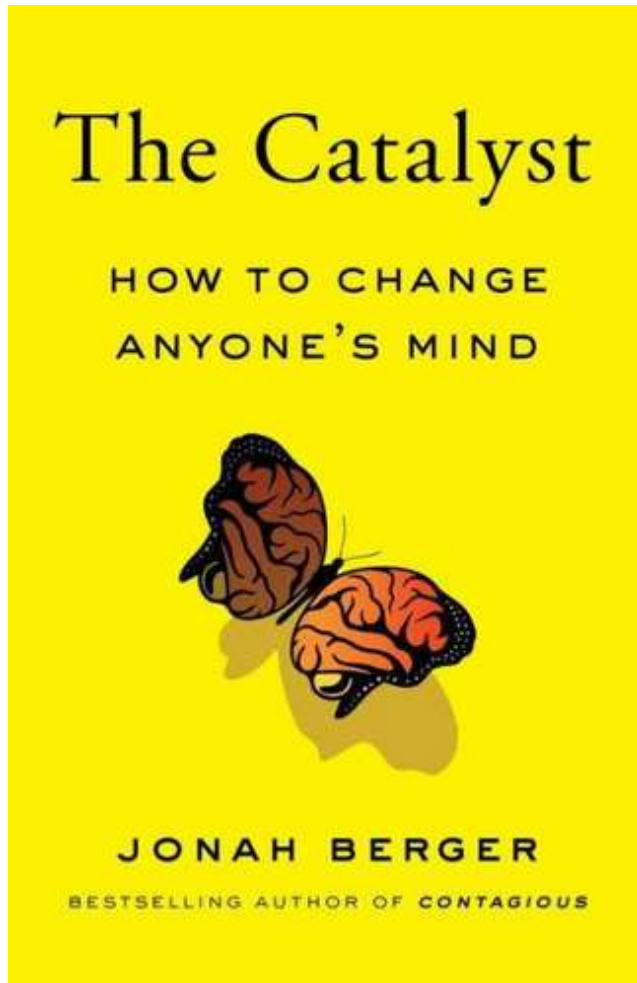


## Berger's 'The Catalyst' operates on multiple planes

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*"The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind" by Jonah Berger. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020, 276 pages, \$26.99 (hardcover).*



"Everyone has something they want to change," Jonah Berger notes near the beginning of "The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind," his new treatise on the intricacies associated with getting human beings to change their attitudes, behaviors and dispositions. "Salespeople want to change their customers' minds and marketers want to change purchase decisions. Employees want to change their bosses' perspective and leaders want to change organizations. Parents want to change their children's behavior. Start-ups want to change industries. Nonprofits want to change the world."

"But change is hard," the author continues. "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."

Anyone who has had a recent conversation about politics, the economy or virtually any other hot-button topic knows the inherent truth of Berger's assessment of how difficult it is to bring about real change – either at the personal or the organizational level. People inherently resist change, even while complaining

constantly about how things desperately need to evolve. The good news is, at least according to this thought-provoking and insightful window into the human psyche, it is possible to get someone to alter their perceptions and their actions. But it is a deceptively-complex process that few understand and even fewer know how to successfully navigate.

At the heart of Berger's thesis are five key principles that one must become intimately acquainted with to initiate and sustain lasting change: Reactance ("when pushed, people push back"), Endowment ("people are wedded to what they are already doing"), Distance ("if new information is within people's zone of acceptance, they're willing to listen"), Uncertainty ("uncertainty makes people hit the pause button") and Corroborating Evidence ("one person, no matter how knowledgeable or assured, is not enough"). The entire manuscript is structured around these five principles, with a chapter devoted to explaining how each contributes to the change process.

"Inaction is easy," Berger observes in "Endowment," the third chapter and one I found especially instructive. "It requires little effort to stick with the same beliefs, little time to stick with the same

policies and approaches, and little money to stick with products and services that are already being used.”

“Not surprisingly, then, when the choice is action or inaction, inaction often wins,” he concludes. “Inertia prevails. A body at rest tends to stay at rest. 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.”

“The Catalyst” is extensively researched, with 15 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, five chapters and epilogue that form the main narrative. What distinguishes this effort from many of its contemporaries (and the “self-help” section of your local bookstore is filled with volumes touting similar themes) is Berger’s emphasis on highlighting strategies and techniques based on empirical evidence. This is more than just his opinion based on personal experience, which tends to characterize a lot of books in this genre. A feature I found particularly appealing was the inclusion of three applications-oriented appendices that help the reader see how the concepts described so articulately in this delightful primer can be used in the proverbial real world.

Berger, who has a BA in human judgment and decision making as well as a Ph.D in marketing from Stanford, is a marketing professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He was named one of the top 30 leaders in business by the American Management Association and one of the most creative people in business by Fast Company magazine. His research has been featured in The New York Times, Harvard Business Review, and Fast Company, and his work has been highlighted on NPR, “CBS This Morning” and CNBC. A recipient of Wharton’s Iron Professor Award, his previous books include “Contagious: Why Things Catch On” and “Invisible Influence: The Hidden Forces that Shape Behavior.”

“The Catalyst” operates on multiple planes; the recommendations have as much utility for individuals as they do for organizations, which makes the book a suitable addition to either your business or personal enhancement libraries. For example, I found Berger’s discussion of the problem of addiction (which is, at its heart, the struggle to change behaviors that are exceptionally difficult to mitigate) to be intriguing:

“Addiction researchers note that even when multiple friends and family members try to get an addict to change, their efforts are usually spread out. After noticing some erratic behavior, a friend may make an offhand comment. Two months later, a different friend may say something else. But the separation between these expressions weakens their collective input. If two people say different things at different times, it’s easier to shrug them off as unrelated incidents, or come up with alternate attributions. Forget they happened or discount the last interaction by the time the next one occurs. It’s not until something more serious happens, like an accident or arrest, that a more correct conversation occurs.”

In the final analysis, “The Catalyst” focused a little more on describing the dynamics involved in maintaining the status quo when more ink could have been spent providing a roadmap for dealing with those realities. As the author makes abundantly clear, awareness doesn’t always lead to action. But it was still a very enlightening and worthwhile read.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.