

## BOOK CLUB SYNOPSIS

*How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of  
Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion*

David McRaney

Portfolio, 2022

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# INTRODUCTION

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This book explores how to change the minds of others and yourself—in a fairly short period of time. While increasingly ugly and entrenched arguments on the internet may suggest that changing minds isn't possible in today's age, this simply isn't true. In fact, arguing is one of the key steps that leads us to consensus.

According to cognitive scientist Hugo Mercier, humans evolved to reach consensus. “Groups that did a better job of reaching consensus, by both producing and evaluating arguments, were better at reaching communal goals and out-survived those that didn't. That led to the innate psychology that compels us to persuade others to see things our way when we believe our groups are misguided.” Arguing is only useful *because* we are capable of changing our minds.

This book delves into what we're doing wrong when we fail to change minds, what we should do instead, and how these tactics combined can create social change; it looks at persuasion, which is changing a mind without coercion. A person who isn't open to changing their mind can't be persuaded—but at the same time, the purpose of the exercise shouldn't be about “winning” an argument; it should be about learning the truth.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### POST-TRUTH

This chapter follows the story of a man named Charlie Veitch, who was once a conspiracy theorist—a 9/11 “truther”—and eventually changed his mind. Over the course of a trip to New York City with a documentary crew and several other truthers, Veitch spoke to a number of experts and eyewitnesses about the attacks on September 11, 2001. Unlike the rest of the members of the group who doubled down on their beliefs, Veitch shifted his thinking and came around to the possibility that the attacks weren’t part of a government conspiracy.

For a long time, many people believed that facts alone would be enough to change someone’s mind. They believed that if everyone had access to the same facts, they would eventually come to the same conclusions. But this information-deficit model has been put to the test with the advent of the internet. Instead of creating consensus, things that were once accepted as facts by many have been called into question. While we are ever more likely to encounter people with beliefs different from our own, we’re becoming increasingly entrenched in our views, leading to further disagreements and cynicism. In short, we’ve started to believe that we’re living in separate realities.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### DEEP CANVASSING

Deep canvassing is a technique created and used by a group of people at the Leadership LAB, an organization that is part of the Los Angeles LGBT Center in California. The group goes out canvassing in pairs, with one person assigned the role of trying to change people’s minds and the other responsible for recording it on camera. The group then uses the footage of these interactions to hone the effectiveness of their approach.

Dave Fleischer, the creator of the Leadership LAB, has spent much of his life working on LGBTQ campaigns. But he didn’t identify deep canvassing until the years following the 2008 passage of Proposition 8 in California. At the time, he wanted to figure out why people had voted for it—so he decided to go out and ask them. Over time, he recognized that having these conversations, if executed in the right way, could essentially lead to the other person talking themselves into a new position without even realizing it.

Some of the key ingredients of a successful conversation are talking about oneself only enough to demonstrate friendliness and interest, avoiding facts, and getting the other person to talk, which helps them understand where their ideas come from. Facts don’t work because what matters to one person might not be convincing to the other, and challenging beliefs or justifications for those beliefs is not effective.

The Leadership LAB team found that “battling over differing interpretations of the evidence kept the people they met from exploring *why* they felt so strongly one way or the other. People

could remain in the logic space doing battle with the canvasser's facts for hours and never leave, safe and unable to tap into why those facts evoked such powerful feelings. The LAB tried arguing the facts for years, and it had long proved a waste of time."

In deep canvassing, the people from the Leadership LAB are essentially trying to get the other person to respond emotionally so they can begin to untangle their thoughts and eventually begin to question their beliefs.

Over time, talk of the Leadership LAB's effectiveness led researchers to study the real success rate of the deep canvassing technique. One study found a success rate of 1 in 10—a figure high enough to precipitate real, significant change. The researchers discovered that "deep canvassing was 102 times more effective than traditional canvassing, television, radio, direct mail, and phone banking combined."

Yet it was still not clear *why* this technique worked. One theory is what psychologists call elaboration. In essence, maybe it works because we're truly stopping to think, rather than simply continuing on autopilot. Most of the time, as the illusion of explanatory depth suggests, we are overconfident about our level of understanding of something. If we're asked to explain *how*, not just *why*, we're less likely to hold so tightly onto our views.

Another possible explanation is that deep canvassing encourages analogic perspective taking. As humans, we rarely take the time to consider another person's perspective until we're asked to do so. The process of deep canvassing does just that, and thus leads to empathizing, which, in turn, encourages us to soften our positions.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### SOCKS AND CROCS

Several years ago, a phenomenon went viral on the internet: People looked at the same photo of a dress, but some believed it to be white and gold, while others saw it as blue and black. Scientists were interested in studying this, as it was a perfect representation of the fact that the reality each of us experience differs from person to person. Yet we often don't realize that what we perceive isn't all that *can* be perceived. Events like "The Dress" force us to grapple with that truth.

Scientist and professor Pascal Wallisch hypothesized that the reason different people saw different colors is that we didn't know what we were seeing, so it led us to disambiguate the image using our priors—meaning, "any assumption the brain carries about how the world outside should appear given how it has appeared in the past." With poor lighting and a lack of familiarity with the object, people disambiguated differently. In short, we were seeing what we expected to see—and this differed from person to person.

But why? Wallisch's research found that this depended in part on how much time people spent exposed to artificial or natural light. Those in the former category assumed unconsciously that the photo was artificially lit, and therefore, "their brains subtracted the yellow, leaving behind the darker, bluish shades." The opposite was true of the latter group: Their brains were more likely to subtract the blue, and they saw the dress as white and gold. In either case, the brain was telling a lie that nevertheless *felt* true; "the ambiguity *never registered*."

Wallisch's team came up with a term for this: SURFPAD. "When you combine Substantial Uncertainty with Ramified (which means

branching) or Forked Priors or Assumptions, you will get Disagreement.” Essentially, “when the truth is uncertain, our brains resolve that uncertainty without our knowledge by creating the most likely reality they can imagine based on our prior experiences.” But since we all have different life experiences, the way we disambiguate differs, leading to different subjective realities. We are also not aware of this process, meaning that when someone draws a different conclusion or disagrees with us, their perspective can appear to be “wrong.”

Wallisch sought to replicate these results in a study he did about the color of Crocs shoes and socks. Using white socks and pink Crocs under artificial green lighting, Wallisch studied whether people’s brains would see both items as green—due to the lighting—or whether their brains would subconsciously subtract the effect of the lighting and see each item for the colors that they actually were, under natural light. Because people aren’t aware of the many steps occurring in visual processing, the participants didn’t realize that both options are true in different ways. This is due to naive realism: “the belief that you perceive the world as it truly is, free from assumption, interpretation, bias, or the limitation of your senses.”

Each of us believes our conclusions are a result of rational thought, and we remain unaware that different priors lead to different disambiguations, and therefore, different subjective and objective realities. In a polarized world, this becomes even more evident.

To overcome this, we can’t simply challenge people with facts and evidence. We have to understand that we all interpret these facts differently; we must seek to understand *how* and *why* we reach different conclusions. We also have to be open to the fact that we could be wrong. As Wallisch said, “You have to open the crack to let in the light.”



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## CHAPTER FOUR

### DISEQUILIBRIUM

This chapter explains the making of the mind. If a behavior makes the brain more successful, the neural patterns get stronger. The opposite is also true. Survival, then, depends on predicting what will happen based on what has happened before. When something doesn't match our expectation, we experience either a spike or dip in dopamine, which encourages us to learn from that experience—to adjust and improve our predictions for the future.

This is all possible because of the brain's plasticity. It can constantly update, write, and edit the information it contains. Two processes in particular lead to these changes in the mind, according to psychologist Jean Piaget: assimilation and accommodation.

Before digging into what both of those terms mean, McRaney backs up, setting out to define what it means to “know” something. Knowledge, he notes, is difficult to define, because that requires defining “truth”—a term whose meaning no one can agree on. As a workaround, people have studied how we agree on facts through a field of study called epistemology. An epistemology is “a framework for sorting out what is true.”

Over time, the epistemology called science won out in the search for empirical truth. In science, people treat all conclusions as maybes and test them. When there is enough compelling evidence for one group of hypotheses, it becomes a theory, which then becomes a model. A model, in turn, is updated when it no longer holds. This approach allows us to create rules for what is true or not true, and even what is wrong. What it can't do, however, is tell us how much we don't know.

When we don't know something, our brains seek to fill that gap and create provisional explanations. If we all use the same placeholder, though, we can inadvertently reach consensus or a "*common* sense of what is and is not true." This phenomenon can lead to odd shared beliefs that only seem nonsensical in hindsight.

New explanations only arise after a series of disconfirmatory pieces of information makes it impossible to continue to believe the existing model. At first, we can ignore the information, but as these anomalies become more numerous, our brains must try to make sense of them within our existing model by *assimilating* them. Eventually, that no longer works, and our brains are forced to overcome our initial resistance and instead *accommodate* this new information. This moment is what we call an epiphany, but in reality, "it is the conscious realization that our minds have changed that startles us, not the change itself." It is not the evidence that changes, but how we interpret it.

Assimilation and accommodation form part of Piaget's theory of constructivism. As part of this theory, Piaget posited that mind change is ongoing and relatively balanced. Humans continue to adapt until they successfully optimize for the given environment, at which point they reach what he called "equilibration."

"Equilibration is both assimilation, 'integrating new information into pre-existing structures,' and accommodation, 'changing and building new structures to understand information.'" When this steady pace is interrupted, however, we experience disequilibrium, a moment that prompts the greatest change. This typically happens when a person's expectations are so subverted that change cannot happen gradually, leading to psychological trauma that causes "the collapse of the entire model of reality they once used to make sense of the world."

Trauma often leads to one of two responses: Either a person goes down a self-destructive path, or they follow a new path in which they seek out new information and update their assumptions and beliefs, known as "posttraumatic growth." Crisis, in this way, can make us

more open to drastically changing our minds—it can be an accelerated version of what we typically experience gradually.

This change causes us to call into question every facet of what one psychologist called the “assumptive world,” which is the “constellation of mental phenomena that provides us with our notions of predictability and control, much of which is inherited and internalized from our cultures.” The assumptive world is what helps us contextualize the present, provides us with if-then statements that support goal setting, and tells us how to behave to maintain social support networks.

When new evidence causes us to question our expectations and conclusions, this moment of doubt is called cognitive dissonance. It alerts us to the fact that we might need to update our priors. But sometimes our brains are so focused on resolving the dissonance that we end up assimilating rather than accommodating; in other words, instead of acknowledging that we might be wrong, we jump to the conclusion that we probably are not. This is what we see, for example, when people who are part of a doomsday cult remain steadfast in their beliefs even when the end of the world doesn’t happen on the day they expect it to.

So, what does it take to move from assimilation to accommodation? What some scientists call the “affective tipping point,” which is “the moment after which people can no longer justify ignoring an onslaught of disconfirmatory evidence.” While the specific threshold may differ from person to person, the point is that there is a moment at which the brain is forced to acknowledge the disconfirming information; there is “a quantifiable level of doubt when we admit we are likely wrong and become compelled to update our beliefs, attitudes, and values.” This, too, is an adaptive tool, as it can be just as dangerous to be ignorant as it is to be wrong.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### WESTBORO

McRaney spent time with members and former members of the Westboro Baptist Church as part of his efforts to understand how minds change. He spoke to two of Westboro founder Fred Phelps' grandchildren who left the church for different reasons to learn what led to their respective decisions.

Throughout his conversations with the grandchildren, Zach and Megan, McRaney was surprised to find that neither of them left the church because they changed their opinions—their opinions changed *after* leaving the church. The decision to leave in the first place was because staying in the church had become unsustainable for other reasons.

Each of them had experienced doubts within the church, but other people on the outside, who showed them alternate possibilities through kindness, helped them find the courage to leave. They felt safe leaving their community because they felt like they had a new one to welcome them on the outside.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### THE TRUTH IS TRIBAL

Our brain's job is to protect itself. This extends to our psychological self. One study found that when a person in an MRI machine was challenged about their political beliefs, their brains went into fight-or-flight mode. This and other studies suggest that humans care deeply about group identity—and are willing to suspend disbelief in order to not feel alone.

This “us-versus-them” mindset can be created around any divider, regardless of how small. There’s “no salient, shared quality around which a group will not form. And then, once people become an *us*, we begin to loathe a *them*, so much so that we are willing to sacrifice the greater good if it means we can shift the balance in our group’s favor.”

Human survival is contingent on groups; therefore, having views that don’t align with our group can be detrimental to our own survival. People “value being good members of their groups much more than they value being right.” As a result, we tend to avoid holding views that may call into question our group loyalty, and “we feel deeply threatened when a new idea challenges the ones that have become part of our identity.” The exception to this is groups for which the openness to question beliefs and change is part of signaling group loyalty, such as for doctors or scientists.

People who become conspiracists are an example of this phenomenon in action. While they may be attracted to a specific conspiracy theory for a variety of reasons, once they’re part of that group, the us-versus-them dynamic arises, and the individual finds themselves identifying even more strongly with the conspiratorial

community. Many conspiracists end up in a loop that makes it nearly impossible to escape: They begin to believe that any disconfirmatory evidence was planted by the conspirators and, therefore, do not believe it.

How can we get out of this loop? One key is to hold another identity separate to the one in question, and another is to remind ourselves of our deepest values. Both of these make it less threatening to accept facts that seem like they could damage some part of our reputation.

“[I]f we feel affirmed, accepting challenging evidence or considering new perspectives poses less of a threat. And that affirmation grows stronger if we’re reminded that we belong to several tribes and can rush to the safety of more amenable groups when the ones that judge us the harshest begin to feel less welcoming.”

Ultimately, then, to get people—especially ones like conspiracists—to change their minds, we need to appeal to their deeper values. We need to seek to understand what led them to join these groups and discover their motivations for doing so. In other words, to get to their brains, we have to go through their hearts.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ARGUING

Confirmation bias is pernicious: If we're looking for a certain answer, we're less likely to see the truth, and instead we'll focus only on that which confirms our beliefs. As humans, we excel at rationalizing and justifying what we believe, even if it's inaccurate.

Communication is essential to human survival, but it is also an imperfect tool. To deal with this, our brain created something called "epistemic vigilance" for when we're on the receiving end of a transfer of information. "In an information exchange, epistemic vigilance helps protect individuals from updating too hastily." This allows us to reduce our individual cognitive load while also ensuring that we don't get duped by bad information.

But sometimes our vigilance is excessive, leading us to challenge something that seems to be too good to be true and preventing us from updating our beliefs. This creates a "trust bottleneck," which can prove stymying to group success. Arguing evolved as a method for breaking through these bottlenecks. The process reveals all the different points of view in a group and makes the evaluation process less cumbersome for any one individual.

Yet arguing with ourselves doesn't work in the same way. "Because we are biased and lazy, when we argue with ourselves, we usually win." We are much better at picking apart the arguments of others than our own. In a group setting, this laziness and bias isn't a problem because the group will be smarter than any one individual. "With a shared goal, in an atmosphere of trust, arguing eventually leads to the truth."

There is a scientific explanation for why this doesn't hold true for "arguments" that take place online. Because people are insulated from group dynamics and other perspectives, they are, in essence, arguing with themselves. This, in turn, leads to the "law of group polarization," whereby people's views become more entrenched, and the group grows more polarized.

Despite all this, scientists believe that "our reasoning isn't flawed or irrational, just biased and lazy, which is both adaptive and rational in the context in which it evolved." It evolved so that we might convince others and be skeptical of other people's attempts to convince us.



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## CHAPTER EIGHT PERSUASION

It took years of research for scientists to understand that beliefs and attitudes are different. “Today, psychology defines beliefs as propositions we consider to be true. ... Attitudes, however, are a spectrum of evaluations, feelings going from positive to negative that arise when we think about, well, anything really.” Beliefs and attitudes together create our values.

In order to understand how to change people’s minds, scientists began researching attitude change in the years following World War II. For decades, no grand theory emerged. Then, in 1984, two psychology graduate students developed what they called the “elaboration likelihood model” (ELM).

They noticed that grouping messages based on how likely a person was to pause and reflect on their content led to all messages fitting into one of two categories: what they called “high elaboration” and “low elaboration.” Both could lead to attitude change; however, they also noticed that a person could learn the ins and outs of a message and still not be persuaded, while others could be persuaded by a message without learning it. That led them to posit that persuasion is less about learning the information and more about elaboration: “contextualizing the message after it gets inside your head.” As a result, the same piece of information could prove persuasive to one person but not to another.

There are a number of factors related to both motivation and ability that determine whether someone will elaborate on a message. This includes such factors as relevance, incentives, a sense of responsibility, a lack of distraction, and how well-articulated the

message is. If someone is likely to elaborate, they will follow what the psychologists called the “central route.” As that likelihood decreases, they are more likely to follow the “peripheral route.”

On the central route, someone will move slowly through the information, considering it carefully. But on the peripheral route, a person is more likely to whiz by, only capturing the gist or most salient points. As such, the variables that matter most for persuasion differ between the two routes: The merits of the message matter on the central route, but on the peripheral route, people focus on simple, emotional cues.

While both the central and peripheral routes can persuade, the effects of each are different; therefore, these routes are best used in different circumstances. Attitude change on the central route is more challenging but also more likely to endure. The peripheral route may lead to quick attitude change, but it is likely to fade over time and can be easily reversed.

Not long after ELM was introduced, two other psychologists developed the heuristic-systematic model (HSM). It suggests that people use heuristics to show we’re right and that people are compelled to be “correct” as much as possible. Unlike ELM, HSM posited that these heuristic processes—“rules of thumb and mental shortcuts”—can happen simultaneously with systematic processes—more effortful, deliberate processing. Human brains are likely to fall back on the heuristic processes, however, because they are lazy.

People want to be correct, but they already think they are. The reason for this is largely because it takes significant time and effort to deeply evaluate everything. For a message to resonate with someone, then, it needs to match with something the person cares about, which will then trigger active processing of the message.

There are several factors that make a persuasive message more likely to succeed.

- **Who:** The communicator of the message must seem trustworthy, credible, and reliable.

- **What:** If a message is coupled with counterarguments, it becomes more impactful and makes the speaker seem more confident and trustworthy.
- **To whom:** The speaker should match the processing abilities and motivations of the audience. The message should be clear, simple, and impactful. If all else fails, rhetorical questions are effective.
- **In which channel:** “The message should fit the medium through which it is conveyed.” In all cases, face-to-face messaging will be the most effective.

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## CHAPTER NINE

### STREET EPISTEMOLOGY

Street epistemology is an approach first created by Anthony Magnabosco. In it, he asks various questions to explore a claim a person makes because they believe it's true, such as a belief in a higher power or a belief in a conspiracy theory. The idea is to get them to define the reasons for which they make that claim and then consider the reliability of the method they're using to draw those conclusions. "The goal is to help people arrive at a more rigorous way of thinking, a better way of reaching certainty or doubt." In the process, Magnabosco hopes to help people reach guided metacognition, where they think about their own thinking.

Getting this to work requires a number of steps upfront. First, it is critical to ask the person for consent and to make sure that they feel safe and that you are listening to them respectfully. From there, the questioner asks the respondent to state their claim outright and then repeats it back to them. The two then clarify and get aligned on definitions, and then the questioner asks the respondent to put a number to their feeling of confidence in the claim. From there, the conversation explores the respondent's reasoning for providing that number.

The conversation continues until the respondent can articulate why they hold that belief, and then the questioner gets them "to test the reliability of the method they typically use to 'judge the quality of their reasons.'" To do this, a questioner can ask something like, "Could your method also be used to arrive at completely different and competing conclusions?" The idea is to get people to be just uncomfortable enough that they'll dig through their thinking but not so uncomfortable that they walk away.

In summary, street epistemology follows a simple, multistep process:

1. Establish rapport.
2. Ask for a claim.
3. Confirm the claim by repeating it back in your own words.
4. Clarify their definitions.
5. Ask for a numerical measure of confidence in their claim.
6. Ask why they hold that level of confidence.
7. Ask what methods they've used to judge the quality of their reasons.
8. Listen, summarize, and repeat.
9. Conclude the conversation, and wish them well.

Street epistemology is not about a gotcha moment or about correcting people; it's about exploring the views that someone holds and guiding them through their reasoning for holding those views. Its aims and process share many similarities with the other methods outlined throughout the book.

McRaney also introduces one other approach in this chapter: Smart Politics, devised by psychiatrist Karin Tamerius. Similar to these other tactics, Smart Politics suggests that the most important step is to develop rapport between yourself and the other person—to encourage them not to see you as an “other.”

The process behind Smart Politics can be broken down into a number of steps:

1. Ask a nonthreatening, open-ended question. Listen to the person's answers.
2. Reflect and paraphrase or summarize what you just heard.
3. Look for common ground between your values and those of the other person.
4. Share a personal narrative about your values to connect with the other person.
5. If your values have changed over time, share how.

Presented another way, she has what she calls the “Change Conversation Pyramid,” a hierarchy of motivations. A person using her approach must start with the bottom—comfort—and then work their way up through connection, comprehension, and compassion, finally ending at the top with change. Tamerius also introduced McRaney to motivational interviewing, an approach often used in therapeutic settings to change minds.

Two psychologists have grouped together many of the persuasive approaches outlined in this book—including deep canvassing, street epistemology, Smart Politics, and motivational interviewing—under the umbrella of “technique rebuttal,” which focuses on how a person processes information and what drives their confidence in their conclusion. The other grouping of strategies is “topic rebuttal,” where a person responds to claims with facts.

The beliefs we hold are processes, not possessions. Psychologist Ulric Neisser discovered this when studying the memories of people who had recorded their experiences when the Space Shuttle *Challenger* exploded in 1986. He asked them to recall those memories a couple years later, and the memories they held differed considerably from what they’d written.

Neisser found that the participants were unable to accept that their memories could be faulty. Said one participant in the study, “That’s my handwriting, but that’s not what happened.” Even when we’re given evidence that we’re wrong, our brain continues to create a mental state of certainty. This “feeling of knowing” can be so strong that it will “encourage us to argue with our own past selves as if trapped in a neurological prison of our own convictions.”

We don’t have control over this sensation of certainty—it’s simply something we feel, but it’s something that *feels* like a conclusion. Said neurologist Richard Burton, “That whole feeling is really a brain calculation at a subliminal level. Then for a lot of evolutionary reasons, that comes into consciousness as a combination of both the calculation and the feeling, absent of any thought at all. It’s a sensation that feels like a conclusion.”

McRaney returns to deep canvassing briefly to provide a step-by-step process for the approach, as he did with the others:

1. Establish rapport.
2. Ask how strongly they feel about an issue on a scale of one to 10.
3. Share a story about someone affected by the issue.
4. Ask again how strongly they feel. If the number has changed, ask why.
5. Ask them why that number feels right to them.
6. Repeat their reasons in your own words.
7. Ask if there was a time before they felt that way and if so, what led to their current attitude.
8. Listen, summarize, and repeat.
9. Share a brief personal story about how you reached your own position, but don't argue.
10. Ask for their rating a final time and wish them well.

Ultimately, the keys are to develop that rapport, to empathize with and humanize the other person, and to make use of the power of narrative transport. “Narrative transport is that feeling when you become so fully immersed in a story that you forget yourself for a moment.” This is effective because the story isn't explicitly about changing the other person's mind, and as such, they are not preparing a rebuttal while listening—they're simply immersing themselves in the story you're sharing.

According to McRaney, each method of technique rebuttal is best for a different type of conversation. Street epistemology is well-suited for beliefs in empirical matters; deep canvassing works best with attitudes and emotional evaluations, and Smart Politics can be used for values and the hierarchy of goals, and motivational interviewing is great when motivating people to change their behaviors. But, he adds the caveat that change usually takes time—any smidge of change is still a change, and we should expect that, rather than an immediate 180.

He concludes that debate isn't always a noble pursuit because the "winner" is he who doesn't change his mind and doesn't learn anything new. Instead, it's more effective to dig into *why* we see things differently. To that effect, he suggests adding a step zero to any persuasion technique that you choose to employ: Ask yourself why you want to change the other person's mind.



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## CHAPTER TEN

### SOCIAL CHANGE

For centuries, humans didn't change in any considerable way. Then the Ice Age hit, precipitating a period of human development not seen previously. While humans couldn't evolve quickly enough to keep up with the change, their brains could create new behaviors that could then be copied from brain to brain. "Culture shaped genes, and genes shaped culture." Even though humans didn't initially know how to respond to the changes, some people would figure it out over time, and then others would replicate their behaviors. This approach assured survival. "Changing our minds became our greatest strength as a species."

This remains true today. Environmental changes lead to culture changes; however, it often takes some time for the latter to catch up to the former. As an example, McRaney describes how we can observe this with the change in attitude seen in the U.S. over the past two decades toward same-sex marriage. One of the factors that makes the biggest difference in changing minds is contact: As more people came out, more individuals around the country interacted with LGBTQ people in their communities, workplaces, and online.

McRaney summarizes psychologist Gordon Allport's contact hypothesis: Before "minds can change concerning members of a minority or an out-group, they must make true contact." True contact requires several conditions: People must meet in a setting where they have equal status, they must share common goals and routinely cooperate to meet those goals, and they must engage in informal interactions. "And finally, for prejudice to truly die out, the concerns of the oppressed must be recognized and addressed by an authority." Poor contact, on the other hand, simply serves to

reinforce prejudiced views, as was seen in racially segregated communities in the 1950s.

We move from one paradigm to the next—such as from opposing to supporting same-sex marriage as a society—when we handle the same information differently. It's not the qualities that change, but rather the categories and definitions we use to look at them.

The network effect is also at play here. If enough early adopters who are connected to the community get members of the mainstream to flip, it will create a cascade effect, eventually reaching even the most stubborn holdouts. “Each group that changes adds to the total population of the changed, and thus the strength of the influence of your peers. This network effect, sometimes called diffusion and sometimes called percolation, is the force behind all major public opinion shifts.”

While our networks are typically quite stable, all it takes is for the right ingredients to combine at the right time to shatter the status quo. “If the conditions aren't right, if some portion of the system isn't vulnerable ... catalysts have no better chance of starting the inferno than a tiny ember. But once those conditions are met, all it takes is a spark.” And it's not about *who* does it either. Spreading an idea across a network in such a way that it changes almost everyone's thinking doesn't require an early adopter or an influencer. If the network is susceptible, anyone can start a cascade.

“At any one time, for any given system, thousands of us are banging away at it hoping to make the difference that changes the world. ... No one can will the system to cascade for them.” No one knows where the vulnerability in the system is. The key to change, then, is persistence. We can never know when it will happen or who will do it, so we must continue until we succeed.

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