

Change and the Brain

- Marcia Hughes & James Terrell

Change is Hard Work. It's possible, yet sustainable behavior change requires clarity, focused commitment and practice. Whether we're working on our own change or coaching a team or leaders to change, four key steps must be engaged:

- Understanding (the cognitive part)
- Commitment (the inspirational part)
- Practice (the determined part)
- Feedback (the collaborative part)

Thanks to neuroplasticity, which refers to the changes that occur in the brain as a result of experience, our work as change agents gains enhanced credibility because of the recognition that people can change. According to the theory of neuroplasticity, thinking, learning, and acting actually change both the brain functionally (our point of interest) and physically. The research showing that some functional aspects of the brain are highly mutable is, from our perspective, one of the most extraordinary discoveries of the twentieth century.

Change happens one person at a time and when this highly specific process is followed. Some people may be so excited to change that they follow these steps without specifically thinking about them. However, for individuals or organizational leaders, consultants and others seeking to build new behaviors, recognizing this process will greatly promote success.

The Four Steps to Sustainable Change:

1. The cognitive part: Build buy-in through awareness. Provide and solicit information on why the change is needed including recognition on the costs experienced now because the change hasn't been made, what the desired change is specifically, how others have made the change, (stories or case examples are powerful), and strategies for making the change.
2. The inspirational part: Make a commitment to making the change, and that is a lot easier when accompanied by inspiration. Follow this strategy. Imagine it is 3 weeks or 3 months from now and the change took place. Notice how good it feels. Ask yourself "What do you hear differently?" "What do you see that's different?" "How does your life work better?" Gaining a sense of these concrete results can provide the motivation for engaging in step 3.
3. The determined part: We know that learning to play the piano, soccer, or be a gourmet chef requires sustained practice. So does any behavioral change. Whether you're building assertiveness, increasing happiness, or building conflict resolution skills, a commitment to regular sustained practice turns something that you have to think about into a habit.



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4. The collaborative part: Find some change enforcers to help increase your awareness of how well you're doing with the change. A few trusted colleagues providing feedback will help you gain perspective. Additionally, it helps hold our feet to the fire when we know we'll be talking with someone else about our successes and challenges in practicing the change until it's a successful part of our natural behavior.

Good luck and remember:

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." - Aristotle