

Title: -The Human Element: Overcoming the Resistance That Awaits New Ideas

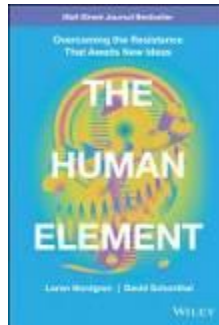
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Manipulation is not a four-letter word. Manipulation is merely a tool utilized to change a state of an object or to change the behavior of another. Yet, in the business realm, manipulation is often seen as a nefarious action whereby ethical quagmires loom large. Thus, Nordgren and Schonthal's, "*The Human Element: Overcoming the Resistance That Awaits New Ideas*" stands out as such an interesting book by illuminating the ways in which business leaders may positively use *manipulation* positively to create buy-in for change, innovation, and ultimately profit. Nordgren and Schonthal posit how positive manipulation can be harnessed in an ethical manner. It is important to note how the authors are quite clear from the beginning of their book that they are not ethical scholars. They do caution anyone reading their work to proceed mindfully as they implement the tools the authors provide. As such, they offer two standards to guide them in the utilization of their change tools:

- Ensuring the strategy for change is genuinely honest and not deceptive, and
- The intent for change is not to disadvantage another in the pursuit of profit.

Their transparency is refreshing, and absolutely a warning of advice of which all business leaders should.

The book begins by asking the reader to assess how a bullet fired from a gun can fly great distances with precision. The typical response gathered by the authors is often “gunpowder”. But, as the authors point out, simply adding more gunpowder does not allow the bullet to fly further...and could actually end up being disastrous! Therefore, Nordgren and Schonthal offer the consideration of an airplane flying through the air, or a baseball careening towards a catcher’s mitt. What allows the objects to fly? Velocity? Fuel? Thrust? Yes...in part. The other ingredient, the one often forgotten about, is the one which reduces the friction of the object’s pathway toward success: Aerodynamics. Clunky items, no matter how hard they’ve been thrown, will not go as far or as exact as one streamlined to reduce drag. Yet, all too often, business leaders focus on adding more power to their ideas, innovations, or products than they do paying attention to mitigating the inherent resistance to the activities.

By applying this cooperative, complimentary, concept of *Fuel* and *Friction* to the business realm, the authors point out how frequently business leaders and organizations attempt to add more features or more energy (fuel) to their ideas or products as a way to promote buy-in, rather than considering ways to reduce resistance (friction). It is here where manipulation as a tool- and a potential ethical hazard- comes into play. Four frictions are identified and discussed throughout the book that allow business leaders to manipulate and mitigate friction inhibiting innovation and buy-in. The four frictions are: *inertia*, *effort*, *emotion*, and *reactance*.

The Four Frictions

Inertia is covered in Chapters 3 and 4 and is based on the premise: people stick to what they know. People like people who like them; people like people who *are* like them. If the business leader attempting to incur buy-in for a change aligns themselves more alike to the person(s) they are attempting to influence, friction is reduced and the chance of change adoption is much higher. The force working against this acceptance is called various names such as *status quo bias* or the *familiarity effect*. Additionally, due to the power of *exposure effect*, the more common and familiar the change appears to be, the more likely an individual is

to provide buy-in. Therefore, a business leader intentionally crafting an interaction or intervention that allows the change to feel familiar to the receiver becomes a powerful leader...and manipulator. The authors provide advice on how to utilize this powerful tool by instructing leaders to anchor change to the familiar, incorporate repetition of the change, start small, and by providing multiple, favorable, options for the targeted audience. A strategy they recommend is to add an extreme option for change that drives the audience member to a lesser valued, but still highly profitable, option.

An example provided is a wine list of bottles ranging from \$17-\$125. The lone \$125 option is extreme compared to the \$17 option, but also to the \$44 and \$50 bottles, which the purchaser is more likely to now select than if the \$125 option had not been on the menu. This decoy effect is a manipulation tool which people buy into frequently. So, let us consider another setting: Does this same strategy make a movie theatre unethical because of the offered small, medium, large, and x-large popcorn options which typically compel an individual to choose the large size instead of the small or medium? Or is this simply an advantageous behavioral tool to help businesses grow?

The friction of *effort* is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 and focuses on the cost-benefit analysis performed on energy expenditure. The authors illuminate this practice by using an interesting analogy to how language has evolved- and shortened- over time.

Specifically, they illustrate how in the 1500s people would leave each other with the phrase, "God be with ye." By the next century, that had become abbreviated to, "God b'wi ye." Another 100 years and the phrase became, "God b'ye". By the 1800s it was, "good-bye", and in the 1900s it became the unhyphenated "goodbye", lastly landing in today's singular, "bye". What does this mean about human behavior and ethics? Well, it tells us something about how humans are hard-wired to seek pathways which exert less energy. For an ethical business leader? The insight allows them to begin their change initiative more attractively by optimizing the merits of less expended effort when compared to the status quo. Essentially,

by reducing the perception of effort (cost) to adopting the change, the change becomes more beneficial and thus more readily adopted.

Emotion is discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 which centers on how individuals may feel about the change. Do they feel threatened? Inspired? Anxious? Hopeful? The friction, perhaps of all the ones detailed in the book, is the one most likely to be considered by an ethicist. *Emotional* friction occurs unintentionally. After all, a business leader's objective is to gain buy-in to change initiatives. However, unforeseen emotional barriers may interfere with change adoption.

A vulnerability component is introduced with accepting any type change, and manipulating that vulnerability can wade into the grey waters of ethical realms. The authors highlight this friction type by discussing *inattentional blindness* whereby a study was conducted with groups of highly trained radiologists. In the study, the radiologists were given X-rays to review that either had a missing bone or, oddly enough, a large angry gorilla. At an alarming rate, the experienced radiologists did not see the missing bone or the included primate. Why? Because they weren't looking for that. Instead, the radiologists were looking for what they anticipated- what they saw every day, multiple times a day.

Therefore, one can find here a disadvantage being turned into- manipulated into- an advantage for the savvy business leader. Nordgren and Schonthal advise that the first step of reducing emotional friction to facilitate change adoption is to start looking for it! Thus, an element of unlearning presents itself here, and has been discussed by various scholars (e.g., Grant, 2021; Mull, Duffy, & Silberman, 2023). Adam Grant, in his book "*Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*", invites leaders to embrace curiosity and "the joy of being wrong" (see Chapter 3, wherein Grant describes an unethical study focused on changing individual belief systems). Essentially, the lever here is to reduce the reliance on past mental models as predictors of future outcomes. Nordgren and Schonthal suggest how leaders can become ethnographers and study the natural behaviors, in the natural environments, of those they are seeking to

influence. By doing so, the leader customizes their targeted approach to the individual. Emotional manipulation? Likely. Unethical? Possibly.

The last of the four frictions, *reactance*, is covered in Chapter 9 and 10. The authors highlight this friction by using the examples of resistance to change from American seat-belt laws in 1980s and the face-mask mandates during the Covid-19 pandemic. Essentially, people don't want to feel like change is happening **to** them, but rather **with** them. Whereas *inertia* is a resistance to change, *reactance* is the personal resistance to being changed. Another example is provided of a study in 1971 comparing three rats, two of which were in electrified cages. Where one of the rats in the electrified cage was able to stop the electric shock, whereby also turning off the shock to the third rat in a neighboring cage, the one with the autonomy over its environment to control the shock fared far better than its neighbor- despite both rats enduring the same amount of electric shock. The study conveys the importance of freedom and how a business leader can manipulate change to be seen as an opportunity for more autonomy rather than an encapturing, stymied, constraint.

Understanding that influencing others is inherently an infringement on another's freedom can be quite advantageous if a leader learns how to present change as a non-threatening advancement. Therefore, the authors warn leaders against the age-old "hard sell" that typically backfires due to *reactance*. Instead, they advise to stop pushing for change and adopt self-persuasion; this strategy encourages leaders to ask rather than tell. Once again, Nordgren and Schonhal suggests that leaders should start with asking for small adoption of changes before directly addressing a larger point of tension (e.g., asking residents to display a sticker on their cars reading "Drive Carefully" prior to asking them to place a large billboard with the same saying in their yards). Of importance, the authors readily admit this strategy is the same mechanism used for brainwashing. Citing the origin of the term *brainwashing* during the Korean War, the authors write, "Torture can get people to say anything. But torture won't lead soldiers to internalize those beliefs. For that

to happen, the propaganda must come from within” (p. 177). Clearly, an ethical breach looms heavy for those leaders equipped with the understanding of navigating the four frictions.

Comparisons and Conclusions

The book ends with three case studies and a useful Friction Report for use and replicated by leaders implementing the tools provided by Nordgren and Schonthal. Overall, the book provides thought-provoking, robust, and applicable examples and strategies for reframing change initiatives. For many business leaders, **this book is a must-read for being able to cultivate and maintain buy-in of change initiatives**. However, the ethical complexity of this knowledge does present a great deal of ambiguity where the reader must employ the brief, succinct, opening reminder of the author’s ethical standards.

In many ways, this book is a nice complement to the works of Grant (*Think Again: The Power of Knowing What you Don’t Know*), Holiday (*Perennial Seller: The Art of Making and Marketing Work that Lasts*), and Gelfand (*Rule Makers, Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire Our World*). The other books also highlight the behavioral factors which can be manipulated for success, or toward a devious means if wielded in the hands of someone intent for self-serving causes. However, that statement can likely be true for most books on human behavior. Regardless, the importance of business leaders being mindful, ethical, stewards of their influence cannot be overstated.

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