

Partners in Learning
Learning to Lead Change: Building System Capacity
Leadership for Change Library

Leading Strategic Change: Breaking Through the Brain Barrier

J. Stewart Black, Hal Gregersen

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194 pages

Black and Gregersen base their work in response to three perplexing questions:

1. Why, when opportunities or threats stare people in the face, do people still *fail to see* the need to change?
2. Even when people see the need, why do they often still *fail to move*?
3. Even when people move, why do they *fail to finish* — not going far or fast enough? (italics in original)

With respect to failure to see, the authors identify two mistakes that leaders frequently make:

1. Mistake #1: The Comprehensive Mistake (making a change too comprehensive and too complex upfront)
2. Mistake #2: The "I get it mistake" Mistake (I understand the change so why can't others when I have communicated it so clearly)

Instead the authors recommend that you have to *illuminate the new right thing* by giving people experiences and other hands-on feelings and glimpses of what the change looks like.

The second brain barrier is more intriguing. The authors discovered the disturbing conclusion that "the *clearer* the new vision, the *more* immobilized employees become" (their italics). They found that people understand that they will go from doing the old wrong thing well to doing the new right thing poorly. Thus, the clearer the new vision, the easier it is for people to see all the specific ways in which they will be incompetent and look stupid. Many prefer to be competent at the old wrong thing than incompetent at the new right thing. In our view this is why capacity building is so critical (see our five books on the supplementary list). People must believe, and experience to an extent, that the strategy being employed will enable them to go through the process of getting proficient at the new right thing.

The third barrier involved the failure to finish. People get tired, and people get lost. Instead, the authors recommend investing in interaction with peers who are making progress and who can serve as mutual problem solvers (what we call *lateral capacity building*). Continuing to invest in capacity building is key, as is marking progress with results, which in turn builds momentum. Instead, many organizations jump from change to change — what Abrahamson (in our *Library for Leading Change*) calls the *repetitive change syndrome*.

Why We Like This Book

It is simple and powerful at the same time. Only three brain barriers with key insights and ideas about how to overcome them. All of our books are practical, but not simple-minded. Change leaders have to be able to think for themselves, and books like this give them the conceptual and strategic tools for engaging complex change situations.



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