The Elephant, the Rider and the Path

What is the Elephant the Rider and the Path?

This is an analogy of human psychology and change\(^1\) which suggests that our minds are made of two complimentary parts.

The largest part is a large, hugely powerful emotional subconscious which acts much like an elephant: strong, dedicated, and focused. This part lives in the present, makes no plans and is usually docile. However, it can be quite easily spooked, with a tendency to do damage if it runs out of control.

The other part is a less powerful, but highly intelligent, cognitive part which makes plans, considers the past and thinks of the future. This part is much like a rider or mahout.

To effect a personal change, we must not only persuade our “rider” of the need for change, but we must also motivate our own “elephant” to make the change.

Change is also made easier if our path is clear.

The model indicates that to change we must do three things:

- Direct the Rider
- Motivate the Elephant
- Clear the Path

Conversely, if we don’t do all of these things, we will find change impossible.

Why is it important?

As leaders, we need to recognise the importance of all of these aspects of change and plan our interventions around these three aspects. For each of the three aspects, there are three further subsections which are shown in brackets below.

What do I need to understand?

We must motivate all our staff effectively by working with the enormous power of their “elephant” mind. This means using the power of stories and feelings to generate desire (Find the feeling). And because elephants are easily spooked we must also find ways

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to make the change seem easy (Shrink the Change). We must also find ways to encourage a sense of identity and pride (Grow your people)

We must also make it clear to the rider what we are trying to achieve and where we are going. We can do this by making things easy and straightforward. This means demonstrating clearly where things are working well (Follow the Bright Spots), making it very specific and clear what is expected of people (Script the Critical Moves), and making it clear where we are trying to get to (Point to the Destination)

Finally, we must also make change easy by removing obstacles. This can sometimes mean changing the space in which people work (Tweak the Environment), or by making repetition part of the job (“Build Habits”), or by ensuring that behaviour is made as ‘contagious’ as possible (Rally the herd)

**What is expected of me?**

For more information on all of this, we recommend reading the book Switch, by Chip and Dan Heath (details in footnote)

Much of the CAREFUL programme is based on the need to motivate and articulate the “first or best” message and change leadership behaviours to support staff in delivering great care. This is intentional – we need to help staff to develop performance ownership by motivating the elephant, directing the rider and by clearing the path.