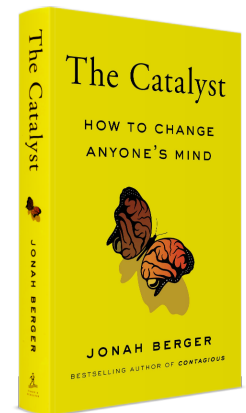


# The Catalyst

How to Change Anyone's Mind

by **Jonah Berger**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Everyone has something they want to change. Marketers want to change their customers' minds, and leaders want to change organizations. Startups want to change industries, and nonprofits want to change the world. But change is hard. Often, we persuade and pressure and push, but nothing moves. Could there be a better way?

Successful change agents know it's not about pushing harder or providing more information; it's about being a catalyst. Catalysts remove roadblocks and reduce the barriers to change. In *The Catalyst*, Jonah Berger identifies the key barriers to change and how to mitigate them. You'll learn how catalysts change minds in tough situations, such as how marketers get new products to catch on and how leaders transform organizational culture.

*The Catalyst* is for anyone who wants to catalyze change. Whether you're trying to change one person, transform an organization, or shift the way an entire industry does business, you can learn how to become a catalyst.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why persuasion is not the best way to change minds.
- The five horsemen of inertia, i.e., the key barriers to change.
- To reduce people's uncertainty and resistance.
- To effect change by building agency, finding common ground, and marshaling strength in numbers.

## Introduction

Change is hard. We persuade and cajole and pressure and push, but even after all that work, often nothing moves. Things change at a glacial pace if they change at all. In the tale of the tortoise and the hare, change is a three-toed sloth on his lunch break.

Isaac Newton famously noted that an object in motion tends to stay in motion, while an object at rest tends to stay at rest. Just like moons and comets, people and organizations are guided by conservation of momentum. Inertia. They tend to do what they've always done.

When trying to change minds and overcome such inertia, the tendency is to push. Client not buying the pitch? Send them a deck of facts and reasons. Boss not listening to the idea? Give them more examples or a deeper explanation.

The assumption is that pushing harder will do the trick. That if we just provide more information, more facts, more reasons, more arguments, or just add a little more force, people will change. Unfortunately, that approach often backfires. Unlike marbles, people don't just roll with it when you try to push them. They push back.

So if pushing people doesn't work, what does?

### A Better Way to Change Minds

To facilitate change, chemists often use a special set of substances. These unsung heroes clean the exhaust in your car and the grime on your contact lenses. They turn air into fertilizer and petroleum into bike helmets. They speed change, enabling molecules that might take years to interact to do so in seconds.

Rather than pushing, they lower the barriers to change. And these substances are called catalysts.

Generating change is not about being more convincing or a better persuader. Instead, it's about being a catalyst—changing minds by removing roadblocks and lowering the barriers that keep people from taking action.

Rather than asking what might convince someone to change, catalysts start with a more basic question: Why hasn't that person changed already? What is blocking them? This is about how to overcome inertia, incite action, and change minds—not by being more persuasive or pushing harder but by being a catalyst.

Reactance, Endowment, Distance, Uncertainty, and Corroborating Evidence can be called the five horsemen of inertia.

Five key roadblocks that hinder or inhibit change. These five ways to be a catalyst can be organized into an acronym. Catalysts reduce Reactance, ease Endowment, shrink Distance, alleviate Uncertainty, and find Corroborating Evidence.

Taken together, that forms an acronym, REDUCE. Which is exactly what great catalysts do. They REDUCE roadblocks. They change minds and incite action by reducing barriers to change.

Let's now discuss each of these five elements.

## 1. Reactance

Instructing jurors to disregard inadmissible testimony can encourage them to weigh it more heavily. Alcohol prevention messages can lead college students to drink more. And trying to persuade people that smoking is bad for their health can actually make them more interested in smoking in the future.

In these and similar examples, warnings became recommendations. Just as telling a teenager not to date someone somehow makes that person more alluring, telling people not to do something has the opposite effect: It makes them more likely to do it.

People have a need for freedom and autonomy. To feel that their lives and actions are within their personal control. That, rather than driven by randomness, or subject to the whims of others, they get to choose. Consequently, people are loath to give up agency.

Restriction generates a psychological phenomenon called reactance. An unpleasant state that occurs when people feel their freedom is lost or threatened. Whether made to encourage people to buy a hybrid car or save money for retirement, any effort is often unintentionally seen as impinging on people's freedom. It interferes with their ability to see their behavior as driven by themselves.

To reestablish a sense of autonomy, people often react against persuasion. They do the opposite of whatever is being requested.

### Allow for Agency

To reduce reactance, catalysts allow for agency—not by telling people what to do or by being completely hands-off but by finding the middle ground. By guiding their path. Four key ways to do that are (1) provide a menu, (2) ask, don't tell,

One way to allow for agency is to let people pick the path. Let them choose how they get where you are hoping they'll go.

(3) highlight a gap, and (4) start with understanding.

**Provide a menu.** One way to allow for agency is to let people pick the path. Let them choose how they get where you are hoping they'll go. For example, potential hires know they are supposed to negotiate, so—almost regardless of what they're offered—they usually ask for more. One way to deal with this is to give candidates the tradeoffs. An extra week of vacation is equivalent to \$5,000 less salary. Ten thousand more in salary is equivalent to this much less in equity.

Letting potential hires choose which dimension is more important makes them feel like they have more of an active role in the process—and hopefully satisfies their need to negotiate. It's providing a menu: a limited set of options from which people can choose.

**Ask, don't tell.** Another way to allow for agency is to ask questions rather than make statements. Questions shift the listener's role. Rather than countering or thinking about all the reasons they disagree with a statement, listeners are occupied with a different task: figuring out an answer to the question. How they feel about it or their opinion. Something most people are more than happy to do.

More importantly, questions increase buy-in. Because while people may not want to follow someone else's lead, they're much more likely to follow their own. The answer to the question isn't just any answer; it's *their* answer. And because it's their own personal answer, reflecting their own personal thoughts, beliefs, and preferences, that answer is much more likely to drive them to action.

**Highlight a gap.** Another route to self-persuasion is to highlight a gap—a disconnect between someone's thoughts and actions or a disparity between what they might recommend for others versus do themselves.

“Can I get a light?” Talk to any smoker, even someone who smokes casually, and they've probably heard this question at least once if not hundreds of times. Most people are happy to oblige. But when smokers in Thailand were stopped on the street and asked this question, their responses were nowhere near as positive. “I'm not giving it to you,” said one

smoker. “Cigarettes contain poison,” responded another. “They drill a hole in your throat for cancer. Aren't you afraid of surgery?” lectured a third. And they did so because the person who made the request was a child.

A small boy wearing a monkey T-shirt or a girl in pigtails. Each no more than four feet tall and barely over ten years old. The kids pulled cigarettes from their pockets and politely asked smokers for a light. After being rejected and often chastised for their request, the kids turned to walk away. But before they did, they handed the smoker a piece of paper. A small note, folded into fourths, almost like a secret passed under the table at school. “You worry about me,” it said, “but why not about yourself?” And at the bottom was a toll-free number smokers could call to kick the habit. With a meager budget of only \$5,000 and no media spending at all, the campaign had an enormous impact. Calls to the helpline jumped more than 60 percent. Many called it the most effective anti-smoking ad ever.

The Smoking Kid campaign worked because it highlighted a gap, a disconnect between what smokers were suggesting to others (kids) and what they were doing themselves. People strive for internal consistency. They want their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to align.

Consequently, when attitudes and behaviors conflict, people get uncomfortable. And to reduce this discomfort, or what scientists call cognitive dissonance, people take steps to bring things back in line.

**Start with understanding.** Over the last few decades, negotiators have relied on a simple stairway model. A basic set of steps consistently works. The first step isn't influence or persuasion. Before people will change, they have to be willing to listen. They have to trust the person they're communicating with. And until that happens, no amount of persuasion is going to work.

Think about why word of mouth is more persuasive than advertising. If an advertisement says a new restaurant is good, people don't usually believe it. Because they don't think they can trust what the ad is saying. But if their friend says they'll love the homemade tagliatelle, they're much

more likely to give it a shot. Why? Because that friend has earned permission. They've known the friend long enough to assume she has their best interests at heart.

Rather than trying to persuade, start by understanding. Why is the supplier's price higher than desired? Perhaps their costs have gone up. When people feel understood and cared about, trust develops. The supplier realizes the goal is a long-term partnership and not just a money grab.

## 2. Endowment

People tend to eat the same foods they've always eaten, buy the same brands they've always bought, and donate to the same causes they've always supported. Take someone who's just had heart bypass surgery or had an angioplasty to widen obstructed arteries. Afterward they're told, often multiple times by multiple doctors, to change their diets and lifestyles. But only around 10 percent actually do.

Change is hard because people tend to overvalue what they have: what they already own or are already doing. Once we have something, once we're endowed with it, we start to become attached to it. And consequently we value it more.

Also, losses loom larger than gains. When deciding whether to take a bet, buy a new phone, or make any change at all, potential disadvantages are weighed more heavily than potential advantages. Losing \$100 feels worse than winning \$100.

To get people to change, the advantages have to be at least twice as good as the disadvantages. New software can't be just a little better; it has to be *a lot* better. A new approach can't just be slightly more effective; it has to be *significantly* more effective. So how do we ease endowment? Two key ways are to (1) surface the cost of inaction and (2) burn the ships.

### Surface the Cost of Inaction

To overcome endowment, we need to help people realize the cost of doing nothing—that rather than being safe or costless, sticking with the status quo actually has a downside. Business author Jim Collins once said that “good is the enemy of great... We don't have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don't have great government, principally because we have good government. Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life.”

The same holds for change. When things are good, it's easy to stick to the status quo. Change is costly and requires effort, so as long as things are good enough, the impetus to switch is muted.

So, to change minds and ease endowment, catalysts surface the cost of inaction. They make it easier for people to see the difference between what they are doing now and what they could be doing. And rather than focusing on how much better the new thing is than the old, or the potential gain of action, catalysts do the opposite. They highlight how much people are losing by doing nothing.

Seeing how much time or money is being lost is more motivating than seeing how much could have been gained.

### Burn the Ships

When endowment is really strong, sometimes change requires going one step further. And those situations may warrant burning the ships. The expression “burning one's bridges” comes from the idea of burning a bridge after crossing it during a military campaign, leaving the troops no choice but to continue the march. Compared to the situations most people face on a daily basis, this tactic is clearly extreme. And selfish.

But similar, less drastic versions can be applied to a broad set of situations in which people are stuck on the status quo. Not completely taking the old option off the table but making people realize and bear more of its true costs.

Car manufacturers don't refuse to make replacement parts for older vehicles, but once a reasonable time has passed, they stop making as many. Prices go up, and consumers are encouraged to transition to something new. Manufacturers don't force consumers to change, but they also don't subsidize the prices on the old parts, leaving them artificially low. They pass the cost on to the consumer, making it less likely those consumers will stick with the status quo.

So sometimes inaction needs to be taken off the table. Or at least no longer subsidized. Because while inaction might beat newcomers in a royal rumble, once inaction becomes more costly, suddenly the contest is a lot more even. Now everyone is on equal footing. Rather than thinking about whether a given new thing is better than the old one, by helping to take inaction off the table, burning the ships encourages people to set aside the old and instead think about which new thing is worth pursuing.

### 3. Distance

When trying to change minds, we hope that evidence will work. That giving people facts, figures, and other information will encourage them to move in our direction. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen.

Numerous studies, whether examining medicine, politics, or other areas, have found that evidence that was supposed to change minds didn't always work. Sometimes it made people more likely to believe the truth, but other times it just reaffirmed falsehoods. Rather than changing false beliefs, exposure to the truth often increased misperceptions. Giving people correct information made them more likely to believe the exact opposite.

Rather than going after anyone, catalysts start by finding the people who see their offering as a painkiller.

#### The Region of Rejection

People have a range, or zone, around their beliefs that they are willing to consider. Staunch conservatives oppose government spending and regulation. Tell them about a bill to eliminate deficit spending or protect free markets, and they'll probably support it.

But go beyond that zone, to things like raising the debt ceiling or providing universal health care, and it backfires. The further afield the message, the less likely they'll listen. And the more likely it will push them in the opposite direction. Because the region of rejection not only impacts change, it shapes how people perceive and react to information. People search for, interpret, and favor information in a way that confirms or supports their existing beliefs.

How do catalysts avoid the region of rejection and encourage people to actually consider what they have to say? Three ways to mitigate distance are to (1) find the movable middle, (2) ask for less, and (3) switch the field to find an unsticking point.

**Find the movable middle.** When dealing with issues that people feel strongly about, start by finding the movable middle. Individuals who, by virtue of their existing positions, are more likely to shift because they're not so far away to begin with. One way is to look for behavioral residue. Clues that indicate conflicting opinions or a willingness to change. In a business context, consumers who've complained about a competitor on social media, for example.

Trying to get a new product to take off? Rather than trying to convince everyone how great it is, find the subgroup that already needs it. Venture capitalists often refer to products and services as vitamins or painkillers. Nice-to-haves (e.g., vitamins) that can be put off until later, or need-to-haves (e.g., painkillers) that people can't live without.

Rather than going after anyone, catalysts start by finding the people who see their offering as a painkiller. Locating potential users who need the offering and can't wait to sign up.

**Ask for less.** Sometimes we want to change minds of people who are further away. So how do we do that? Try asking for less rather than pushing for more. Dial down the size of the initial request so that it falls within the zone of acceptance. Not only will that make that initial request more successful, it also makes big change more likely overall.

This is really about chunking the change. Breaking big asks into smaller, more manageable chunks. Starting with one and building from there. Moving 10 or 15 yards at a time, rather than tossing a Hail Mary and hoping for the best.

**Switch the field; find an unsticking point.** When someone is really dug in, you can find a dimension where there's already agreement and use that as a pivot point. Have a boss who doesn't support an initiative because they think it will cost too much? Dealing with a colleague who doesn't believe in company culture because they think it's too "squishy"?

Catalysts switch the field and find an unsticking point. Rather than pushing harder down the same blocked path, explore related directions where people aren't so dug in. Even though someone might seem like an adversary on one dimension, there's probably more to them than just that. Points of agreement like making sure the company continues to grow or employee retention stays high. Start with that. Start with the areas of agreement and build from there.

## 4. Uncertainty

People are risk averse. They like knowing what they are getting, and as long as what they are getting is positive, they prefer sure things to risky ones. Even if the risky choice is better, on average.

This devaluing of things uncertain is called the “uncertainty tax.” When choosing between a sure thing and a risky one, the risky option has to be that much better to get chosen.

Change almost always involves some degree of uncertainty. Consequently, the more change involves uncertainty, the less interested people are in changing. The more ambiguity there is around a product, service, or idea, the less valuable that thing becomes. So how can we get people to un-pause?

Trialability is how easy it is to try something. The ease with which something can be tested or experimented with on a limited basis. The easier it is to try something, the more people will use it, and the faster it catches on. Trialability works because making things easier to try lowers uncertainty.

The question, then, is how to reduce uncertainty by lowering the barrier to trial. Four key ways to do that are to (1) harness freemium, (2) reduce up-front costs, (3) drive discovery, and (4) make it reversible.

**Harness freemium.** Like Uber and Airbnb, Dropbox often appears on lists of “unicorns,” or privately held startups with valuations of more than \$1 billion. In less than a decade, the file hosting company has amassed more than 500 million registered users. More than 200,000 businesses and organizations have signed up, and the company is valued at more than \$10 billion.

But it wasn’t always that way. At the outset, Dropbox struggled to get customers to sign up. The technology was innovative, but they were trying to solve a problem most people didn’t realize they had. Dropbox’s CEO thought about hiring a marketing person or buying some search ads, but the firm didn’t have a lot of money to spend, and the return on investment seemed low.

So, rather than trying to convince people how great their service was, Dropbox did something else. They gave it away for free. On the surface, this might seem backward. Give your product away for free? This seems to violate the basic laws of successful business. But it worked. In just two months, the number of users more than doubled. In less than a year, the number had increased tenfold. And soon Dropbox was making billions of dollars in revenue.

Dropbox grew by harnessing a business model called freemium. “Freemium” is a portmanteau, a linguistic blend of two words: “free” and “premium.” The initial or basic version is free of charge, but the experience is designed so that satisfied users will eventually pay to upgrade to an enhanced or premium version.

**Reducing up-front costs.** When it launched free shipping, Zappos got a lot of pushback. No one thought it would succeed, and it was an expensive gambit. But it worked because it removed the main barrier to purchase. It reduced uncertainty.

Free shipping was the catalyst that made e-commerce into the behemoth it is today: Just think about Amazon Prime. Success came not from dropping prices or devising a clever slogan but by removing the roadblock that was hindering change. By allowing consumers to experience things like they would in a physical store, without having to pay for the opportunity, free shipping overcame the uncertainty tax and changed how people shop forever.

These and similar examples work by reducing the up-front cost. They shrink the amount of time, money, or effort required at the outset to experience something.

**Drive discovery.** What if people don’t even know you exist? Or they know you exist but don’t think they’d like what you have to offer? If people don’t know something exists or don’t think they’ll like it, they’re unlikely to go looking to try it.

Supermarkets hand out free samples of smoked sausage on toothpicks. That not only lowers the barrier to trial for sausage lovers; it also grows the set of people who think about buying sausage in the first place.

Trial-size toothpastes in first-class airline amenity kits or shaving cream samples in hotel bathrooms serve the same function. Even if someone isn’t looking to switch toothpastes, anyone who forgets theirs at home will try the sample, increasing the chance that they will change brands in the future.

**Make it reversible.** Returns are a big issue for retailers. Consumers return more than a quarter of a trillion dollars in merchandise annually, and less than half of those goods can be resold at full price.

Not surprisingly, then, many retailers are tightening up their policies. REI and L.L.Bean have replaced their famous lifetime guarantees with stricter limits. Most companies give consumers 30 days to return their purchases,

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with the expectation that shorter policies will reduce costs and increase profit.

But some research suggests this might be shortsighted. Two marketing researchers ran an experiment in which different groups of consumers randomly received different return policies. For the strict policy group, only defective products or incorrect shipments could be returned. For the lenient policy group, any product could be returned at any time for any reason.

Contrary to intuition, the less restrictive policy actually increased profits. Not by just a little but by 20 percent. Because the lenient policy didn't just increase returns; it also increased sales and word of mouth. And these increases were more than enough to offset the cost of the extra returned merchandise. Applied to the company's full base of customers, the lenient policy would have increased profits by more than \$10 million a year.

Money-back guarantees or pay-for-performance contracts work similarly. "Don't like it? We'll fix it." Some lawyers advertise that they don't get paid if the client doesn't win. Even airline tickets are covered by a 24-hour return policy. All of which lower uncertainty and reduce inertia, encouraging customers to change their minds from "no" to "yes."

## 5. Corroborating Evidence

Imagine someone comes into the office Monday morning and tells you that they watched an amazing show over the weekend. The dialogue is sharp, the plot is gripping, and the acting is superb. They just loved it and they think you'll like it, too.

When your co-worker says a show is great, that could mean the show is really, truly great. But it might also just reflect the fact that they like lots of shows. Or that they like all sitcoms or anything with a strong female lead.

When someone hears a recommendation, they try to make sense of it. To sort out what that recommendation means. Does it say something about the thing being recommended, or does it just say something about the recommender themselves?

So whenever people get a recommendation or see someone else doing or liking something, they try to figure out—to translate—what it means for them. How informative is that person's opinion? What does it say about their own likely reaction?

When it comes to changing minds, translation comes into play. Not everyone likes or believes the same thing. And what works for one person or organization doesn't necessarily work for another. Things are subjective rather than objective. So how do we solve the translation problem?

### Strength in Numbers

There's strength in numbers. Corporate boards wait to adopt new practices until they've been adopted by several peer institutions. Doctors wait to adopt new drugs until they see multiple colleagues using them. And companies wait to adopt supply chain technologies and management strategies until they've been piloted by a number of other firms.

Multiple sources saying or doing the same thing solves the translation problem. If just one source suggests or does something, it's hard to translate. Hard to know if their opinion is diagnostic. Hard to know what their reaction means for your own.

But if multiple sources say or do something, it's harder not to listen. Because now there's corroborating evidence. Reinforcement. Multiple sources concur. They have the same view, response, or preference. And this consistency means it's much more likely that you'll feel the same way.

If multiple people are doing the same thing, it's harder to argue that they're wrong. Harder to argue that the thing they're suggesting or recommending isn't any good. Multiple sources also add credibility and legitimacy. Increasing the expectation that others will approve and lowering the risk of embarrassment or sanction.

More sources doing or saying the same thing can provide more proof. But who those sources are and when they share their perspectives plays an important role. In particular, when finding corroborating evidence, it's important to consider who, when, and how.

**Which sources are most impactful?** A great deal of research finds that similarity matters. Looking at hotels on TripAdvisor? You don't just want to know whether a hotel is highly rated; you want to know if that hotel is highly rated among people like you. If you're a family traveling with two kids, you probably want a place that other families recommend. The fact that hip 22-year-olds like the hotel isn't as useful.

In other words, the translation problem is less of a problem when there's less need for translation. In the absence of Another You, similar sources are the next closest thing: Sources that are dealing with the same issues or challenges. Other people with the same needs. Other companies in the same vertical. The more similar they are, the more proof or corroborating evidence they provide, and the greater their impact.

**The science of when.** Let's go back to the co-worker recommending a show. If they tell you how much they love it, and another co-worker says something similar the next day, it's hard not to at least consider checking out the show. It's a hot topic, lots of people are talking about it, so you infer that the show must be pretty good.

Spread those conversations out a bit more, though, and their effect is muted. If one co-worker says something today, and another mentions the show three weeks from now, it's less likely to drive action. It's been a while since you heard about the show, so you're less likely to infer it's widely popular. You've probably heard about a lot of other shows in the meantime. And if enough time passes, you may not even remember hearing about the show in the first place.

When trying to change minds, then, not all proof is equal. Concentrating proof boosts its effectiveness. Trying to in-

crease attention for a new service or important social cause? Make sure that different media hits happen soon after one another so potential supporters hear about it multiple times in a short period.

Trying to change the boss's mind? After stopping by her office, catalysts encourage colleagues to make a similar suggestion right away. Concentration increases impact.

Whether it's about shifting minds, changing behavior, or inciting action, catalysts REDUCE roadblocks.

And anyone can be a catalyst. You don't have to be a slick talker or have the best PowerPoint deck. You don't have to have a huge advertising budget or work for a big organization. And you don't have to have 20 years of domain expertise, know how to speak with your hands, or be the most charismatic person in the room.

By being a catalyst, and working to REDUCE roadblocks, you, too, can change anyone's mind.

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