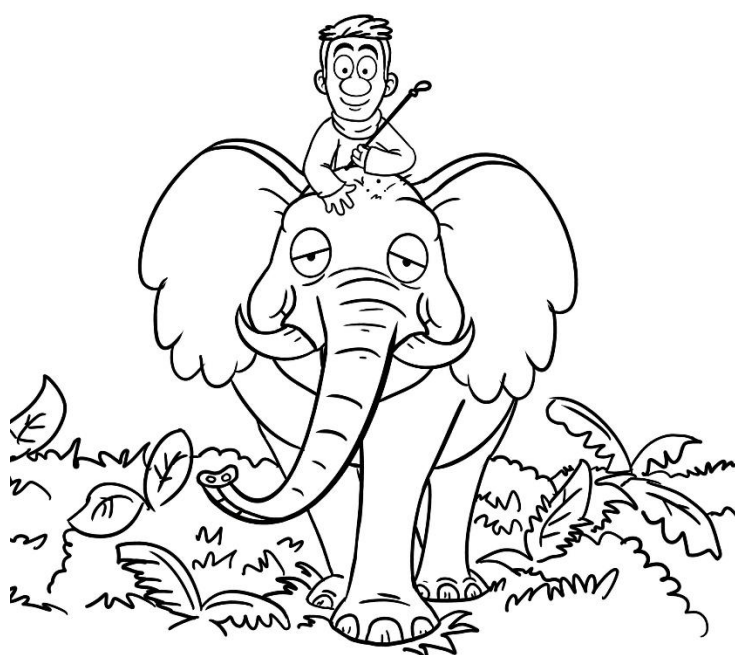
Most of our thinking (and the resulting behaviour) is automatic. Our conscious awareness is where we plan and evaluate, the home of logic and reason, and it has very limited capacity. Research has shown that we're able to hold only around four items of information active in our working attention at any given time. Add more, and the first ones soon slip out.


All the rest of our thinking goes on outside the awareness, in what I like to call our auto-routines - the patterns by which our brains operate, to keep that valuable conscious capacity available for what only it can do.

An example with which many people are familiar is learning to drive a car. At first, there's so much to think about, with all the controls, the mirrors, signs and traffic lights, other road users.... It takes a bit of getting used to; but as we do, our awareness can hand over more and more to the auto routines. So that eventually, you can drive without really thinking about how you're doing it, singing along to the radio, or planning your evening.

One of my favourite models for these two types of our thinking is Jonathan Haidt's elephant and rider: The rider represents our awareness, the deliberate thinking – it likes structure and reason, and makes decisions based on facts and data.

The elephant represents all the rest of our thinking – everything which goes on outside our deliberate awareness. Our emotions, intuition, inspiration and creativity; and those automatic routines which keep us functioning.





Most of the auto-routines are amazingly useful. They might have been set by deliberate practice, like learning to fasten buttons and open doors – and once we have them, we're happy to trust them. Hopefully you never approach a door, concerned that you might have forgotten how to open it.

But these routines can also be the enemy of learning and change – because of our brain's love of familiarity, anything which doesn't fit the usual pattern can be treated with suspicion, or completely ignored.

These patterns can also become the root of limiting beliefs – if our first experience of something hasn't gone well, like a presentation which didn't land well, the brain can generalise it to similar events in the future; setting a new auto-routine that's a lot less helpful.

So what does this mean for change?

For change to go smoothly, for yourself or within your organisation, the rider and elephant need to be lined up to go in the same direction. When they are, they're a powerful team, and even big changes can happen smoothly. Think of someone who's set their heart on running a marathon. With their plan in place, they change their diet, and head out to pound the streets, whatever the weather; sacrificing downtime and maybe even socialising to stick to their plan.

And when they're not aligned.....?

The rider starts to get more insistent, telling the elephant what needs to happen, perhaps using bribes or threats. For an individual, it relies on using willpower, and within an organisation, on management controls to try to shape the desired behaviour. But when the elephant's really not listening, it becomes harder and harder work for the rider to control it.

This is one of the reasons that so many organisational changes fail: SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound) goals assume emotional engagement, rather than creating it. The finance team and board of directors may be hugely excited and energised by the latest targets; but to really work, for behaviours to change for good, these have to be translated into something meaningful for everyone in the organisation.

Even on a personal level, changes like losing weight or ditching a damaging habit can become really hard work if there's mis-alignment in parts of the thinking.

One of the ways to avoid this struggle is to take a little time exploring what you really want – and making sure that want is actually worded as the root of the thing you want to change, rather than as a perceived solution to it.

Here's an example to illustrate: The first project I was given in a new job (the project, as it turned out, for which I'd been specifically hired); was to non-stick coat the heat weld dies of a manufacturing process. We made our product from thin plastic film, which was welded together by a large, hot chunk

of metal. A layer of non-stick fabric between the film and the metal stopped it from turning into a gooey mess.

My project was to make the metal itself non-stick, so the fabric wouldn't be needed. BUT it was very risky – any damage to the metal coating, and it wouldn't stay non-stick (resulting in a lot of scrap product); and as the metal tools were regularly taken in and out of the machines, that damage was highly likely.

The project had been given a budget of £250,000, and a time scale of 8 months. I simply couldn't justify spending that amount of time and cash on something I really didn't believe would work. So I asked 'Why?'.



This wasn't a question my management were used to, so it took a good few askings, to find out that what they actually wanted was the machines to run faster – and taking away the non-stick fabric was expected to enable an 8% speed increase.

Now I was clear on what they actually wanted – make the machines run faster. So I delivered a 12% speed increase, in two weeks, with zero spend, risk free. Simply by finding a better solution to what was actually needed; rather than following along with someone else's perception of the best solution.

Asked glibly, 'why?' can quickly become annoying – like being followed around by a small child, constantly questioning everything, and only sometimes listening to the answer. But carefully targeted, it can save months of accidentally working on the wrong thing, or taking an ineffective route.

Asking why can also help to root out changes which are a 'should' rather than a 'want to': A 'want to' generally has a very clear 'why' behind it – one which aligns with what's really important. 'Shoulds' don't. They're notoriously poor at engaging the elephant, and generally destined to become very hard work.

What's Already Working?



When we're looking to change something, we naturally tend to focus on what's not yet working as we'd like – but by directing our noticing instead to what is working, we can often find short cuts.

Interestingly, though, the first reaction to finding something that's working is often not to ask 'What can I learn from that?', but to question its validity. I've seen this so many times in organisations, when comparing different teams' performance – the first response is generally to argue that the work mixes aren't comparable, or the higher performers are just cutting corners. It can take quite a bit of reassurance before the quest for best-practice sharing begins.

Even when I'm supporting clients in making personal change, there's often a tendency to discount what's already working as fluke, or different because...., keeping the focus on what's not.

Starting with what's working, is something which expert mediators do extremely well. When they first bring the two parties together, they'll go through, in detail, all the points on which they're already agreed. They know that by noticing what's already working, it builds a solid foundation. It shrinks the change of reaching an agreement, making it seem more achievable.

Doing some more of what's good is a lot less daunting than creating it from scratch. A popular mantra within the Continuous Improvement world is 'steal with pride'. No need to reinvent the wheel. You might need to adapt it, but that's a whole lot easier.

What Gets in the Way?

When it comes to capacity, the rider's is pretty limited. So our brains come pre-loaded with an array of shortcuts, designed to keep that limited conscious capacity available for what only it can do. Here's how a few of these shortcuts can get in the way of effective change:

The Bystander Effect



In a novel situation, the more people are present, the less likely anyone is to act. We take our visual cues from each other, and when no one steps forwards, neither do we. The most charmingly simple illustration of this was carried out by the experimenter dropping something – when there was only one other person present, help was offered to pick it up about 60% of the time. But the offers of help reduced incrementally the more people were there to see the dropped items.

In organisations, this effect has been strong in each of the improvement culture change programmes which I've led. The initial high-profile launch discussions can build little inertia when everyone stands back, waiting for someone else to make the first move. So be prepared with a very prescriptive first few steps, to get things rolling.

It's also very common where emails are cc-ed to a lot of people, hoping that one of the recipients will take action. If you really need something done, ask someone specific – and if they're not the right person, you can always work out between you who to route it to instead.

Learned Helplessness

This is another of our mind patterns which is charmingly simple to illustrate.



Imagine you're a student, and at the start of class, your teacher says you're going to have a really quick test: You're to be given three different words, each of which is an anagram of another word. So your task is to scramble the letters into a new word, and put up your hand when you have it.

Your first word is **Whirl**.

As you're still working on it, you see hands going up around you.

You're told to go on to the next word, **Slapstick**, and the same thing happens. Half the hands raised, while you're still trying to make another word from the letters you have. How would you be feeling?

What you don't know is that half the class have been given different words. They have 'Bat' and 'Lemon' instead. Pretty easy anagrams to solve...

The 3rd word (which everyone is given) is **Cinerama**. Even though this can be rearranged to **American**, the half of the class with your initial words simply don't see it. Even amongst students, who are supposedly used to rising to a challenge and persevering through adversity, it takes only two failed attempts for people to stop even trying.

It's not a conscious choice, it kicks in without you realising. And it's pervasive. The more someone's faced with things they can't influence or change, the less they'll spot the opportunities for the things they can. So whatever change you're trying to lead, create these opportunities and celebrate the successes early, breaking the brain out of its efficiency mode.

Avoid Decision Paralysis

Because of our rider's love of being in control, and having it all mapped out, many changes fail very early on. If we can't see the whole path from starting point to desired destination, we might simply stop. But sometimes, it's better to just start moving, in any direction – because it's usually easier to adjust direction as more information emerges, than to create the momentum from scratch.

These days, choice proliferates – you only have to visit Starbucks to experience how simply choosing your hot drink has a huge 2,000+ different options. But choice isn't always a good thing. If we're faced with too many options, we'll often let the auto-routine dominate, and stick with what we know best. This was starkly illustrated by the research of Donald Redelmeier and Eldar Shafir:



The scenario was simple – a 67 year old arthritic patient is scheduled for a hip replacement, a highly invasive surgery with risks, and a potentially long recovery. Previous medication has failed, but a final check reveals one last medication which hasn't yet been tried, giving the doctor a dilemma. Would you prescribe, potentially subjecting the patient to further months of pain if it doesn't work, or progress straight to surgery?

47% of the doctors asked chose to try the medication. A second group of doctors were then presented with a similar dilemma, except that this time, there were two medications to choose from – making it an over all three-way choice. Those who chose some form of medication dropped all the way to 28% - the rest sticking with the familiar route of surgery. Simply adding a third option almost halved the number who'd choose an unfamiliar route.

A powerful question in designing change is 'What will be the first thing you'll notice when you have what you want?', or even simply 'What will it be like when....' It bypasses the paralysis of not knowing how to get there, and opens up the imagination (engaging the elephant) to what it could be like.

The Warning Signs



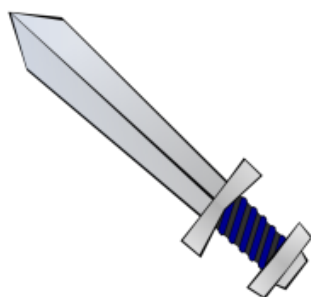
Rationalising away failure is a warning sign that the elephant's not fully bought-in: The refrigerator blow-out after a bad day at work, a sign that the elephant's still more interested in short-term gratification, than the long-term gains of losing weight.

In these cases, it's worth looking at the motivation: 'Away from' motivation (avoiding something unpleasant) works best when you're looking for simple compliance. For some drivers, traffic rules are a good example of this - they'll happily speed or jump red lights, if they think they can get away without getting caught.

But this type of motivation does little to engage the creativity or the emotions – so if you're looking for change which requires these to be part of the success mix; look instead at making the motivation 'Towards' something desirable instead.

Examples like providing excellent customer service, where you'd like staff to think on their feet in a whole array of situations, can't be prescribed by pure compliance – they have to be 'towards' driven – which some organisations do exceedingly well.

Identity – the double-edged sword



Identity, our perception of who we are, is hugely powerful in shaping our change-ability. Someone who thinks of themselves as 'not an assertive person', is likely to shrink away from opportunities to make themselves heard, never really exploring their potential capabilities. Even on occasions when they do assert themselves, they'll tend to rule it out, thinking 'that was different because....' – protecting their perceived identity. It's simply a belief, but belief is a powerful shaper of the elephant's (our automatic) behaviour.

But on the plus side, we'll work hard to conform to our perceived identity too – so a sportsperson who believes themselves to be a winner, will work tirelessly to make it so. Organisations who foster high employee engagement, do so through the shared organisational identity; to excel in fields such as innovation or customer service.

So one of the most powerful ways to drive change, coaxing the elephant along a different path, is to make sure that path is clearly aligned with a compelling identity.

One way to begin may be by re-framing the currently perceived identity as simply a behaviour (or lack of it). The non-assertive person doesn't have a hard-wired characteristic – they've simply not been doing the behaviours of assertive; which just like driving a car, can be learned and practised to set new auto-routines.

For many of the clients who I've supported to get rid of extreme stress or anxiety, the first step has been the realisation that anxious and stressed is not who they are, it's something they've been doing. Even if they've been doing it for as long as they remember, they can learn how not to – and with the right guidance they do, often quickly and smoothly.

Building New Auto-Routines


Some auto-routines establish more quickly than others – so for change to really stick, the new way needs to be the easiest way. The elephant likes the path of least resistance, and there are all sorts of ways of ensuring this, depending on the type of change.

It might require adjustments to the physical environment, like not buying tempting snacks when you're dieting, so they're not in the house to interrupt progress; or arranging a workplace so that the task being carried out smoothly follows the new sequence.

It's likely to require lots of feedback and positive reinforcement, keeping the noticing firmly directed to what's already working. Parents actively practise this when encouraging a child to walk – every single move and step in the right direction receiving enthusiastic encouragement – and after a stumble or fall, the child's quite happy to get up and carry on.



How might things be different if we offered that same kind of un-faltering support to ourselves?



It might simply need really clear instructions for what's expected – it's surprising the range of different interpretations we can place, on what seems to be a few simple words; so what you think you've asked for might not be what was heard.

Making Change Stick – Checklist

Whether the change you're making is personal, organisational or beyond; to make it stick, keep in mind

- Engage the elephant, the outside-awareness thinking, making the rider's job much easier
- Ask why – make sure that the chosen destination is fixing a root issue, and not just someone's perception of the solution
- Find what's already working, and steal with pride
- Keep it simple, to avoid decision paralysis
- Keep an eye open for the warning signs of rationalising away failure
- Leverage the power of identity
- Change the environment to shape the behaviours
- Provide lots of feedback, and positive reinforcement

And more than anything KEEP GOING!

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Chip and Dan Heath, for their amazing book 'Switch', which gave added clarity to why I intuitively work the way I do. It's a highly recommended read to expand on the ideas within this guide.

About Sue Evans

The whole of my career has been about change – firstly as an Engineer, leading new factory start-ups and performance step changes, delivering several £multi-million savings and more than doubling productivity within two different international organisations. More recently as a coach and Director of the FAST Pathways Academy, helping people to think differently, changing minds.



My biggest personal change started with an accidental discovery. I attended a week's course about communication, and discovered a whole new passion. Thinking skills – things that I'd been doing automatically (as we all do), without realising that I could do them differently, and get so much better results.

I trained LOTS more, and soon ventured happily into the unknown of setting up my own businesses – something which would have terrified me only a year earlier; and I've never looked back. Those new skills opened up a whole new life that I'd never dreamed of, and they're skills which I'm passionate about sharing.

So I created the FAST Pathways Academy...

Most approaches to stress centre on managing it. Managing's better than not doing - but the results are often patchy, following yo-yo cycles. Very similar to yo-yo dieting, and just as ineffective.

Because managing has a major drawback. Whatever method you choose requires doing something differently - prioritising, practising mindfulness, taking time to exercise or talk things through....

And we're rubbish at doing what's good for us (the diet industry relies on it!), or at least not consistently enough to maintain the results.

FAST Pathways is different. The Academy programmes blend interactive masterclasses with bite-sized skills resources, introducing the skills to improve both performance and wellbeing by re-training the outside-awareness thinking - so that with a little deliberate guidance, it can start to do things differently all by itself.

Meaning that the results last without on-going practice, delivering natural resilience to uncertainty and adversity; and keeping you at your most resourceful, even when the pressure's on.

To explore go to www.fast-pathways.com