

Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2007). *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die*. New York, NY: Random House.

Reviewed by Kylie Goodell

Introduction

What do kidney thieves, Jared Fogle (of Subway marketing fame), and the phrase “*Don’t mess with Texas*” have in common? They are all sticky, according to Chip Heath and Dan Heath, brothers and authors of the New York Times bestseller *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. In this book, the Heath brothers explore how to change the way ideas are received; from falling onto deaf ears to resonating and making a lasting impact. According to the Heaths, this book is useful to anyone who wants to enjoy more effective communication. Positional and process-based leaders looking to make an impact in their teams or organizations would find this book especially beneficial.

In *Made to Stick*, the Heaths discuss a “Tapper/listener experiment” (p. 20). Tappers are given a well-known song title and asked to tap out the beat for a listener to guess. Usually, this exercise ends in frustration on both ends. Listeners languish; no matter how hard they try it seems impossible to guess the song! Tapper brood; they cannot understand how such an “easy” task is so difficult to accomplish. The reason behind these frustrations lies in what the Heaths refer to as the “Curse of Knowledge” (p. 20). Tappers are privy to information (the song title) that renders them unable to imagine what it is like to lack that knowledge.

This Curse haunts many people on a daily basis. Reasonable attempts to share useful ideas fail because it is exceedingly difficult to those who lack critical background information. To combat the Curse of Knowledge and other “villains” which cause great ideas to be ineffective, *Made to Stick* arms the reader with a checklist of six principles common to some of the world’s stickiest stories, campaigns, and urban legends. The checklist includes: Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credentialed, Emotional, and Story; and it just so happens to be accompanied by an easy-to-remember acronym; SUCCEsS. *Made to Stick* provides theory and real world examples to back up these principles and, ultimately, aims to lead its readers to more skillful communication.

Theoretical Frame

Made to Stick is all about effective communication; an ever-popular topic in educational, organizational, and leadership literature. In the organizational classic, *The Giving of Orders*, author Mary Parker Follett (1926) discusses guidelines of effective communication techniques for individuals in positional leadership roles. The circumstances surrounding communication efforts and the manner in which orders are presented can make all the difference in whether or not communication is effective. Similarly, one must be thoughtful in their communication efforts to ensure that what is being said actually results in its desired effect. Though written

through the lens of a positional leader directing followers, these guidelines are extremely relevant and are echoed by the Heath brothers throughout *Made to Stick*.

In more modern literary works, the theme of effective communication remains paramount. On-going, dynamic, and non-formal communication is becoming increasingly important as a way to promote effective practices between individuals and in organizations (Baker, 2002). In positional and process-based leadership settings, this informal communication can serve as a way to capture the attention of individuals and encourage the pursuit of shared goals. The principles highlighted in *Made to Stick* are applicable to group leaders and group members and provide a strategic base upon which to frame both formal and informal communication efforts.

The biggest villain in *Made to Stick*, the Curse of Knowledge, can lead to many negative outcomes. Discussed by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2008), people experienced in a certain area often lose the creativity and imagination of the less informed. When one becomes too familiar with patterns and too focused on following trends, their ability to perceive new ideas is hindered. *Made to Stick* teaches its readers not only how to present ideas to others, but, also, how to be on the lookout for the next big thing; its authors arguing that it may be more effective to spot than create sticky ideas.

Another villain of effective communication that is highlighted in modern literature is found in the paradox “less is more”. Information overload is a growing problem which leaves us wanting of better, not more, communication efforts (Allen & Cherrey, 2000). While knowledge is an infinite resource and progress is aided through the sharing of information, when one is not careful about which information they communicate and how that information is shared they run the risk of drowning their ideas in a sea of other competing information. Combined with the concept of a networked society, where boundaries are blurred and systems perspectives exist, we are challenged to discover new ways of relating to one another and building effective, cooperative relationships. In *Made to Stick* the reader is given tips to make his or her information stand out and stick with audiences as well as tips to relate to these individuals; leaving them hanging on every word and coming back for more.

Elements of the Book

Made to Stick breaks down the SUCCEs checklist, the adhesive behind sticky ideas, with a chapter devoted to each of its six principles.

Simple

To make ideas stick, they must be presented as simply as possible. The Heaths note that this is not about “dumbing things down”; it is about “elegance and prioritization” (p. 30). No matter how compelling an idea may be, it loses its meaning if it is bogged down by details. For leaders to communicate effectively with group members, ideas must be presented so that they are easy to understand, remember, and implement. This also involves eliminating uncertainty and its paralyzing effects. If there are too many possible choices to make, often times, one chooses to do nothing. This can be especially damaging in today’s fast-paced, information-overloaded

world. Those who get ahead only do so by taking action. And those who take action are often motivated by simple ideas.

According to the Heaths, stripping out information in order to focus on the simple, core idea is not instinctual (p. 243). One technique to accomplish this feat is using schemas or metaphors to provide a general model of an idea. This helps to make ideas accessible, a paramount first step even if this accessibility comes at the expense of accuracy (p. 57). This is not to say that one should provide misleading information to their group members. It simply means that one should provide just enough detail for that information to be useful. Then a little more. Then a little more.

Unexpected

A second attribute of sticky ideas is that they are unexpected. The Heaths reveal that the most basic way to get someone's attention is to break a pattern, to make use of the element of surprise. This surprise cannot be too outlandish; it needs to make sense after it happens but cannot be predicted. Leaders can use surprise to bring attention to an important new idea. The best way to keep this attention, to generate interest in learning more about an idea, is to open gaps of knowledge. It is human nature to give people facts without letting them realize the importance of this information (p. 85). To keep people engaged in a new concept, leaders need to highlight specific knowledge that group members are missing, leaving them craving more details to fill this hole.

Concrete

Beyond the Curse of Knowledge, there lies another villain to sticky ideas: abstraction. Abstract ideas are difficult to remember and understand. They also leave room for misinterpretation. By being concrete with ideas one is able to avoid this problem. According to the Heaths, if one can examine something with his or her senses it is concrete (p. 104). So how can one ensure that they are presenting concrete ideas? They must begin by presenting concepts that group members can understand on an instinctual level. Once they have communicated a concrete idea and allowed group members to relate to this concept they can embellish; constructing higher, more abstract meanings, on top of existing knowledge.

Credible

No matter how appealing an idea may be, if it lacks credibility it will be exceedingly difficult to obtain buy-in. Where does this all-important credibility come from? According to the Heath brothers, it is often the honesty and trustworthiness of a source rather than status that encourages acceptance of ideas (p. 137). Often times, the most honest and trustworthy opinion can be obtained through personal experience. By using "testable credentials", group members are able to experience an idea for themselves, providing this new concept with an enormous credibility boost (p. 157).

A frequently misused tactic in obtaining credibility, however, is the presentation of statistics. While statistics can be helpful in illustrating a relationship between two familiar concepts, they are rarely meaningful in and of themselves. When using statistics to encourage group members to accept an idea, one must remember that it is the relationships, not the numbers, that are most important (p. 150). Use concrete comparisons rather than intangible figures to make ideas stickier.

Emotional

Sticky ideas make people care by tapping into the things that they care about (p. 176). To imbue ideas with maximum stickiness, one must provide group members with discernable benefits that strike an emotional cord. Tangibility rather than magnitude makes people care. Additionally, one must not blend analytical and emotional appeals. In *Made to Stick*, the authors assert that the mere act of calculation reduces the emotional allure of an idea (p. 167). To encourage an idea to be accepted and implemented, leaders need to be in touch with what appeals to group members at an emotional level. They must then intertwine their idea with these stirring appeals.

Stories

The Heaths believe that being in the audience of a story is not a passive experience. Inside, audience members are getting ready to act (p. 214). This provides another way to make ideas sticky; incorporate them into a story. When a leader makes an argument in support of a new idea, these arguments encourage evaluation, judgment, debate, and criticism. When a new idea is presented as part of a story, however, the audience is engaged in the idea and welcomed to participate in exploring its implementation.

Target Audience

Made to Stick was written with a broad audience in mind: anyone interested in improving their communication skills to leverage and encourage the acceptance of their ideas. From CEOs to soccer moms, the principles discussed in this book are happily considered thanks to its well-supported principles and their engaging presentation. I believe that this book would be especially useful to individuals involved in positional leadership or process-based leadership activities. Encouraging group members to listen to, consider, and accept ideas is no easy feat. Leaders are now equipped with a practical tool, the SUCCEsS checklist, to help guide and facilitate this process.

Uses of Book in Practice

According to computer engineer and mathematician Howard Aiken, “Don’t worry about people stealing your ideas. If your ideas are any good, you’ll have to ram them down people’s throats” (Slater, 1987). In *Made to Stick*, the authors present a compelling alternative belief. Good ideas should not require force or coercion. Good ideas, when applied with the right techniques, will find widespread stickiness and acceptance.

According to the Heath brothers, there are plenty of good ideas circulating waiting to be picked up by someone with the dexterity to amplify their stickiness (p. 224). Spotting ideas with the potential to stick is often easier and more useful than generating these ideas. Conversely, if the world takes an idea and changes it, one must decide if the trimmed down or modified versions still represent the core of the original idea. In *Made to Stick*, the authors assert that the test of success for ideas is not whether people mimic exact words but whether goals are achieved (p. 240).

Made to Stick provides insightful information with an attention-grabbing commentary that is as enjoyable as it is practical. After reading about the six principles of sticky ideas, I am aware of how to make a lasting impact in my most important interactions. The SUCCEsS checklist is an operative tool; not exceedingly difficult to grasp, but not natural or instinctive, either. In maintaining an awareness of new ideas and evaluating the stickiness of their presentation, the reader is able to practice SUCCEsS principles and gain a deeper understanding of how to communicate effectively and make a bigger impact.

Critique

An important takeaway from *Made to Stick* is an aid to correctly spell “success”. Those “double c’s” sure can be tricky. Luckily, readers of *Made to Stick* are able to improve much more than their spelling skills. What this book does best is provide a way to qualitatively analyze communication. When one tries and fails to make an impact in their communication efforts, they may be left grasping for straws in a sea of other ideas. *Made to Stick* offers a formula to guide communication, leaving its readers with concrete steps to take in improving the manner in which they relate to others.

While its practicality and clear-cut approach are extremely effective, *Made to Stick* is written from somewhat of an idealistic point of view. What if one is working with people who are innately unreceptive to change? What if one encounters individuals who are unwilling to open their ears, let alone give new ideas real consideration? The authors describe how to fight sticky concepts with even stickier ideas; however, for the most part, this book is written as though perfect use of these principles always results in intended effects. Unfortunately, perfect implementation does not always lead to perfect end-results.

Similarly, the authors misrepresent the facility in which these ideas can be implemented. It takes a lot of time and effort to run ideas by the SUCCEsS checklist before they are leaked to the public. Therefore, while I whole-heartedly agree that the principles presented in this book may be extremely useful in certain situations, they may not apply to everyday communication efforts. After all, one cannot be expected to drink a glass of bacteria (p. 132) to prove every point they try to make.

Despite these shortcomings, *Made to Stick* prevails in presenting intellectually stimulating concepts through an enjoyable and exceedingly readable commentary. By considering its six principles, I am now more critical of the way I communicate as a leader and a team member, as a teacher and as a student. I am empowered to measure and qualify my ideas and realize that, ultimately, widespread acceptance or failure is a result their stickiness.

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Reviewer

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