

Crafting a message that sticks: An interview with Chip Heath

The key to effective communication: make it simple, make it concrete, and make it surprising.

Lenny T. Mendonca and Matt Miller

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The ability to craft and deliver messages that influence employees, markets, and other stakeholders may seem like a mysterious talent that some people have and some don't. Jack Welch, for example, created ideas that inspired hundreds of thousands of GE employees. But many other leaders are frustrated to find that key messages sent one day are forgotten the next—or that stakeholders don't know how to interpret them.

Why do some ideas succeed while others fail? Chip Heath, professor of organizational behavior in Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, has spent the past decade seeking answers to that question. His research has ranged from the problem of what makes beliefs—urban legends, for instance—survive in the social marketplace of competing ideas to experiments that show how winning ideas emerge in populations, businesses, and other organizations. Earlier this year Heath published his findings in *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*,¹ written with his brother, Dan, who founded a business that specializes in this very subject.

In July 2007 Chip Heath spoke with Lenny Mendonca, a director in McKinsey's San Francisco office; Matt Miller, an adviser to McKinsey; and Parth Tewari, who was then a Sloan fellow at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, about the key principles for making an idea "stick" and how executives can use them to communicate more successfully. The conversation took place at Stanford.

The Quarterly: Let's start by defining success. What is a sticky idea?

Chip Heath: A sticky idea is one that people understand when they hear it, that they remember later on, and that changes something about the way they think or act. That is a high standard. Think back to the last presentation you saw. How much do you remember? How did it change the decisions you make day to day?

Leaders will spend weeks or months coming up with the right idea but then spend only a few hours thinking about how to convey that message to everybody else. That's a tragedy. It's worth spending time making sure that the lightbulb that has gone on inside your head also goes on inside the heads of your employees or customers.



CHIP HEATH

Vital statistics

Born July 19, 1963, in Huntsville, Alabama

Married with one child

Education

Graduated with BS in industrial engineering in 1986 from Texas A&M University

Received PhD in psychology in 1991 from Stanford University

Career highlights

Stanford Graduate School of Business (2000–present)

- Professor of organizational behavior

Duke University's Fuqua School of Business (1997–2000)

- Associate professor

University of Chicago Graduate School of Business (1991–97)

- Assistant and associate professor

Fast facts

Has published research in such academic publications as *Cognitive Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and his research has been reviewed in publications including *Scientific American*, *Financial Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Vanity Fair*

Has appeared on *NPR*, *The Today Show*, and the National Geographic Channel

Serves on editorial board of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*; through programs at Stanford's Center for Social Innovation has worked with more than 190 social-sector organizations on their mission and strategy

The Quarterly: Give us an example of a sticky idea.

Chip Heath: John F. Kennedy, in 1961, proposed to put an American on the moon in a decade. That idea stuck. It motivated thousands of people across dozens of organizations, public and private. It was an unexpected idea: it got people's attention because it was so surprising—the moon is a long way up. It appealed to our emotions: we were in the Cold War and the Russians had launched the Sputnik space satellite four years earlier. It was concrete: everybody could picture what success would look like in the same way. How many goals in your organization are pictured in exactly the same way by everyone involved?

My father worked for IBM during that period. He did some of the programming on the original Gemini space missions. And he didn't think of himself as working for IBM—he thought of himself as helping to put an American on the moon. An accountant who lived down the street from us, who worked for a defense contractor, also thought of himself as helping to put an American on the moon. When you inspire the accountants you know you're onto something.

The Quarterly: But when is it important for ideas to have this kind of clout and when not? Surely, not every message that leaders convey should be designed to stick?

Chip Heath: True, not every message is worth obsessing over. The daily status update doesn't need to stick. But think of the messages that do: messages about your organization's strategy need to be compelling to your employees. Messages about your products and services need to convince your customers.

It's worth taking time to design a message when it needs to persist over time. If you're going to be in the room when your customer makes a buying decision or your employees make an important business decision, your message doesn't need to stick with them. But if you need people to make the right decision a week or a month later, you'd better hope your message has stuck.

The Quarterly: What's the hardest thing for leaders to learn about making their messages stick?

Chip Heath: I think simplicity is the hardest. Leaders know lots of things about their organization and business and want to share them all. But effective leaders are masters of simplicity. I'm not talking about dumbing down a message or turning it into a sound bite; I'm talking about identifying the most central, core elements of strategies and highlighting them. That way everyone in the company can keep their eye on the right ball. Getting the right simple message is hard to do, but you can't avoid doing it. I worked with a nonprofit organization that had *eight* core values. Research has shown that even a few good choices can paralyze people and prevent them from making a decision. How are you going to avoid decision paralysis when

you're juggling eight core values? The guiding message of Bill Clinton's first presidential race was, "It's the economy, stupid." There were lots of issues in that race, but you can't keep a complicated campaign organization on track if you try to tackle all of them. You have to pick your battle and win it.

The Quarterly: But you've written that simplicity isn't enough—to stick, messages also have to be concrete. Please talk about the importance of that.

Chip Heath: Take an abstract message, like "Maximize shareholder value." What should one of your employees do tomorrow to make that happen?

Now contrast that abstraction with the stories told at FedEx. One of them features a driver who couldn't open one of the pickup boxes on his route—he'd left the key back at the office. His deadline was tight and he knew that by the time he could get his key and return to the box, the packages in it were going to miss the plane. So he got a wrench, quickly unbolted the whole box, and muscled it onto his truck, knowing he'd be able to unlock it back at the office! That's the kind of behavior you want when your competitive advantage is "absolute, positive reliability." That's how you're going to maximize shareholder value in the long run. But telling FedEx drivers to maximize shareholder value just leaves them hanging. The story tells them how to act.

When messages are abstract, it's frequently because a leader is suffering from the "curse of knowledge." Psychologists and behavioral economists have shown that when we know a lot about a field it becomes really tough for us to imagine what it's like *not* to know what we know—that's the curse of knowledge. If you've ever had a conversation with your IT person about what's wrong with your computer, you've been on the other side of the curse of knowledge. The IT person knows so much that he or she can't imagine knowing as little as the rest of us. And we're all like that IT person in our own domain of expertise: prone to be overly complex and abstract.

As an executive, you may have 30 years of experience in business and 20 years in a company. So when you talk about maximizing shareholder value, you're speaking in an abstract language you've learned to understand. But that abstraction is not going to be at all clear to your frontline employees. You're better off looking for your equivalent of the FedEx story.

The Quarterly: Take this a step further and show us how leaders use these ideas to create change in their organizations.

Chip Heath: When Jack Welch was turning around GE he had a number of legacy businesses in declining industries. He often told a story about a retreat he had with the managers of the nuclear-engineering group. This was after the 1979 meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear-power station, yet their business plan still assumed that they would continue to sell more nuclear-power plants in the United States. He said to them, "I can't imagine we're ever going to sell another nuclear-power plant, so go back and make this plan work without selling new reactors." They went back and developed a plan based on selling services to existing reactors.

He used that story with managers in other legacy units. They could recognize that the managers of the nuclear group were deluded about selling more product, and

maybe that prompted them to ask themselves if they were deluded too. And it was a story that provided a concrete suggestion—you could build a great business selling to an existing base.

When you come up with a concrete story like that, you're in a good position to change the way people think and behave.

The Quarterly: How do you adapt ideas that make sense in the boardroom to other audiences, such as employees, the business community, and the broader social sphere?

Chip Heath: When ideas share the properties of sticky ideas—simplicity, concreteness, stories—they are more portable. Jack Welch could take his story about the nuclear group to lots of audiences. He could use it with Wall Street analysts who were worried about GE's business mix to tell them why GE was still a good bet. He could use it with employees who were worried about the industries they were in to reassure them that there's hope for a good business even in the lousiest industry. Leaders constantly have to talk to audiences who have many different agendas. A good story or example is going to be way more portable across those audiences than an industry analysis or a net present value calculation or a seven-point change plan.

The Quarterly: Is the ability to design sticky messages learnable?

Chip Heath: Yes, it is. Steve Jobs looks like a natural, but he's known in Silicon Valley for the obsessive amounts of time he spends working on his new-product introductions. He thinks systematically about his messages and most of them work. But few other leaders are as deliberate.

If you want to learn how to make your messages stick, the highest-return-on-investment advice is to be more concrete. Systematically go through your speech, your PowerPoint deck, or your memo and strike out every abstraction. Instead of saying "outstanding customer service," substitute an example. At Nordstrom they give the example of the salesperson who gift-wrapped a package a customer bought at Macy's. Now all of a sudden the abstraction about outstanding customer service becomes meaningful for a Nordstrom audience. You will improve your communication ability by 200 or 300 percent.

Often, leaders think that to make their messages stick they have to come up with a slogan worthy of Madison Avenue. But if you think about most commercials, they're actually not very sticky. That's why we have to repeat them so many times. Compare the typical ad tagline with the FedEx story about the driver who unbolted the box when he forgot his key. That story has the sticking power of an urban legend, yet it's true. It's a concrete example that embodies the strategy of absolute reliability. You can tell it to your employees to guide them on how to act. And you use it in a commercial that's probably much better than the typical FedEx commercial at motivating customers to trust FedEx—those people are fanatical about reliability.

The Quarterly: What role do market research and focus groups play in designing sticky messages?

Chip Heath: I'm a big fan of research because I'm a researcher. But let's face it: many of the most important messages in your organization never get near a focus group. I've never heard about a top leadership team that pitched a strategy presentation to a focus group.

You can get a long way toward a sticky message just by building in the right properties. Is my message simple enough? Is it concrete? Is there a story I could tell? If leaders want to get something done in an organization of 1,000 or 10,000 or 100,000, they'd better spend some time working through the checklist of traits that make a message sticky. And if on top of that you hold a focus group for the new-strategy speech with a random sample of employees from across your organization, their feedback will improve your message even more. You'll be able to see faces light up when you hit the right example.

The Quarterly: What does Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" mean today? How important is the medium in all this?

Chip Heath: I admire McLuhan for coming up with a sticky slogan, but with all due respect his slogan is wrong. In truth, the message is the message. People who think too much about the medium—opt-in newsletters, the Internet, Web 2.0—are making the same mistake that people have made for years in education. Remember how the 8-millimeter film was going to revolutionize education? Then the VCR? Then the personal computer? The medium can certainly help, but an 8-millimeter film didn't salvage a bad math lesson.

Leaders should take comfort that when they find some good stories to tell, the medium doesn't matter. Think about Seabiscuit, the undersized horse who became a champion. That story about overcoming adversity inspired people in the 1930s who read about it in the newspapers. It inspired people in the 2000s no matter whether they read the book or saw the movie. If you have the money to produce a movie about your inspiring story of organizational renewal, that's great. If not, just find an inspiring story and put it in your newsletter.

Six basic traits

Chip Heath's research suggests that **sticky ideas share six basic traits**.

1. **Simplicity.** Messages are most memorable if they are short and deep. Glib sound bites are short, but they don't last. Proverbs such as the golden rule are short but also deep enough to guide the behavior of people over generations.
2. **Unexpectedness.** Something that sounds like common sense won't stick. Look for the parts of your message that are *uncommon* sense. Such messages generate interest and curiosity.
3. **Concreteness.** Abstract language and ideas don't leave sensory impressions; concrete images do. Compare "get an American on the moon in this decade" with "seize leadership in the space race through targeted technology initiatives and enhanced team-based routines."
4. **Credibility.** Will the audience buy the message? Can a case be made for the message or is it a confabulation of spin? Very often, a person trying to convey

a message cites outside experts when the most credible source is the person listening to the message. Questions—“Have *you* experienced this?”—are often more credible than outside experts.

5. **Emotions.** Case studies that involve people also move them. “We are wired,” Heath writes, “to feel things for people, not abstractions.”
6. **Stories.** We all tell stories every day. Why? “Research shows that mentally rehearsing a situation helps us perform better when we encounter that situation,” Heath writes. “Stories act as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively.”

About the Authors

Lenny Mendonca is a director in McKinsey’s San Francisco office, and **Matt Miller** is an adviser to McKinsey.

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of Parth Tewari, who helped initiate and shape this interview. Tewari recently left Stanford to become the India director of TechnoServe (a nonprofit organization that helps create business solutions to fight poverty), where he is using these ideas to shape his communications.

Notes

- ¹ New York: Random House, 2007.