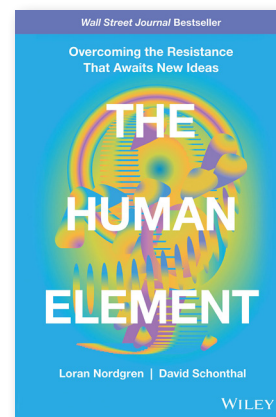


The Human Element

Overcoming the Resistance That Awaits New Ideas

by **Loran Nordgren & David Schonthal**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Have you ever tried to introduce a new idea, innovation, or product to your customers or to the world, only to find that you hit roadblock after roadblock in getting people to adopt it? What causes this lack of momentum? After all, you've poured all the fuel you can on your genuinely innovative idea. The problem isn't lack of fuel—it's that you haven't reduced the friction.

This simple yet powerful concept is at the root of *The Human Element*, by Loran Nordgren & David Schonthal. *The Human Element* is all about recognizing that no amount of pushing an idea or innovation forward is going to lead to adoption and acceptance. You have to reduce the four major types of friction— inertia, effort, emotion, and reactance. Whether you're a business leader, entrepreneur, product or project manager, educator, or marketer, adopting a Friction-based mindset will transform the way you think about innovation and communicating that innovation to your audiences in a way that inspires adoption.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why your best ideas get rejected despite their undeniable value
- How to disarm the forces of friction and resistance that stand in the way of real and powerful change
- How to turn the very Friction points that stop our momentum into effective catalysts for change.

Introduction

How do you get people to embrace a new idea? Most marketers, innovators, executives, activists, or anyone else in the business of creating change, operate on a deep assumption. It's a view of the world so deeply ingrained in our thinking that we rarely see its influence or question its value. It is called The Law of Attraction.

It is the belief that the best (and perhaps only) way to convince people to embrace a new idea is to heighten the appeal of the idea itself. We instinctively believe that if we add enough value, people will say yes. This reflex leads us down a path of adding features and benefits to the idea or increasing the sizzle of the messaging – all in the hope of propelling people to get on board. We refer to strategies designed to give an idea thrust as Fuel. Fuel is what heightens the appeal of an idea and incites our desire to change.

This book argues that people have the wrong intuitions about how to sell new ideas and create change. By focusing on Fuel to enhance attraction, innovators neglect the other half of the equation – the Friction that works against the change we seek to create. Frictions are the psychological forces that oppose change. Frictions create drag on innovation. And though they are rarely considered, overcoming these Frictions is essential for creating change.

The conventional, Fuel-based approach to innovation is necessary. Without appeal, an idea won't survive. But Fuel alone is insufficient. To create change we must first understand the forces operating against change. While we might not see them, they are there, quietly undermining our efforts to innovate. When we attempt to overcome these forces by adding more Fuel (as our instincts instruct), we inadvertently intensify the very Friction we are trying to overcome.

The Law of Attraction

This book explores the four Frictions that operate against innovation and change. The four Frictions are:

Inertia. The powerful desire to stick with what we know, despite the limitations. Inertia explains why, when attempting to change behavior, you should always give people multiple options, and why, at least when it comes to sports, Americans are socialists and Europeans are capitalists.

Effort. The energy (real and perceived) needed to make change happen. Effort explains why Beach House customers never clicked "Order," why shore crabs are such picky eaters,

and why New Zealand is the best country to start a business.

Emotion. The unintended negative emotions created by the very change we seek to make. Emotional Friction is the reason why cake mix took 30 years to catch on, why Tinder surpassed Match.com as the go-to dating app, and why managers often strategically put their best employees in the least important roles.

Reactance. The impulse to resist being changed. Reactance reveals why Americans waged war against seat belts in the 1980s, why strong evidence is often worse than no evidence at all, and why manufacturing plants find it so difficult to change practices.

Thinking in Fuel

Our deep assumption is that the way to sell a new idea is to heighten its appeal. We instinctively believe that if we add enough value, people will say yes. We assume that when people say no, it's because the Fuel was insufficient. It is a belief so deeply ingrained in our thinking that we rarely consider it and would struggle to imagine any other approach to innovation. The Fuel-based mindset explains so much of what we do, from adding countless trivial features to software, to bolting a sixth blade onto a shaving razor. If our audience is not responding to our idea, our instinct tells us to puff out our chest and show off our plumage.

Let's be clear: Fuel is essential to the success of new ideas. Without Fuel there is no motivation to change. But having a compelling idea and a well-crafted message is, in our minds, table stakes. For the sake of this book summary, we will assume that you, the innovator, have these boxes checked. You have a great idea, but despite your best Efforts, you can't quite figure out why people (your investors, customers, partners, colleagues, etc.) say no. Why? Because you need to focus less on Fuel and more on Friction.

Discovering Friction requires work and patience. It requires that we not only identify what people do, but take the time to understand why they do it. Detecting Friction demands that we become more anthropologist than marketer – a role for which few organizations have a department.

Let's look at an example. Although Americans love their cars, they loathe the process of buying them. That's because people fundamentally distrust car dealers. Buying a car, perhaps more than any other major purchase, pits the dealer against the buyer. The assumption buyers make

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when walking into a dealership is that the dealer intends to talk you into a bad deal.

The distrust people feel when buying a car is a significant Emotional Friction. Car dealers don't just neglect this Friction, the culture of persistent sales tactics exacerbates it. It is in this context that we can understand the secret to the extraordinary performance of Ali Reda, the best car salesman on earth.

The best salesperson in American history doesn't see himself in the business of sales. He's in the business of building trusted relationships. But before we simply tip our caps to the importance of Fuel and move on to Friction, it is important to understand how and why Fuel works, as well as its inherent limitations. This chapter explores the limits of Fuel and why, despite its limitations, a Fuel-based mindset remains the default approach to innovation.

Inertia

People are often reluctant to embrace new ideas and possibilities, even when the benefits are obvious and indisputable. That's because the human mind prefers familiarity and stability to uncertainty and change. This design feature goes by different names. Psychologists call it the status quo bias. Marketing scholars call it the familiarity effect. In this summary, we call it Inertia.

For humans, familiarity breeds liking. We favor the known over the unknown. And that makes sense from an evolutionary perspective. Because things that are familiar have been tried and tested and are thus safer than things that have not. Familiarity means that we have survived contact with it in the past. Our instinctive mind recognizes this, and steers us toward the familiar option.

The instinct to favor the familiar suggests that even when we are open to new ideas, innovators and organizations don't consider all the possible opportunities and solutions, just the familiar ones – those they've tried in the past or fit with the culture.

The principal problem with Inertia (as the name implies), is that it breeds inaction. And inaction is precisely what the innovator is fighting against. Inertia leads us to choose the familiar over the potentially better but uncertain option. This instinct is a big reason why, as the old saying goes, "good enough is the enemy of great." This thinking leads to stagnation and the rejection of new ideas.

But inaction isn't the only way Inertia harms innovation. Even when people are willing to break from the status quo, Inertia limits the options we are willing to consider when pursuing opportunities or solving problems. Take investment decisions. Investors tend to favor domestic stocks (often referred to as home bias). Japanese investors, for example, put 80 percent of their money in Japan-listed companies, despite these companies accounting for only 9 percent of world capitalization. The reason? Inertia.

Overcoming Inertia

New ideas are like beer. The first time you tried beer, did you like the taste? For most people, it's not a pleasant experience. But you get used to it. And after a while, the once unpleasant flavor becomes a comfort at the end of a long day.

But imagine if after the very first time you tried beer, you had to make a binding decision about whether you would ever want to have another one. A lot of people would needlessly reject beer simply because they weren't given time to acclimate. If you were trying to promote beer drinking, it would be a terrible approach.

But this is the precise path many leaders and innovators take. Like beer, new ideas often first leave a bad taste in people's mouth. But as familiarity grows, Friction eases. All too often, the first time we announce a new idea is also the moment we ask people to decide on it. Though it's a common occurrence, it's an equally terrible approach. Instead, we want to allow people to acclimate to new ideas before we ask for buy-in.

Here's a super simplified timeline of the change process:

Step 1: Spot a problem.

Step 2: Gather potential solutions.

Step 3: Decide on the best solution (discarding the bad ones and the great-but-unrealistic options).

Step 4: Pitch the solution to your audience.

The principle of relativity shows us that our mistakes happen at Steps 3 and 4. Our habit is to cull the bad options, and at times we may even reluctantly abandon the ideal solution for fear we are asking too much. What we mistakenly present to people is one path – a good (but maybe not ideal) option. You know it is a good option in part because you've considered and discarded inferior ones. You know it. But they don't. Instead, put your ideas in context. Give them a reference point. Because everything is relative.

The human mind is hardwired to favor the familiar. Yet new ideas ask people to embrace the unknown. This is an ever-present Friction for the innovator. To tame this Friction, we need to transform the unfamiliar into the familiar. Inertia tends to be greatest under two conditions: when the innovation or change represents a major break from the status-quo and when people don't have time to acclimate to change. To determine the level of Inertia that awaits your next idea, ask these three questions.

1. Does the innovation represent a major break from the status quo or is it a slight tweak on what has been done before? Radical ideas are likely to run into heavy Inertia headwinds because people inherently distrust and reject unfamiliar and untested ideas.
2. Have people had time to acclimate to the idea? If people haven't had time to adjust to new ways of thinking, expect resistance.
3. Does the proposed change happen gradually or in one big step? Big, abrupt changes of practice or thinking are the most unfamiliar and therefore produce strong resistance.

Effort

Humans are highly sensitive to energy expenditure. We are programmed to find and favor the path that brings the most rewards for the least Effort. This design feature is called The Law of Least Effort.

When we first encounter a new idea or innovation, our minds instinctively calculate the cost of implementation. The greater the Effort, the stronger the resistance. Unfortunately,

innovation generally requires some form of Effort. Learning a new work procedure requires Effort. Unlearning old habits requires Effort. Navigating an unfamiliar website requires Effort. Sifting through new product options requires Effort. Setting up meetings to discuss a new proposal requires Effort. The Effort associated with innovation is a psychological Friction that undermines the appeal of new ideas.

Although Effort is one of the strongest forces operating on our behavior, people rarely account for it when leading change – a blind spot we refer to as Effort Neglect.

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After all, the primacy of Effort challenges a lot of conventional business calculations. Take customer service. What drives customer loyalty? When 100 customer service heads were asked this question, 89 of them said their main strategy was to exceed expectations. They described Efforts to “wow” customers by going above and beyond. But an in-depth study on customer loyalty defies this view. The study asked 75,000 people to identify the companies they feel the most loyalty for. And then they ask them a series of questions to determine why.

They found that Fuel-based tactics designed to exceed a customer's expectations, such as offering a refund or a small product giveaway, didn't build loyalty. Instead, they found that reducing Frictions commonly experienced during a customer service interaction (like having to explain your problem to several different people) does.

This insight should fundamentally change the way companies look at customer service. The question shouldn't be: how do we delight the customer? The question should instead be: how do we make the interaction easy for the customer?

Overcoming Effort

Before we can reduce Effort, we need to understand what

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people mean by it. What attributes of an idea or initiative make it easy or difficult to perform? Effort has two dimensions, one obvious and one not. The obvious and intuitive dimension of Effort is exertion. Exertion captures how much energy goes into a task or behavior. Writing a 50-page document requires more exertion than a 5-page document.

The second dimension of Effort is ambiguity. If exertion captures the amount of work that goes into achieving a goal, ambiguity reflects whether people know how to achieve the goal. Think about the first explorer to navigate new terrain, or a rat exploring a maze for the first time. If you don't know the way, you have to discover the path yourself. That means trial-and-error. It means false leads and dead ends. Ambiguity is a critical dimension of Effort because a lot of ideas that appear easy to the innovator are shrouded in ambiguity for everyone else.

Emotion

Emotion has a profound influence over our behavior. We experience emotion as a feeling. But emotion is much more than a subjective experience. Emotion transforms our thoughts and actions. Emotion shifts our attention, changes the way we process information, and alters which ideas and memories we bring to mind.

Emotions are designed to create adaptive responses to critical situations we faced in our evolutionary past. Fear, for example, is triggered when we detect a potential threat in our environment. The experience of fear initiates the goal to avoid risk. Fear broadens our visual perception to help us detect threats (fear literally expands our peripheral vision). And it readies the body for fight-or-flight action.

Emotion has both a constructive and destructive influence on our lives. Emotion is the root of most self-control problems. Rage, pride, and fear can lead us to make regretful decisions. But emotion is also critical for proper human functioning. People who don't feel emotion (usually due to a significant brain injury) struggle to understand and interact with others and have tremendous difficulty making good decisions.

We define Emotional Friction as the unintended negative feelings that inhibit a new idea or innovation. Emotional Friction takes many forms. The anxiety and doubt associated with committing to a new product is a common Emotional Friction. The embarrassment of being a teacher's pet is an Emotional Friction that prevents many school children from displaying their academic potential. Social anxiety is a Friction that keeps introverts from attending valuable networking opportunities. We encounter Emotional Frictions every day, in decisions big and small.

Emotional Friction is the exact opposite of what we intend to do. When introducing a new idea, we hope to trigger positive emotions. We want our ideas to fill people with delight, excitement, confidence, etc. But without our realizing it, our audience often has the exact opposite emotional reaction. Even the most promising idea can unintentionally trigger negative emotions that become significant barriers to adoption. When that happens, those negative emotions are Frictions. And, just as with other frictions, the drag of Emotional Friction must be addressed before any real change can occur.

Overcoming Emotion

Addressing Emotional Friction isn't simply about removing a few hiccups from an idea to help it function a little better. Incredible opportunity awaits those who spot the frictions others have missed.

The first step to spotting Emotional Friction is to start looking for it. Our Fuel-based mindset means that Frictions aren't a natural part of our mental model. To begin seeing the Frictions that hold our ideas back, we need to start noticing them.

Unfortunately, Emotional Friction can be tricky to observe because most individuals tend to keep negative emotions hidden, especially when interacting with new ideas and new people. They rarely express their authentic feelings of worry or hesitation with clear, introspective language like, "This idea offends me," or "Using this new product gives me anxiety," or "Our company's newest hire makes me feel insecure." Instead of seeing the true negative emotions our ideas

provoke in others, what we often observe are the symptoms of these underlying feelings – symptoms that may confuse or even bely the true problem. Sometimes a customer’s “anxiety” expresses itself as “disinterest.” Sometimes a colleague’s “anger” shows up as “apathy.” If we were to only treat the symptoms of these Emotional Frictions, we would not be able to overcome the cause of someone’s resistance.

What we need are methods that can help us spot moments of Emotional Friction in the wild so that we might reframe them as opportunities for innovation. There are a number of techniques for uncovering Emotional Friction, including increasing your focus on the ‘why’ of your customers, studying them in their ‘natural habitats’, and focusing on bringing your audience into the innovation inside your company to get a firsthand look at their needs.

Are you asking or telling? Telling people what to do is a form of pressure. Asking removes Reactance.

Reactance

People don’t like having change imposed on them. We don’t like being told what to do. This is a major obstacle for the innovator, because innovation is the act of changing what people do. This means that the innovator’s objective is at odds with our human nature. And when people feel they are being pressured to change, the automatic reaction is to react against change. We call this tendency Reactance. Reactance leads us to see new ideas not as opportunities, but as invaders. So we raise the drawbridge and arm the gates. If Inertia is the resistance to change, Reactance is the resistance to being changed.

The aim of innovation is to lead people to embrace new ideas. But if people feel pushed, their instinct is to push back against change. How do we possibly overcome this Friction? The answer: unlearn everything we know about influence.

Overcoming Reactance

Rather than telling people what to think, self-persuasion uses questions that lead to self-discovery. Not only does self-persuasion work against those who oppose our ideas, but self-persuasion is often the only thing that does.

The secret to overcoming Reactance is to stop pushing for change. Rather than attempting to persuade others, we should help them to persuade themselves. We call this approach to influence and innovation, self-persuasion. Self-persuasion occurs when the arguments and insights for change come from within. This section is about looking more closely at two ways that you can lead people to persuade themselves: ask yes questions and co-design.

Ask Yes Questions

1. Are you asking or telling? Telling people what to do is a form of pressure. Asking removes Reactance.
2. Are you asking a yes question? The innovator’s faulty instinct is to begin the conversation at the point of tension or disagreement. New innovations and ideas will be more easily accepted if we begin with questions that reveal acceptance and common ground.
3. Can you create public commitments? Self-persuasion becomes more powerful when the commitment is made publicly.

Co-Design

1. Can your audience participate in designing the idea? The foundational principle of co-design is that by inviting people to participate in the design of a new idea, these individuals become more inclined to embrace and implement the idea once it is ready.
2. Is participation meaningful? Self-persuasion doesn’t lend itself to short cuts or empty gestures. Co-design is most powerful when participation is meaningful and exceeds people’s expectations.

Conclusion

“Put a bird on it!” Fans of the IFC comedy series Portlandia will recognize this famous line from an episode where two entrepreneurs decide that the way to make ordinary objects more desirable for sale in retail stores is to simply stencil a bird outline on the item – immediately transforming the ordinary object into hipster art.

The satire beautifully depicts our Fuel-based mindset and

its shortcomings. We focus our attention on adding gunpowder instead of reducing drag. The limitations of Fuel call for a new approach to innovation. It demands that we stop thinking in Fuel. It's time to start thinking about Friction, and giving the long-overdue attention that will allow us all to create products, marketing strategies, and businesses that go the distance and lead to real results.



Loran Nordgren is a Kellogg Professor of Management. His research and teaching explores the psychological forces that propel and prevent the adoption of new ideas. Loran has received numerous awards for research and teaching, and has worked with companies throughout the world on a wide-range of behavior change problems.

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