Reset
How to Change What's Not Working

Dan Heath

Avid Reader Press, 2025

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Northwestern Memorial Hospital faced a challenge: It took an average of three days for a package to get from the receiving area to its intended destination. The people responsible for delivering the packages were doing all they could, but they felt there was no way to change and therefore speed up the process.

This book looks at moments like these, guiding people toward how to get unstuck from what may feel like insurmountable problems. The idea is to make you see that you can, in fact, improve, and progress is possible.

In the case of the team at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Paul Suett was their answer to getting unstuck. When he was hired as the supply chain performance manager, he took it upon himself to help the team rethink how they worked. He didn't just tell them *what* needed to change—he knew they needed to believe in this change and want it for themselves. To do this, he started by asking them to share their own complaints about the process. Suett then challenged them to deliver packages in a single day, instead of the average three days.

Together, they used the challenge to assess what was going wrong, giving them the information they needed to rebuild the process. The team realized that one of the biggest elements that was slowing them down was a process called "batching." Once they stopped processing packages in batches and began processing them individually, they saw results immediately. Within six weeks, 90% of hospital locations were receiving daily deliveries.

Dan Heath became interested in exploring moments like these, when people get stuck due to inertia, decision paralysis, politics, or firefighting. Once the feeling of stuckness sets in, it can feel impossible to overcome. Heath calls for thinking strategically and focusing instead on one small, consequential thing to change. He refers to these opportunities as *Leverage Points*, which are "interventions where a little bit of effort yields disproportionate returns."

Once you have identified the right Leverage Point, you need to choose the right resources that will allow you to move that Leverage Point. Making the change will not be easy. Often, it will require sacrifice, choosing one thing instead of another. If you choose the right Leverage Point and resources, though, you will quickly begin to see progress, and that momentum is an essential ingredient to making change happen.

SECTION I: FIND LEVERAGE POINTS

CHAPTER 1:

Go and See the Work

"You can find the Leverage Points by observing up close the reality of your work."

An assistant principal was interested in understanding how her school could better meet the needs of its students. To do so, she shadowed a student for a day in the hopes of seeing firsthand where her expectations conformed with reality—or not. This effort of going and seeing the work is an essential part of identifying a Leverage Point. The right Leverage Point is doable and also worth doing.

Without digging deeper, it can be hard to see where a Leverage Point may lie. This is because there may be problems that you are oblivious to or have simply gotten used to. "Glaring problems are sometimes the legacy of past solutions—improvisations and workarounds." They are often habits that once served a purpose but no longer do. To uncover them requires making the invisible visible.

Another challenge is that, too often, people will make big decisions in a room far from where the actual work is happening. Their decisions are based on guesses, instead of an understanding of reality. This is even more dangerous when something significant isn't working properly. By going to where the work is taking place, you increase the likelihood that you might uncover something previously unknown to you. "The problem comes when we mistake functional understanding for systemic understanding. We think because we use something, because it operates as we expect, that we understand it." Gaining this systemic understanding is crucial for making an improvement—and it doesn't have to be hard.

Consider the way a turnaround consultant works. Many businesses don't act until a crisis arises, when they have no choice but to take action. Some will hire a turnaround consultant who is responsible for stepping in. As outsiders, these consultants don't typically possess a deep expertise in the business, so they talk to people on the front lines to get an understanding of what's happening. In other words, they go and see the work. They observe workers and consult them to gain the knowledge they need to make things right.

CHAPTER 2:

Consider the Goal of the Goal

"You can find Leverage Points by identifying alternate pathways to your ultimate destination."

After buying a car, a man received numerous nudges to fill out a survey about his experience. He answered each one, but he continued to be pestered. He gave one or two pieces of critical feedback, at which point the salesperson began texting him, encouraging him to increase the scores. After that, customer service completely dropped off.

These surveys may initially have been driven by a worthwhile goal: creating a good buying experience. But the short-term proxy became increasing customer satisfaction scores, which meant that salespeople took to badgering customers instead of actually working to improve their experience. If someone at the company had visited a dealership, they might have seen what was taking place and realized that they had set the wrong goal.

Before thinking about making a change, it is critical to ensure you're targeting the right one. Sometimes, we can expend significant effort to meet some goal only to find that it was the wrong one. "One simple way to avoid that misalignment—a goal that's inconsistent with the real mission—is to ask a simple but powerful question: *What's the goal of the goal?*" This question can help you uncover other ways to achieve that aim beyond the originally chosen goal—and may even allow you to get there more easily or quickly.

It is also important to avoid the trap of choosing a goal too quickly, as you risk pursuing the wrong one. An approach called the "Miracle Question" can help in this process. Derived from solutions-focused therapy, the idea is to imagine that the problem you're facing is magically gone when you awaken. How would you know the problem has been solved? What signs might you observe that tell you the miracle happened? Key to this tactic is identifying signs of the miracle and not simply describing how the miracle is making you feel. In the process, you may uncover disagreements among your team, which will help you work toward defining a common goal.

The goal of the goal tells us where we want to end up, while the Miracle Question helps us figure out how we should begin to make our way there. "Achieving clarity on the way forward is not an incremental victory. It is transformative. It can mean the difference between stuck and unstuck."

We see this play out in a challenge the Department of Education faced. Veterans are eligible for student loan forgiveness, but the department noticed that many weren't taking advantage of this benefit. They tried numerous interventions to nudge veterans in the right direction, making changes to the application process. Every effort failed, until they finally realized they could essentially automate the loan forgiveness. They were only able to have this realization when they stopped and took stock of what the actual goal was. They recognized that if their ultimate objective was to increase the uptake of veterans taking advantage of this loan forgiveness program, they could use a different approach: scrapping the whole application process.

CHAPTER 3:

Study the Bright Spots

“You can find Leverage Points by analyzing your own best work.”

In the early days of the airplane, U.S. military leaders designed the cockpit based on average pilot measurements. By 1950, a lieutenant who was part of the redesign team discovered that these averages were basically useless. They decided instead to build an adjustable environment that could accommodate nearly the full spectrum of measurements, and pilot performance improved dramatically.

When it comes to finding Leverage Points, averages are similarly not helpful. They may help when monitoring things like revenue or profit margins and can tell us that something is wrong. But when it comes to making a diagnosis, understanding what’s wrong, and then fixing it, averages can’t help.

It is better, Heath argues, to look for *“bright spots”* instead. These may be your most successful efforts or employees. They show you what’s possible. To figure out how to replicate them, you should study them carefully, looking for commonalities. You also need to take a reading of what lower performers are doing so you can identify what factors set the bright spots apart.

Once you’ve identified the characteristics or actions that contribute to better performance, it is much easier to create a replicable set of steps that everyone can follow. “By studying bright spots, we can identify the circumstances that allow us to succeed. And if we understand those circumstances, we can replicate them, allowing our success to spread.” These bright spots can even come from analogous job types or industries—they don’t have to come from within your own organization.

A veterinarian working in shelter medicine was trying to reduce the overpopulation pressures a cat shelter was facing. A high percentage of the cats were euthanized or died from diseases that were caused by the overcrowding. When a consultant joined to work on this issue, he drew on his prior experience working in animal care and control. Not all of the cats were house pets and could live on their own in the neighborhood. With this realization, they replicated the already successful idea of “TNR: trap, neuter, return” with some of the cats in the shelter and were able to reduce the crowding and overpopulation, improve cat health, and increase the likelihood that the remaining cats would be adopted.

Leverage Points may not be easy to find, and even if you identify a promising one, there’s no guarantee that it will work. That’s the beauty of bright spots: You know they’ve worked before, so it’s likely that they’ll work again.

CHAPTER 4:

Target the Constraint

“You can find Leverage Points by assessing the No. 1 force that is holding you back.”

The drive-thru line at Chick-fil-A is longer than the line at other major fast-food chains. When you dig into the numbers, however, it becomes clear that a greater total number of cars goes through a Chick-fil-A drive-thru line on average, meaning that, relatively speaking, the line moves quite quickly.

This relative speed is the result of numerous changes made over the years, which were guided by the idea of “targeting the constraint.” The idea is to pinpoint the biggest bottleneck or limiting factor and do what you can to remove obstacles.

In the case of Chick-fil-A, they made a couple of small changes to the drive-thru line that made a big difference. Instead of making patrons wait until they reach the PA system to place their order, a human approaches them in their cars while they wait. This not only speeds up the ordering process but also gives the kitchen more time to prepare orders. They also have a process of physically closing the gap, by having the order-taker walk alongside cars as they take orders. This keeps the line moving and prevents a car backup, which would deter patrons. “[Tony] Fernandez [the owner/operator of Heath’s local Chick-fil-A] and his team learned that what drove customer satisfaction was not necessarily minimizing the wait time. It was the feeling of progress.”

Ignoring a constraint leaves you vulnerable to choosing an intervention that accomplishes nothing, as the constraint will still impede progress toward your goal. At the same time, you have to choose your intervention carefully to ensure that it actually relieves the constraint. The right constraint and the right intervention are dependent on the goal you’ve chosen.

A woman who runs a caregiver network was faced with the issue of finding and keeping good caregivers. Turnover rates are high, due in part to the demanding nature of the work and the low pay. After identifying this as her constraint, she made two major changes to the way she ran the business. She decided to choose hires more carefully and make a greater effort to hold onto those hires. In other words, she shifted resources to target her identified constraint.

If your constraint isn’t immediately obvious, there’s a question you can ask yourself that might help you pinpoint it. “If you were allowed to hire one person to help you achieve your goal, what would that person’s role be? The role you identify might well be the epicenter of the constraint. Once you realize this, you might be able to mitigate the constraint even if you can’t actually hire someone.” This is not a one-and-done operation. If—or when—your goal shifts, the constraint will shift as well.

Knowing what’s holding you back will make it easier to pinpoint possible Leverage Points that will help rid you of this obstacle and allow you to move forward.

CHAPTER 5:

Map the System

"You can find Leverage Points by rising above the silos to spot hidden levers."

Two people who ran charter schools realized that a college degree wasn't enough to help people from low-income families become financially secure in their future. They were interested in figuring out how to change this. In other words, they were looking for a Leverage Point, and they decided to start by looking into how career centers worked at colleges.

The approach they used is what Heath calls "mapping the system." The idea is to zoom out, helping you see how the pieces in the system work together. This allows you to identify "hidden levers" you can pull to chip away at your Leverage Point.

Inspired by the idea of "high-dosage" math tutoring, the two school administrators became interested in trying what they called "high-dosage career counseling." They met with a few students regularly, giving them specific feedback and advice they might not have received previously. They hoped that this would help the students get unstuck. Over time, it worked.

Getting to this point requires having a complete picture of the system in which you're working. You have to "ascend above the silos: the individual units or departments within a larger organization (or across multiple organizations in the same field)." One way to do this in a business setting is to map out a typical customer journey. This process ensures that you include every step, involving different teams or departments. With a comprehensive systems-level view, you can more easily identify aspects that may be key to improvement.

Challenging assumptions is also an important part of mapping the system. Instead of accepting the way things have always been done, pause and consider whether there's a reason that they're done that way. Might there be a better way to do it? This may help turn up additional hidden levers that can be pulled.

Using these tactics to gain a better understanding of the system and how each part of it works together is an effective way to pinpoint Leverage Points to get you unstuck.

SECTION 2: RESTACK RESOURCES

CHAPTER 6:

Start with a Burst

"You can Restack Resources on your Leverage Points by beginning with an intense and focused period of work."

Once the work of identifying the right Leverage Point is complete, you have to pick which resources will be required to nudge it in the right direction. This could include money, labor, assets, or data. Regardless of which resources you choose, they will need to be "restacked" to work more effectively in service of your goal.

One way to restack your resources is to *"start with a burst"*—working intensely for a short period of time on a single goal. This is the opposite of what many people do. Too many of us today constantly switch between tasks, multitask, or work in fragments of time. Starting with a burst requires a block of uninterrupted time. Think of how a design sprint works: That's what you're aiming for.

When everyone is working remotely, collaborating and focusing in equal measure becomes that much more difficult, yet Heath notes that it is not impossible. He advocates for "bursty communication," whereby people are online for real-time collaboration in certain time blocks. Working in this way makes it easier to see how a team is advancing toward their goal, and research has found that progress is a significant motivator and a booster of morale.

A newly appointed leader of the Technical Data Center at ExxonMobil used just this approach. His team had an extensive backlog of files it needed to organize and prepare. He set a goal of getting rid of the backlog in 18 months—a goal the team initially assumed was impossible. To get them going, he required the whole team to spend one day a week working together, rather than in their silos. By working in this way, they could easily see the progress they were making as a team, which in turn encouraged further and better collaboration.

An effective motivational strategy comes from Miguel Brendl, a professor of marketing at the University of Basel: "Early in your pursuit of your goal, look backwards at what you have achieved; toward the end, look forward." The idea is to avoid or shorten the appearance of this middle period, as that can be a demotivating time. One way to do this is to break down goals into shorter time frames, making use of this idea of "bursty work" to get through the smaller chunks more quickly.

CHAPTER 7:

Recycle Waste

"You can Restack Resources on your Leverage Points by ending work that doesn't serve the mission."

In Asheboro, North Carolina, city leaders noticed that trash collection consumed a lot of fuel. After analyzing the system, they realized that, in addition to the regular trucks, their bulk trash trucks did the rounds of the whole city, even though the bulk trucks weren't required on every street every day. They could cut fuel costs by logging where bigger pickups were needed, meaning the larger trucks would need only to visit those houses. This small change considerably cut down wastes of money, resources, and time. "*Waste* is anything that doesn't add value to your work in the customer's eyes."

There are numerous sources of waste, but many companies draw on the acronym DOWNTIME, which identifies eight categories: Defects, Overproduction, Waiting, Nonutilized talent, Transportation, Inventory, Motion, and Excess processing. Heath notes that while restacking resources typically requires tradeoffs, there are no such downsides to eliminating waste.

The trick, then, is to pinpoint sources of waste. This can be difficult because the habits of an organization or its people may be hiding sources of waste without realizing it. Once you have found a culprit, the goal is not to remove it in support of greater efficiency; rather, the goal is to use this information as an opportunity to hit the reset button. This is about yielding benefits in the immediate or short term, not years from now.

"In keeping with that, you've got to stay focused on waste that can be quickly harvested and repurposed. You're looking for hours, dollars, and resources that can be redeployed immediately from one purpose to another." Factories may experience waste across every letter of the DOWNTIME acronym. In non-factory settings, the N—nonutilized talent—is often the crucial piece. When people are idle or distracted, you're losing time and money. The key is to shift these people to doing more impactful work.

Heath is quick to clarify that making this shift does not call for micromanaging or excessive oversight. In fact, that can often backfire—and be a source of waste in itself. There needs to be a baseline level of trust in the people, giving them the space they need to perform at their best.

One way to figure out the right amount of oversight is to distinguish between Type 1 and Type 2 decisions, an idea Heath borrows from former Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos. The former are nearly irreversible, while the latter are not. They can be undone with relative ease. To avoid excess oversight, don't treat Type 2 decisions with the methodical decision-making required for Type 1.

CHAPTER 8:

Do Less AND More

"You can Restack Resources on your Leverage Points by shifting effort from lower-value work to higher-value."

Many companies make the mistake of wanting to treat all of their customers the same. But, as outlined in an example of an optical instruments company, treating their biggest customers the same as—or worse than—their smallest customers simply doesn't make financial sense. It may be easier to fill the orders of a smaller customer, but the payoff isn't the same. "The point is to ensure that customers are paying for the resources they're consuming."

The objective is to move away from these lower-priority activities, such as dedicating resources to the small customers in the example above, and invest more in higher-priority activities, such as your Leverage Points. It may simply not be possible to dedicate the same resources to every customer, so this is a straightforward way to determine what to do less of and what to do more of.

While it may feel scary or irresponsible to transfer more of your attention and effort to the larger customers, this is a key way to Restack Resources. Shifting from the "overcoddled" to the "undercoddled" is a way to free up, and then restack, resources. It is up to you to decide how you define overcoddled and undercoddled, but there will always be opportunities to make this transfer of resources. It will, of course, involve a trade-off. You will have to make choices about where to expend more time, money, etc., and where to take those resources from.

One way to figure out which areas may need more and which may need less is to create a box with four quadrants titled "start," "stop," "less," and "more." This exercise can be applied to any part of your business or even your life and is a way to intentionally think about how to best spend your resources. Note that you have to put something in each quadrant; you can't leave any of them blank, or it will leave you unbalanced. "[In] the early stages of change, you've got to be ambidextrous: Both cutting and investing. Both defense and offense. LESS and MORE."

It can never just be about cutting costs or reducing expenses. By myopically focusing on the short term, you risk neglecting to consider what the organization will need in the medium and long term. There will be some areas of the business that will require additional investment in order to preserve them. If adding more resources isn't an option, then you may need to figure out a way to use them differently. It may be that in order to fund one component, you have to cut from another area of the business.

CHAPTER 9:

Tap Motivation

"You can Restack Resources on your Leverage Points by prioritizing the work that's required and desired."

Getting someone to do something requires understanding what motivates them. In the case of a parent who wanted to get his kids to clean up their toys, he drew on his expertise as a marketer and realized he could gamify the experience. "To motivate people, we've got to pay attention to *their* desires. *Their* interests. *Their* hopes. And that requires empathy."

We tend to underestimate how much motivation can move the needle with people. It is a resource that is often overlooked—but people are bound to try harder and be more effective at something they want to do or that they believe in. If you have uncovered a number of Leverage Points that you could try, choose the one that you think people may actually be interested in. This is likely to be the most effective.

Ask people if they're more likely to be effective when they're doing something they love or believe in or when they're doing something that is required of them that they don't like or don't agree with. The answer will always be the former. To *tap motivation* is to look for overlap between what is required and what is desired.

When working in a team setting, you can leverage the fact that different people may desire different things to achieve everything that is required. Try a "genius swap." Staff members write down one thing they would pay someone to do for them and one thing they'd love to do. Everyone compares these pieces of paper and, where possible, swaps with one another. In this way, you're able to tap the motivation of numerous team members, allowing them to do the work that they want to be doing.

It's not enough to simply tap into the motivation of your team. You also need to sustain this motivation, and one great way of doing that is through recognition. By recognizing people for efforts that are aligned with the strategic direction of the organization, you can achieve two goals: You can encourage this forward momentum while increasing the likelihood that you meet your broader organizational objectives.

Of course, there will always be some outliers who are unwilling participants, who are resistant to the change. There are a few things you can try to get them on board. First, is there a different Leverage Point you could choose that would encourage greater participation? Second, is there a way to make the change more exciting—perhaps through some other kind of incentive? If neither of these is a viable option, is there a way you can use the people who are already proponents of the change to work toward a quick win and then use that visible progress to get the remaining few on board? Evidence of progress can be the key to convincing the unconvinced.

CHAPTER 10:

Let People Drive

"You can Restack Resources on your Leverage Points by giving your team the autonomy to own the change effort."

When people experience kidney failure, they need dialysis, a treatment typically given over a several-hour period multiple times a week. At some clinics, they now allow the patients to receive training to give themselves the treatment. Doctors were initially reluctant, but they noticed that the patients felt more in control, which often led to better health outcomes.

This is an example of *letting people drive*. The idea is to give them the autonomy to do it themselves. While it may not work in every instance or setting, it can often be more effective to follow the other person's lead, instead of giving them directives. This is in part because it employs many of the other tactics touched on previously. Autonomy is motivating and gives the individual more accountability; it requires more complex skills; and it reduces the waste that results from micromanagement.

A coach for the U.S. Olympic archery team learned this himself. He initially tried to take control of the situation and used an authoritarian approach to coaching, but this backfired, so he changed tack. "Instead of pushing ideas onto the athletes, [the coach] pulls ideas from them. They set the goals; he doesn't. They provide the assessment; he doesn't." He draws on the athletes' energy and motivation to get them to achieve.

"Autonomy helps people operate at the top of their range. When you're in charge of something, you act with more conscientiousness—and tap more of your skills—than if you're a cog in the machine." The idea isn't to give people complete freedom. Most people, when asked, still want some structure or guardrails, what Heath calls "bounded autonomy." They want to know what is expected of them and feel supported.

To demonstrate the right way to do this, Heath draws on an example from Spotify. The engineering team's culture is built on both high alignment and high autonomy. Managers still let their teams know what problems they want them to solve, but then they give them the space to figure out how. Even if your organization isn't currently structured this way, it's possible to make a shift.

At a T-Mobile call center, they did just that. The employees initially had minimal autonomy, and the call centers were managed as cost centers. When the goal shifted to customer happiness, they identified better service as a Leverage Point that could support that goal. They shifted the management of the call centers, giving employees more ownership over their work and encouraging more collaboration. In the process, team members were given the support and incentives they needed to succeed, while also offering them greater autonomy and alignment.

CHAPTER 11:

Accelerate Learning

"You can Restack Resources on your Leverage Points by getting better, faster feedback to fuel improvements."

The chief strategy officer for the San Francisco 49ers was responsible for ensuring fan enjoyment. As a way to measure fan satisfaction, his team relied on surveys. The problem with the surveys was that it took time to acquire the data and then make changes based on the results—so they set a goal of trying to make improvements in real time. They implemented feedback buttons at high-touch places such as bathrooms and concession stands, which allowed them to get a huge number of data points as the game was still in progress. These insights made it easier to address fans' grievances more quickly.

Sometimes, as in the case above, the resource that needs to be drawn upon is information. The most efficient way to effectively Restack Resources in such an instance is to *accelerate learning*. The work is to identify obstacles or figure out the source of your failures. By speeding up learning, you also reduce waste by more quickly identifying where resources are being wasted. It can also lead to more motivation, because the faster you learn something, the faster you can make progress.

Accelerating learning can, of course, take the form of using technology or data to uncover insights, but it can also be as simple as role-playing a new idea. One organization was considering launching a new program for some of their executives. While those involved were excited by the idea, they decided to test it out before launching. In those conversations, they quickly learned that the executives didn't like it.

Another effective tool is customer feedback. The goal is to yield transformation by "shrinking the time needed to surface failure." In each of these instances, it's important to get this information as quickly as possible to avoid wasting time or effort on an initiative that may not actually advance your goals. And it's not just about identifying failures, but also opportunities.

An iterative approach, like that preferred by those who use Scrum or Agile in the software industry, can uncover both failures and opportunities quickly. Trying something and testing it takes the guesswork out. It gives you concrete information on which to base your decisions. In fact, Heath notes, finding Leverage Points and Restacking Resources can in itself be an iterative process.

CONCLUSION

Heath concludes by sharing a story of a woman who worked in a hospital in Brazil to summarize all of the key points of the book. The woman was faced with a question: How do you create a joyful, engaged workforce?

She started by asking employees about what mattered to them and what stood in the way of those values. People shared their thoughts publicly, and then they grouped the complaints thematically. She then broke people into teams to come up with straightforward ways they could address some of these grievances.

The teams began to make some changes—and within six months, they saw noteworthy results, including improved employee satisfaction surveys, increased retention, and better patient outcomes. “When your employees are consulted, they will contribute. When they are empowered, they will act. When they are trusted, they will lead.”

Participative management was the *Leverage Point* in this example. She chose this Leverage Point after looking at *bright spots* drawn from other health systems. She acknowledged the hospital’s *constraints*, noticing that lack of agency was holding people back. She *mapped the system* to help her pinpoint participative management as the hidden lever that may help nudge them toward their goals.

Then, she *Restacked Resources*. She *tapped motivation* by asking people what mattered to them. She *let people drive* by letting them volunteer to tackle the complaints. By using sticky notes and creating teams early in the process, she *started with a burst*. Getting daily, real-time feedback on progress allowed her and everyone involved to *accelerate learning*. Ultimately, progress begat progress, and the successes rippled. In this way, a small investment made a big difference in the hospital culture.

“When we manage to budge the boulder, it serves us on two distinct levels: We (by definition) make progress toward our goals, which is remarkable enough. But, beyond that, as we witness ourselves moving, we simultaneously reassure ourselves that we’re *capable* of moving.” In other words, people feel good when they see that they’re making progress—and thereby become further motivated to work toward the goal.