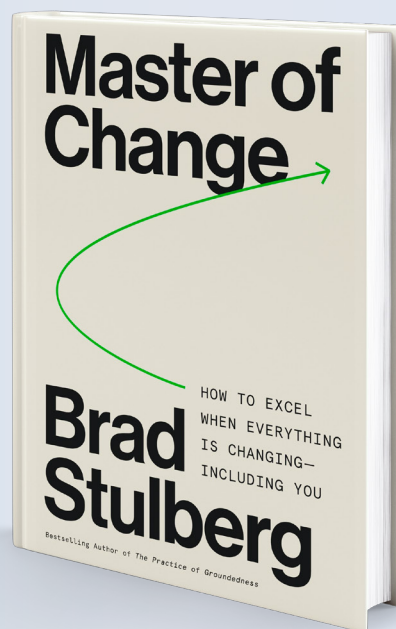


BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



Master of Change

How to Excel When Everything Is Changing – Including You

By Brad Stulberg

Brad Stulberg researches, writes, and coaches on health, well-being, and sustainable excellence. He is the bestselling author of *The Practice of Groundedness* and co-author of *Peak Performance*. Stulberg regularly contributes to the *New York Times*, and his work has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Outside Magazine*, *Forbes*, and other outlets. He also serves as the co-host of *The Growth Equation* podcast and is on faculty at the University of Michigan's Graduate School of Public Health. In his coaching practice, he works with executives, entrepreneurs, physicians, and athletes on their mental skills and overall well-being.

A Book Review by Soundview

Making Meaning and Moving Forward

Change is an inevitable part of life. Everybody experiences it constantly, and according to Brad Stulberg, the trick to living purposefully and productively with change is to accept it and to learn to adapt according to it. At the outset of his book, *Master of Change: How to Excel When Everything Is Changing – Including You*, Stulberg discusses the different attitudes towards change that homeostasis and allostasis present us with. With homeostasis, the belief is that when an organism is presented with change, it will do all that it can to return to its original state. In life, however, Stulberg does not believe this is always either possible or practical. Instead, he relies on the notion of allostasis. Allostasis states that when presented with change, an organism will confront the challenge and change because of it, arriving at a new normal. He describes this pattern as being one of “order, disorder, reorder” rather than the homeostatic process of “order, disorder, order”. Stulberg attempts to help his reader proceed through this process of allostasis in a manner that allows them to flourish despite the myriad changes that life confronts every person with.

In his book, Stulberg succeeds in combining research from numerous fields including psychology, religion, and philosophy, and he has a desire to share only those insights that are relevant across different studies and different fields. He does this because he believes individual studies can lead people astray if they prove to be inaccurate. As such, he trusts most what is replicated and believed to be true in numerous different areas. Because of this, his book is littered with quotes, propositions, and theories from everything from Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance to Tao Te Ching [tow-tay-ching].

Stulberg begins by discussing the importance of non-dual thinking. By this, he means “that truth is often found in paradox: not this or that, but this and that”. He extols the virtues of rugged flexibility. He believes that people need to allow for changes and bumps in the road, but they must also be tough. He believes that the “result is a gritty endurance, an anti-fragility that not only withstands change, but thrives in its midst”. This allows people the opportunity to change and adapt while still maintaining a “strong core identity”.

Stulberg notes that one of the biggest problems people face

with change is accepting it. All too often, he claims, people make situations worse when they refuse to acknowledge change that is in their midst. If a person is able to accept change, Stulberg believes that he or she can “enter into conversation with change”. Another critical factor in accepting change is something Stulberg calls the inescapability trigger. He proposes that people are much more likely to engage with change if they believe it is immutable. In order to get to the point of accepting change, a person must not only think and talk about the change and make plans concerning it but they must actually fully accept it.

In his second chapter, Stulberg moves on to the concept of expectations. He claims that expectations are a large part of how a person experiences the world and are a key component to happiness. As he writes, “Swaths of psychological research shows that our happiness in any given moment is a function of our reality minus our expectations”. In other words, a person is happy when their situation is better than what they expected it to be, and they are unhappy or disappointed when reality does not live up to those expectations.

Stulberg then goes on to discuss Victor Frankl and tragic optimism. Concentration Camp survivor, psychologist, and author Frankl believes there are three types of tragedy people experience: suffering, guilt, and the realization that everything will pass away. Stulberg posits that because of the inevitability of suffering and negative change, it is irresponsible and impossible to expect ourselves to be happy at all times. Stulberg believes that tragic optimism is an antidote to this. “Tragic optimism,” according to Stulberg, “is the ability to maintain hope and find meaning in life despite its inescapable pain, loss and suffering”. This requires maintaining a positive attitude despite the setbacks that life presents. With tragic optimism, a person need not rely on denial, despair, and self-judgment because that person will accept that these are a normal part of life. This, according to Stulberg, is preferable to either toxic positivity or pessimism. Maintaining tragic optimism allows a person to see a situation clearly and then adapt to it as best they can.

Hope is a necessary component to maintaining peace in the midst of change. What can derail a person when faced with unwanted change is resistance. Resistance, Stulberg maintains, is what leads to greater suffering. He believes that resistance is multiplicative so that suffering equals pain times the amount of resistance a person holds against it. As an example of this, he describes the Mayo Clinic’s Pain and Rehabilitation Center. The Center’s aim is “to eliminate the overwhelming desire of patients to eliminate their pain”. This allows patients to engage in more activities once they stop trying to eliminate their pain at all costs. The clinic is effective because it reduces resistance while improving expectations at the same time.

Stulberg moves on to discuss a person’s sense of self, and he maintains that this sense of self must remain fluid if a person is to thrive. He explains that the closer a person’s sense of self is tied to one area or pursuit, the greater difficulties they face in life. Things change, and having such a narrow, rigid view of self makes those changes much more difficult to endure. This

does not mean that it is wrong to care deeply; it just means that a person’s identity is most helpful when it is not rigidly tied to one pursuit.

He discusses complexity, differentiation, and integration when it comes to self-identity. He explains that in regards to evolution, the complex are more apt to survive. A species must have differentiation; this means that it must have numerous distinct parts. These parts also, however, must be integrated and work in unison with each other. In order for a person to thrive during times of change, this complexity will benefit them.

Along with these concepts, he discusses interdependence and independence and a belief that a person must nurture a sense of both. This requires a person to “be both singular and stable on the one hand and porous and constantly changing on the other”. Stulberg summarizes psychologist Jane Loevinger by saying that a person needs to understand that an ego is not static over time; rather, it changes. A person must be cognizant of this and understand when their ego or self view become detrimental to their sense of well-being. Self-identity only becomes harmful when it becomes rigidly attached to one circumstance or characteristic. A person has a somewhat stable ego that is acting in the present moment. They also have a sense of the ultimate self which is connected to and influenced by everything around it. A person must keep in mind their ultimate self which is constantly changing and is not attached to any particular circumstance. This will help shield people from the distress that arises because of inevitable failures.

Stulberg moves on next to discuss boundaries. He analogizes boundaries to the banks of a river. They are what keep the water flowing in a steady and contained direction. The water itself, however, is fluid. People are fluid. They are constantly changing. They need boundaries, however, to keep them going where it is they want to go. Stulberg believes that while much of life is out of control, a person can control their own boundaries. These values are particularly important during periods of change and upheaval. He advises people to consult their core values when they are unsure of how to proceed in difficult circumstances. In general, these values provide stability when life starts to seem out of control. Stulberg writes, “But if you can know and trust in your core values, essentially knowing and trusting in the deepest parts of yourself, then you can courageously walk forward into the unknown”. He recommends people develop a list of 3-5 core values, define those values, and then devise practical ways to implement them in everyday life. He believes in rugged flexibility, meaning that people and organizations must be willing and able to change in changing circumstances, but they also must strictly or rigidly adhere to their values.

Throughout his fifth chapter, Stulberg maintains that it is vital for a person to learn to respond rather than to react to situations. He discusses target fixation. This occurs in many different arenas, but one example he gives is when a person focuses closely on the car in front of them. They focus so closely, in fact, that they hit it inadvertently. He believes that this applies to all areas of life. In order to overcome this, he advocates for the expansion of a person’s view. To expand one’s view, he tells his reader



... people need the ability to pause and consider responses rather than engage in knee-jerk reactions.”

that when they find themselves focusing too heavily on anything, they should zoom their focus out and pay attention to all that is happening around them.

He then goes on to explain the neural circuitry referred to as the RAGE network. This pathway is activated when a person faces a threat to their safety such as a lion on the horizon. Evolution has equipped people with a fight or flight response to help them get out of such situations. This is a reaction, however, and since people are infrequently in this type of danger these days, it can prove detrimental for everyday 21st century living. Instead, people need the ability to pause and consider responses rather than engage in knee-jerk reactions. In order to move from this RAGE response to a more beneficial SEEKING response, he advocates pausing and naming emotions, processing and removing oneself temporarily from the situation, planning what to do based upon this more removed perspective, and proceeding to take small steps.

The key component in responding rather than reacting is a moment of pause long enough to allow a person to consider the most beneficial action. The more a person is able to pause and respond, acting on the SEEKING pathway, the more effectively they will be able to respond to situations. Because feelings are so important for determining behavior. This SEEKING pathway is important. This is because taking the time to pause and consider elicits a dopamine response which is pleasurable. This pleasurable effect will entice a person to respond in a similar way the next time they find themselves in a threatening or anxiety provoking situation. One way a person can activate this seeking pathway is through behavior modification.

Stulberg moves on to discuss activation energy. This can be helpful when a person is struggling, and feelings of despair or apathy are making it hard to do anything. This term borrowed from psychology explains that one small act can create a dopamine reaction which can spur on future acts. He maintains that sometimes when a person feels very bad, dwelling on those feelings can make it worse. What can help is taking one small action which may lead to other small actions. Stulberg writes, “productive actions are self reinforcing”. If unsure of how to start down this path, Stulberg goes back to core values and advocates letting them dictate which action to take.

Finally, Stulberg discusses serious tragedies that occur in a person’s life. These are situations that are not easy to overcome and that are hard to make sense out of. At the most extreme example, he refers to the loss of loved ones, but other situations such as a layoff or a health crisis can also be detrimental to a person’s sense of self. In these situations, Stulberg strongly recommends against trying to force meaning onto suffering.

He believes that over time people will come to find growth arising out of these difficult times, but that trying to force meaning on intense suffering when it is fresh can make people feel like failures because they will not be able to view suffering from a distanced perspective. Sometimes, he maintains, people have to allow themselves to sit with and accept their suffering. He believes that one of the most important things a person can hold on to during these difficult times is to remember that “What feels like forever now will not in the future”.

In the end, Stulberg maintains, suffering and trauma do result in growth and resiliency. How long that takes often depends on the severity of the trauma. He maintains the importance of asking for help when needed. This is an important factor in resiliency. Voluntary simplicity where a person focuses on what matters most is also helpful during the most stressful or difficult circumstances.

Stulberg finishes his book by answering five questions and giving ten tools to help people accept and embrace change. He also provides his reader with a list of core values and advice on how to implement these values most optimally. Throughout his book, Stulberg maintains committed to understanding the difficulties of change while helping his reader learn to adjust and adapt to inevitable life changes. He understands that some changes are so severe that they take time to adjust to and that surrender to them is sometimes the best step in working through to the other side. The one thing constant in life is change, both small and large and both good and bad, and the tools Stulberg provides can help his readers come to a better understanding of how to approach this reality in the most effective and beneficial manner.

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