



BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION

This Time It's Personal: How Behavioral Science Proved What One Business Leader Saw in 1993

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Change is intensely personal. For change to occur in any organization, each individual must think, feel, or do something different.

— JEANIE DANIEL DUCK, 1993

In 1993, a pioneering business consultant named Jeanie Duck published an article in Harvard Business Review that should have changed everything. She argued that the root cause of most change failures wasn't strategic, financial, or operational—it was behavioral. Companies were failing not because their strategies were wrong, but because they didn't understand people.

Duck had discovered something profound. Yet corporate change programs have continued to fail at astonishingly high rates—75%, according to our latest research.

Why did that record of failure continue? Because Duck's insight, powerful though it was, arrived ahead of its time. In 1993, the behavioral science data that would confirm Duck's hypothesis did not yet exist.

But in the years that followed, the body of science that Duck needed gradually accumulated. Legions of scientists across disciplines, decades, and continents uncovered evidence about the conditions under which human beings change. Sometimes, the scientific method proves the wisdom of common sense principles.

So what did Jeanie Duck see in 1993, and how did the science eventually catch up? What discoveries by a generation of behavioral scientists finally vindicated Duck's intuition?

In the pages that follow, we describe just three moments in this decades-long scientific journey, and outline how leaders can follow the science to change their organizations for good. We explore each of them in greater detail in a new book titled *How Change Really Works: Seven Science-Based Principles for Transforming Your Organization*.

1999: The Science of Storytelling

Jeanie Duck recognized the critical role that storytelling plays in successful organizational change. She observed that it wasn't enough to distribute information—such as by sending a detailed binder to managers. Instead, communicating messages intentionally, strategically, and repeatedly was vital. In her words, “Have they heard the message? Do they believe it? Do they know what it means? Have they interpreted it for themselves, and have they internalized it?” Her core idea was simple yet powerful: well-crafted narratives significantly influence what people remember and how they feel about change.

In 1999, six years after Duck's article, researchers Karen Zabrocky and DeWayne Moore conducted a study designed to test how narratives (stories) compared to expository information (essays) in terms of audience comprehension and recall. Their experiment involved having 40 adults read eight different passages—four narrative short stories and four expository essays—of identical length and complexity. Some passages deliberately included inconsistencies, such as plot holes or contradictory details.

The researchers found that participants who read narrative passages read faster, identified more inconsistencies, and remembered details better than those who read expository passages. The researchers concluded that narratives are easier for human minds to process and recall, stating, “Narrative passages thus appear to be less demanding of effective regulation skills than expository passages.”

In our own experiences leading change programs, we have found that three types of change story are particularly effective: the threat story (“if we don't change, we'll suffer . . . or die”); the fitness story (“changing will make us stronger”); and the destiny story (“by changing, we can realize our full potential”).

In 2006, Ford Motor Company CEO Alan Mulally provided an effective demonstration of the “threat story.” He wrote a simple email to the entire company about the challenge that they faced: increased competition that demanded an effective response across the entire organization, not just in isolated areas. He framed the situation plainly and directly: “It is encouraging that there are so many areas of excellence we can point to within our company right now. But pockets of success aren't enough. Not today. Not in this competitive environment.” In less than three years, Mulally led Ford back to profitability, without needing a government bailout.

2006: The Science of Momentum

Jeanie Duck understood the essential role of momentum in successfully managing change. She observed that employees typically do not believe in a change initiative simply because leadership asks them to do so. Instead, she argued, they need to witness properly modeled behavior, tangible action, and visible results to believe that a change can work. As she put it:

“Over and over, I’ve witnessed the same hard truth: When it comes to change, people don’t believe in a new direction because they suspend their disbelief. They believe because they’re actually seeing behavior, action, and results that lead them to conclude that the program works.”

In 2006, this insight found scientific support through the discovery of the endowed progress effect. Researchers Joseph Nunes and Xavier Dreze tested whether giving people a head start toward a goal increased their persistence in achieving it. In their experiment, 300 customers at a car wash received loyalty cards. One group received cards stating that eight purchases would earn them a free car wash. Another group received cards stating that ten purchases would earn them a free car wash, but they received two stamps immediately—presenting them with a kind of head start, even though they would need to make the same eight additional purchases as those in the other test group. The results demonstrated the power of perceived progress: the redemption rate for the group with the perceived head start was 34%, significantly higher than the 19% redemption rate of the group without an initial boost.

In our own practice, we have observed four effective techniques that leaders can use to create and sustain momentum during business transformations. The first technique is simply to show belief. Explicitly say, “I believe that we will succeed,” and invite fellow executives, leading shareholders, and respected thought leaders to express similar sentiments. The second technique is to promote wins. Effective change leaders persistently detect and highlight successes across their organization—new clients, big cost savings, successful deployments of brand-new technologies—spreading the good news through newsletters, videos, town hall meetings, and any other communication channels available.

The third and fourth techniques are complementary: set new challenges for overperforming teams in order to prevent employees from becoming complacent, and engineer fresh starts for underperforming teams, giving them the chance to begin again with a clean slate and renewed energy.

The leaders of Aetna, the US insurer, practiced these techniques during a major post-pandemic change program. Katerina Guerraz, the company’s chief operating officer, designed a 90-day plan to energize the employees. After the kickoff and some early wins, she knew she needed to generate new momentum. So she started sending out a “transformation email” twice a month to shine a light on what was going well, and she asked fellow executives to start sharing stories of success with each other and to invite teams that had achieved emblematic wins to tell stories of progress in their own words at all-staff town hall meetings. By doing this, she drove a virtuous cycle of momentum, with everyone across the company given fresh motivation to follow the inspiring examples.

2012: The Science of Agency

Duck understood the importance of empowering employees during periods of organizational change. She observed that genuine empowerment meant giving employees meaningful opportunities to shape and design their future within the company. As she stated: “Provide opportunities for joint creation. Most change programs today embrace the concept of empowerment but never get around to defining it ... My working definition of empowerment is a true opportunity for employees throughout the company to create the future together.”

In 2022, Duck’s practical insight received scientific confirmation with the discovery of the IKEA effect. Michael Norton and his research colleagues conducted an experiment that began by splitting university students into two groups. One group, the “builders,” assembled plain IKEA boxes, while the other group, the “nonbuilders,” simply inspected identical preassembled IKEA boxes. Afterward, each participant was asked to bid on their box. The researchers found that builders were willing to pay 63% more for their boxes than nonbuilders were for theirs. Norton explained the underlying cause of this phenomenon succinctly: “Putting effort into something makes you value it.”

In our own practice, we have observed that transformations are more likely to succeed when employees feel that their own thumbprints are on the design—when they have exercised some degree of genuine agency. The most powerful way for leaders to foster this sense of participatory ownership is to offer some employees experiences of decision making in the form of delegated authority to shape initiatives in a way that they believe best serves the transformation’s objectives. Of course, not every employee can provide decisive input on every design question. So instead, we recommend giving many employees experiences of influence by asking them for their ideas and feedback and then showing them exactly how their advice helped shape the ultimate decisions made. We also endorse giving all remaining employees experiences of representation: ensuring that people who share particular interests have the opportunity for someone speaking on their behalf to decide or influence for them.

Ericsson, the telecom infrastructure company, tapped agency as a change resource when conducting an enterprise-wide, business-led digital transformation. Igor Maurell, the executive leading the change program, wanted Ericsson’s employees to feel that a new digital sales platform was in some way their technology—that they had helped create it. So, among other things, he gave the cross-functional teams in different regions co-ownership of the development and implementation of the new processes and ways of working for the new business digital platform. He also invited employees not only to buy into the change metaphorically but literally. The business units and market areas (as co-owners from the beginning) that stood to benefit from the new digital sales platform were charged a small, symbolic fee for its development and later for its maintenance as well. As he reasoned: “If you bring in something new and it’s free for all, then there’s no incentive to really adopt it or make it work.” Elaborating on his thinking, he said: “It’s kind of like paying for a gym membership: If you pay for a really expensive gym membership, you’re more likely to go to the gym, right?”

In 1993, Jeanie Duck suggested that the root cause of most change failures is behavioral. Then came decades of science that proved her right. BCG's *How Change Really Works* distills that science into seven principles that give leaders, for the first time, a truly human-centered program that can deliver lasting change. The book brings science and practice together and explains how leaders can put it to work to ensure that change succeeds much more often than it fails. The book is the latest expression of BCG's long commitment to helping organizations achieve successful transformation and to improving the unacceptable failure rates that have persisted since Duck published her original insights.

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