

The Catalyst

HOW TO CHANGE
ANYONE'S MIND



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THE CATALYST

How to Change Anyone's Mind

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*To Jordan, Jasper, Zoë, and little piccolina
For changing my life in all the best ways*

Introduction

As a case agent for the FBI, Greg Vecchi specialized in international drug trafficking, money laundering, and extortion. Many of his targets were hardened, violent career criminals. The kinds of guys who sold helicopters to the Medellín drug cartel or tried to buy old Russian submarines to sneak cocaine into the United States from Colombia.

To corner one suspect from the Russian mob, Greg led a three-year wiretapping effort, painstakingly collecting information and building a case. When the warrants were ready, Greg called in a SWAT team: dozens of stocky guys in full body armor who would then storm in, neutralize the bad guys, and collect the evidence.

As he briefed the team, he outlined the various concerns. Greg emphasized that the suspect might be armed and was certainly dangerous. The SWAT team formed an arrest plan that left no room for error. They needed to get this just right or things could turn violent in a hurry.

At the end of the briefing, everyone left the room except for one guy. Greg had spotted him earlier. In a room full of commandos, this guy looked out of place. Fat, short, and bald, he was nowhere close to the chiseled picture of SWAT material.

“Tell me about your guy,” the man asked. “I want to know more.”

“Not sure what you mean,” said Greg. “I just did. I said I’ve got this whole file of —”

“No. No, no, no,” went the guy. “I don’t mean his criminal history. I don’t mean his violent past and all the other stuff. You’ve been on the wiretap, right?”

“Yeah,” Greg replied.

“What is he like?” the man asked.

“What do you mean, ‘What is he like?’”

“What does he do? What are his hobbies? Tell me about his family. Does he have any pets?”

Does the suspect have any pets? Greg thought to himself. *We're about to send a paramilitary unit after a guy, and you want to know whether he has any pets? What a bunch of crap. No wonder this guy got left behind by the rest of the SWAT team.*

Greg dutifully provided the information and started to collect the briefing documents he'd laid out.

"One last question," the guy said. "The suspect is there now, right?"

"Yeah," said Greg.

"Well, give me his phone number," the guy said, before walking out the door.

When it came time for the arrest, the SWAT team was ready. Stacked in a line outside the building, one behind the other, waiting to kick in the door. Dressed in black from head to toe, they had their shields out and guns drawn. "Get down! Get down! Get down!" they'd yell before rushing in and grabbing the suspect.

But as the seconds ticked by, the SWAT team still hadn't gone in. A few minutes passed. Then a few more.

Greg started to worry. He knew the suspect better than anyone. He'd listened to him talk with his friends and associates. The guy was bad news. He would kill people. He'd been in a Russian prison and he wasn't scared of a fight.

Then all of a sudden the door opened up.

And out into the open came the suspect. With his hands up.

Greg was dumbfounded. He'd been in law enforcement for a long time. Years as a special agent in the U.S. Army and the Department of Agriculture. He'd worked undercover across the United States and done anti-corruption work on the Mexican border. He had a good chunk of experience. But a guy coming out of his own accord and getting arrested without incident? He'd never seen anything like it.

Then he realized: that short, bald guy he'd been talking to? *That* guy was a hostage negotiator. And the hostage negotiator convinced the suspect to do something no one thought possible: turn himself over to the authorities, in broad daylight, without a fight.

Shit, Greg thought. *I want to be that guy.*

Since then Greg has spent more than twenty years as a hostage negotiator. He's dealt with international kidnappings, interviewed Saddam Hussein after his capture, and headed the FBI's legendary Behavioral Science Unit. From talking down bank robbers to interrogating serial killers, he's changed people's minds under seemingly impossible conditions.

Crisis negotiation emerged after the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, where terrorists took hostage and then killed eleven Israeli Olympians. Previously, the focus had often been on force, telling people, "Come out with your hands up or we'll shoot!" But after Munich and a number of other very public failures, it became clear that bullying people into submission wasn't working. So practitioners turned to the psychology literature, using behavioral science to build new training techniques that could safely deescalate a crisis.¹

For the last few decades, negotiators like Greg have relied on a different model—one that works. Whether trying to convince an international terrorist to let hostages go or to change someone's mind about committing suicide. Even when talking to someone who just killed his family, who's locked himself up in a bank with hostages, who knows he's talking to a police officer, who knows the consequences and knows his life is going to change. Nine out of ten times he comes out by himself.

And he comes out just because someone asks.

The Power of Inertia

Everyone has something they want to change. Salespeople want to change their customers' minds and marketers want to change purchase decisions. Employees want to change their bosses' perspective and leaders want to change organizations. Parents want to change their children's behavior. Start-ups want to change industries. Nonprofits want to change the world.

But change is hard.

We persuade and cajole and pressure and push, but even after all that work, often nothing moves. Things change at a glacial pace if they change at all. In the tale of the tortoise and the hare, change is a three-toed sloth on his lunch break.

Isaac Newton famously noted that an object in motion tends to stay in motion, while an object at rest tends to stay at rest. Sir Isaac focused on physical objects—planets, pendulums, and the like—but the same concepts can be applied to the social

world. Just like moons and comets, people and organizations are guided by conservation of momentum. Inertia. They tend to do what they've always done.

Rather than thinking about which candidate represents their values, voters tend to pick whoever represents the party they voted for in the past. Rather than starting fresh and thinking about which projects deserve attention, companies take last year's budget and use that as a starting point. Rather than rebalancing financial portfolios, investors tend to look at how they've been investing and stay the course.

Inertia explains why families go back to the same vacation spot every year and why organizations are wary of starting new initiatives but loath to kill off old ones.

When trying to change minds and overcome such inertia, the tendency is to push. Client not buying the pitch? Send them a deck of facts and reasons. Boss not listening to the idea? Give them more examples or a deeper explanation.

Whether trying to change company culture or get the kids to eat their vegetables, the assumption is that pushing harder will do the trick. That if we just provide more information, more facts, more reasons, more arguments, or just add a little more force, people will change.

Implicitly, this approach assumes that people are like marbles. Push them in one direction and they will go that way.

Unfortunately, that approach often backfires. Unlike marbles, people don't just roll with it when you try to push them. They push back. Rather than saying yes, the client stops returning our calls. Rather than going along, the boss says they'll think about it, which is a nice way of saying "Thanks, but no way." Rather than coming out with their hands up, a suspect holes up and starts shooting.

So if pushing people doesn't work, what does?

A Better Way to Change Minds

To answer this question, it helps to look to a completely different domain: chemistry.

Left to itself, chemical change can take eons. Algae and plankton turning into oil, or carbon being gradually squeezed into diamonds. For reactions to occur, molecules must break the bonds between their atoms and form new ones. It's a slow and painstaking process that happens over thousands if not millions of years.

To facilitate change, chemists often use a special set of substances. These unsung heroes clean the exhaust in your car and the grime on your contact lenses. They turn

air into fertilizer and petroleum into bike helmets. They speed change, enabling molecules that might take years to interact to do so in seconds.

Most intriguing, though, is the *way* these substances generate change.

Chemical reactions usually require a certain amount of energy. Turning nitrogen gas into fertilizer, for example, usually requires heating things up to over 1000°C. Adding enough energy, through temperature and pressure, to force a reaction.

Special substances speed up the process. But rather than upping the heat or adding more pressure, they provide an alternate route, reducing the amount of energy required for reactions to occur.

At first glance, this seems impossible. Like magic. How can faster change happen with *less* energy? It seems to violate the very laws of thermodynamics.

But special substances take a different approach. Rather than pushing, they lower the barriers to change.

And these substances are called catalysts.¹

Catalysts have revolutionized chemistry. Their discovery generated multiple Nobel Prizes, kept billions of people from starving, and spawned some of the greatest inventions of the last few centuries.

But their underlying approach is equally powerful in the social world. Because there is a better way to generate change. It's not about pushing harder. And it's not about being more convincing or a better persuader. These tactics might work once in a while, but more often than not they just lead people to up their defenses.

Instead, it's about being a catalyst—changing minds by removing roadblocks and lowering the barriers that keep people from taking action.

That's exactly what hostage negotiators do. Anyone faced with a SWAT team bearing down on them is bound to feel trapped. Whether they're a Russian mobster or a would-be bank robber holding three hostages at gunpoint. Push them too hard and they'll snap. Tell them what to do and they're unlikely to listen.

Good hostage negotiators take a different tack. They start by listening and building trust. They encourage the suspect to talk through their fears and motivations and who's waiting for them back home. Even talking about *pets* in the middle of a tense stand-off, if that is what's required.

Because the hostage negotiators' aim is to ease the pressure, rather than banging down the door. Gradually lowering the suspect's fear, uncertainty, and hostility, until they look at their situation and realize that the best option is likely the one that seemed unthinkable at the start: coming out with their hands up.

Great hostage negotiators don't push harder. Or up the heat in an already tense situation. Instead, they identify what's preventing change from happening and remove that barrier. Allowing change to happen with less energy, not more.

Just like a catalyst.

Catalyzing Change

I started studying catalysts because I was stuck.

A Fortune 500 company had asked for help launching a revolutionary new product, but traditional approaches weren't working. They'd tried advertising, push messaging, and all the usual tactics, without much luck.

So I dug into the literature.

In my day job, as a professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, I've spent more than two decades studying the science of social influence, word of mouth, and why things become popular. With a set of amazing colleagues, I've conducted hundreds of experiments on everything from why people buy to what drives decision-making and choice. I've had the pleasure of teaching tens of thousands of students and executives, and helped hundreds of companies like Apple, Google, Nike, and GE change minds, behaviors, and actions. I've helped Facebook launch new hardware, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation sharpen messaging, and small start-ups, political campaigns, and nonprofit organizations get their products, services, and ideas to catch on.

But as I read more and more, I realized that most perspectives out there took the same traditional approach. Coax, convince, and encourage. Push, push, push. And if that doesn't work, rinse and repeat. Step on the gas and push harder.

And they weren't working.

I started wondering if there might be a better way. I interviewed start-up founders to learn how they drive adoption of new products and services. I talked with CEOs and managers to discover how great leaders transform organizations. I spoke to superstar salespeople to learn how they convince the toughest clients. And I

consulted with public health officials to find out how they change behavior and speed diffusion of important medical innovations.

Slowly, a different method emerged. An alternate approach to changing minds.

We tried a rough version with the client and it got a little traction. We revised it and were even more successful. Emboldened by these early wins, we tried extending the approach to a different company. They found it useful, and soon I was trying this technique on all my consulting projects. Driving product adoption, changing behavior, and shifting organizational culture.

One day a potential client asked if I had something written up that I could share. Something that documented our strategy and approach.

I culled slides from different PowerPoint decks but realized that wasn't enough. There needed to be one place where all the information was pulled together in an easy-to-read package.

This is that place.

Find the Parking Brakes

This book takes a different approach to change.

Unfortunately, when it comes to trying to create change, people rarely think about removing roadblocks. When asked how to change someone's mind, 99 percent of the answers focus on some version of pushing. "Present facts and evidence," "Explain my reasons," and "Convince them" are common refrains.

We are so focused on our desired outcome that we're consumed with how we can push people in that direction. But along the way, we tend to forget about the person whose mind we're trying to change. And what's stopping them.

Because rather than asking what might convince someone to change, catalysts start with a more basic question: *Why hasn't that person changed already?* What is blocking them?

That's what this book is all about: how to overcome inertia, incite action, and change minds—not by being more persuasive, or pushing harder, but by being a catalyst. By removing the barriers to change.

Every time you start driving, you buckle your seat belt, stick your key in the ignition, and slowly press the gas pedal. Sometimes, if you're on an incline, the car

needs a little more gas, but in general the more you push on the gas, the more movement you get.

But what if you push and push and the car doesn't budge? Then what?

Whenever change fails to happen, we think we need more horsepower. Employees not adopting that new strategy? Send out another email reminding them why they should. Customers not buying the product? Spend more money on advertising or give them yet another sales call.

But with all that focus on pushing on the gas, we often overlook an easier and more effective way: identifying what is blocking or preventing change. And eliminating these obstacles to action.

Sometimes change doesn't require more horsepower. Sometimes we just need to unlock the parking brake.

This book is about finding the parking brakes. Discovering the hidden barriers preventing change. Identifying the root or core issues that are thwarting action and learning how to mitigate them.

Each chapter lays out a key roadblock and how to address it.

Principle 1: Reactance

When pushed, people push back. Just like a missile defense system protects against incoming projectiles, people have an innate anti-persuasion system. Radar that kicks in when they sense someone is trying to convince them. To lower this barrier, catalysts encourage people to persuade themselves. You'll learn about the science of reactance, how warnings become recommendations, and the power of tactical empathy. How a public health official got teens to quit smoking and how a hostage negotiator got hardened criminals to come out with their hands up, just by asking.

Principle 2: Endowment

As the old saying goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. People are wedded to what they're already doing. And unless what they're doing is terrible, they don't want to switch. To ease endowment, or people's attachment to the status quo, catalysts highlight how inaction isn't as costless as it seems. Discover why sellers value things more than buyers, why the upsides need to be 2.6 times larger than the downsides to get people

to take action, and why spraining a finger can actually be more painful than breaking one. How financial advisors get clients to invest more sensibly and how IT professionals get employees to adopt new technologies.

Principle 3: Distance

People have an innate anti-persuasion system, but even when we just provide information, sometimes it backfires. Why? Another barrier is distance. If new information is within people's zone of acceptance, they're willing to listen. But if it is too far away, in the region of rejection, everything flips. Communication is ignored or, even worse, increases opposition. You'll learn how to swing a voter and how a political activist got committed conservatives to support liberal policies like transgender rights. Why big changes require asking for less, not pushing for more. And how catalysts find the unsticking points to change minds on the seemingly toughest issues.

Principle 4: Uncertainty

Change often involves uncertainty. Will a new product, service, or idea be as good as the old one? It's hard to know for sure, and this uncertainty makes people hit the pause button, halting action. To overcome this barrier, catalysts make things easier to try. Like free samples at the supermarket or test drives at the car dealership, reducing risk by letting people experience things for themselves. Discover why lenient return policies increase profits, why farmers fail to adopt helpful innovations, and how a former minor-league baseball ticket salesman built a billion-dollar business on free shipping. And lest you think this idea is restricted to big businesses with a product or service to offer, I'll show you how anyone can apply these concepts, from animal shelters and accountants to vegetarians and organizational change efforts.

Principle 5: Corroborating Evidence

Sometimes one person, no matter how knowledgeable or assured, is not enough. Some things just need more proof. More evidence to overcome the translation problem and drive change. Sure, one person endorsed something, but what does their endorsement say about whether *I'll* like it? To overcome this barrier, catalysts find reinforcement. Corroborating evidence. You'll see how substance abuse counselors

encourage addicts to seek treatment, which sources are most impactful, and why and when it's better to concentrate scarce resources rather than spreading them out.

Reactance, Endowment, Distance, Uncertainty, and Corroborating Evidence can be called the five horsemen of inertia. Five key roadblocks that hinder or inhibit change.

Each chapter focuses on one of these roadblocks, and how to reduce it. Integrating research and case studies to illustrate the underlying science behind each roadblock and the principles that individuals and organizations have used to mitigate it.

These five ways to be a catalyst can be organized into an acronym. Catalysts reduce *Reactance*, ease *Endowment*, shrink *Distance*, alleviate *Uncertainty*, and find *Corroborating Evidence*. Taken together, that forms an acronym, REDUCE. Which is exactly what great catalysts do. They **REDUCE** roadblocks. They change minds and incite action by reducing barriers to change.

After each principle, there is a short case study illustrating how these ideas apply to different domains—from changing the boss's mind and driving Britons to support Brexit to changing consumer behavior and getting a grand dragon to renounce the Ku Klux Klan.

Note that not every situation involves all five roadblocks. Sometimes reactance is the key barrier. Other times uncertainty plays a larger role. Some cases involve a combination of a few barriers, and others involve only one. But by understanding all of them, we can diagnose which ones are at work and mitigate them.

This book has a simple goal: to reframe how we approach a universal problem. You'll learn why people and organizations change—and how you can catalyze that process.

Throughout the book I'll apply the idea of removing barriers to individual, organizational, and social change. And along the way you'll see how catalysts have applied these ideas to a range of different situations. How leaders transform organizational culture and how activists ignite social movements. How salespeople close the deal and employees get management to support new ideas. How substance abuse counselors get addicts to realize they have a problem and how political canvassers change deeply rooted political beliefs.

We'll talk about changing both minds and behavior. Sometimes concepts that change one also change the other, but other times we don't need to change minds to

drive action. Sometimes people are already open to changing their behavior; we just need to remove roadblocks and make it easier to happen.

This book is designed for anyone who wants to catalyze change. It provides a powerful way of thinking and a range of techniques that can lead to extraordinary results.

Whether you're trying to change one person, transform an organization, or shift the way an entire industry does business, this book will teach you how to become a catalyst.²

I. Reactions happen when molecules collide. But rather than increasing the frequency of collisions, as adding energy does, catalysts increase their success rate. Instead of bouncing around on a bunch of blind dates, hoping something sticks, a catalyst acts as a matchmaker, encouraging reactants to encounter each other at the right orientations for change to occur.

1. Reactance

Chuck Wolfe was facing an impossible task. Florida's governor had asked him to head up a new program. This itself was nothing new. Chuck had served the governor for almost a decade in a variety of different roles: operations manager, director of external affairs, and executive director of financial oversight. He had developed and implemented programs that aided relief efforts after Hurricane Andrew and helped the city of Miami dig itself out of its financial crisis.

But this time the challenge was much larger. Chuck's job was to build a team to fight an industry that sold more than a trillion products to more than a billion consumers worldwide. An industry that spent almost \$10 billion a year marketing its products and in which leading companies individually had profits larger than Coca-Cola, Microsoft, and McDonald's.

Combined.

Chuck's goal? To do something dozens of organizations had failed at for decades: to get teens to stop smoking.

In the late 1990s, smoking was the biggest public health crisis facing the nation. Cigarettes were the largest cause of preventable deaths and disease, killing tens of millions of people worldwide. In the United States alone, smoking was responsible for one in five deaths and had an economic cost of almost \$150 billion a year.¹

The problem was particularly acute among teens. Tobacco companies knew the youth market was vital to their success. While outwardly they claimed to avoid teens and children, internally they knew that wasn't an option. "Today's teenager is tomorrow's potential regular customer, and the overwhelming majority of smokers first begin to smoke while still in their teens," a Philip Morris memo noted. Not selling to children meant going out of business.