



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

## Hope is not a strategy for change

### What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity

**H**ope seems to be hard-wired into our DNA. Ever find yourself thinking, “Boy, I sure hope the plant manager approves my budget this year so I can implement the safety change we need to be in compliance with the new regs.” Often we lay in bed at night hoping things will be better in the morning, but, alas, in the morning, nothing has changed.

“Hope” is not a strategy, nor is it a method. There is nothing wrong with having hope; however, when hope is all we count on and we subsequently fail, we give up.

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in his “Human, All Too Human,” referring to Pandora’s box, “...for Zeus did not want man to throw his life away, no matter how much the other evils might torment him, but rather to go on letting himself be tormented anew. To that end, he gives man hope. In truth, it is the most evil of evils because it prolongs man’s torment.”<sup>1</sup>

Even though hope was “the most evil of evils” released from Pandora’s fabled box; many would argue that change should have been included in Pandora’s box.

The most difficult challenge environmental safety and health (EHS) professionals can encounter in their careers is to be tasked with leading and implementing change within their workforce. Why do people find change intolerable?

Our close familiarity with routine work habits often interferes with our willingness to try something new. Whenever we make a mistake, our tendency is to rationalize our error; sometimes through very sophisticated means. Since we try to preserve the past for as long as pos-

sible, our typical response to change is reactive, rather than anticipatory.<sup>2</sup>

Most of us would rather react to than initiate a new approach to safety. Thomas Kuhn, in his “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,” hit upon this in writing, “...The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by problem-solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few.”

Kuhn’s magnum opus introduces his readers to the concept of paradigm shifts — a previously held scientific norm (i.e., paradigm) shifts to a new scientific norm. This paradigm shift is typically evolutionary because, in almost every case, the shift occurs based on work done by young researchers who are not wedded to the old paradigm. Data builds over time until a tipping point is reached, and then the paradigm shift occurs. Evidence of the paradigm shift appears when the “old-timers” let go of their previous paradigm and embrace the new “normal science.”<sup>3</sup>

### Time for a change

With the financial meltdown (a paradigm shift) that occurred in March 2009 and the attendant outfall, I believe it is time, in fact, past time, to start practicing our profession differently. Of course this is easier said than done. Consider the median age of currently practicing safety and health pros and the workforces they serve. Remember, “old-timers” view their



current safety paradigm as working just fine, thank you very much.

How do we affect this change as opposed to hoping the change will take place? Countless books and articles have been written on change: *Change Management*, *Change Leadership*, *Change Followership*, *The Heart of Change*, and on and on.

Amazon.com’s search engine finds more than 100,000 references when searching for the word “change.” Still, launching a change effort is probably where and when most endeavors at a paradigm shift crash, burn and die.

Chip Heath and Dan Heath, best-selling authors of “Made to Stick,” have possibly discovered one roadmap to affecting a safety paradigm shift in their new book, “Switch – How to Change Things when Change is Hard.”<sup>4</sup> They frame their “How to Make the Switch” model after Jonathan Haidt’s metaphor in his book, “The Happiness Hypothesis,” of a rider perched on top of an elephant.<sup>5</sup> The elephant represents our emotional side and the rider our rational side. Anytime the elephant and the rider disagree on which direction to go, the elephant always wins. Think about the times your emotions have won out over your rational side.

Three surprises about change the Heath brothers discovered:

- ⊗ What looks like a people problem is often a situation problem.
- ⊗ What looks like laziness is often exhaustion.
- ⊗ What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity.

The next time you are faced with implementing a change effort, consider

## How To Make A [Safety Paradigm] Switch<sup>6</sup>

*For safety to change, somebody somewhere has to start acting differently. Picture that person or people. Each has an emotional Elephant side and a rational Rider side.*

*You've got to reach both and you've also got to clear the way for them to succeed. In short, you must do three things:*

### 1) DIRECT the Rider

**Follow the bright spots.** Seek out and investigate safety practices that are being done correctly and clone them.

**Script the critical moves.** Avoid thinking Big Picture and think in terms of specific safety behaviors of the person or people.

**Point to the destination.** Change is easier when you know where you're going (#1 product producer) and why it is worth it (To safely go home to your family).

### 2) MOTIVATE the Elephant

**Find the feeling.** Knowing something isn't enough to cause change. Make people feel something.

**Shrink the change.** Break down the safety change until it no longer spooks the Elephant. Focus on work teams versus the entire plant operation at one time.

**Grow your people.** Cultivate a sense of identity and instill the growth mindset. Build work team spirit

through a "buddy" system.

### 3) SHAPE the Path

**Tweak the environment.** When the situation changes, the safety behaviors change. So change the situation. Look for physical changes you can make (e.g., refurbish the bathrooms, spruce-up housekeeping, improve work areas, etc.).

**Build habits.** When safety behavior is habitual, it's "Free" – it doesn't exhaust the Rider. Look for ways to encourage safe behaviors. Point out and be supportive of good safe work practices.

**Rally the herd.** Safe behaviors are contagious. Help it spread.

whether these three surprises apply to your change initiative.

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