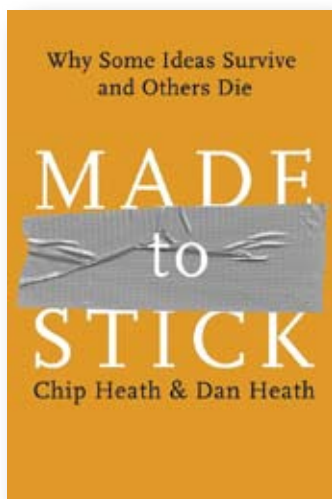


## Getting Your Ideas to Stick

By Shayne Kavanagh



Made to Stick:  
Why Some Ideas Survive  
and Others Die  
Chip Heath and Dan  
Heath  
Random House  
2007, 291 pages

Chip Heath and Dan Heath are the authors of a series of New York Times Best Selling Books on business psychology, communication, and transformation. (See “The Rider and the Elephant” in the February 2014 issue of *Government Finance Review* for a review of *Switch*, another book in this series.) *Made to Stick*, the first of these books, is about communicating ideas in a memorable way. This topic is of paramount importance to finance officers, who must regularly communicate new ideas to non-experts and convince them that these ideas have merit.

### THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

The authors begin *Made to Stick* by introducing a villain, the Curse of Knowledge. A 1990 Stanford psychological experiment demonstrates the Curse of Knowledge beautifully. A group of people are asked to play a game in which people are assigned one of two roles: “tapper” or “listener.” The job of the tapper is to tap out the rhythm of a well-known song to the listener (such as “happy birthday” or “the star spangled banner”) by knocking on a table, while the listener’s job was to guess the song. Out of the 120 trials, the listeners were only able to guess 3 songs correctly — 2.5 percent. The truly astonishing finding was that when asked to project what the success rate of the listeners would be, the tappers estimated 50 percent! In other words, because the tappers knew the

song and could hear it in their heads, they assumed the listeners would have a reasonable chance of guessing the song, while all listeners really heard was a series of knocks. The lesson from this experiment is that it is often difficult for people who have ideas to communicate them because they can’t appreciate how the audience’s lack of knowledge impedes their ability to understand. For finance officers, the “song” might be any number of financial management best practices — financial policies, long-term financial planning, or many others. Frustration ensues when finance officers attempt to “tap out” these ideas to an audience that doesn’t have the same level of knowledge.

### FINDING SUCCESS

Against this background, the authors introduce us to their six-part communications framework, which they call “SUCCESS”: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional stories.

**Simple.** According to Leonardo da Vinci, “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.” Hence, the SUCCESS framework starts by finding what the authors refer to as the “core” of the idea. This does not mean finding a way to express the idea using words of only one syllable or otherwise dumbing it down; it means prioritizing the facets of a multi-faceted idea and expressing it in a way that brings across the underlying

ing intent. Examples of famous “core” ideas include “Southwest Airlines is *the* low cost airline” and Bill Clinton’s “It’s the economy, stupid” campaign slogan. Identifying the core helps keep the audience from becoming distracted and thus paralyzed by the other, less important facets of the idea.

Once the core is identified, the authors urge the reader to “compact” it — that is, to reduce the idea to its essence. The goal is not to produce a meaningless sound bite but a proverb. Cervantes defined a proverb as containing short sentences (compact), and being drawn from long experience (core). Proverbs are memorable because they draw on existing “schemas,” or generic properties or categories we store in our memory. For example, a common schema for a sports car is something small, with two doors, probably red, that goes fast. Schemas can be used to create analogies that are memorable to the audience while still conveying valuable information. To illustrate, the “bird in the hand is better than two in the bush” proverb tells us that it is better to go with the “sure thing” than to chase a greater, but highly speculative, reward. Hence, the pinnacle of the “simple” component of SUCCEs is to find the equivalent of the “bird in the hand” proverb for your idea.

**Unexpected.** Simply put, audiences pay more attention to ideas that have an unexpected quality; the first element of this is surprise. Surprise shakes the audience out of mental autopilot. However, the authors caution against surprise degenerating into gimmickry because the audience will remember the gimmick but not the idea. Hence, the surprise should reinforce the core

of the idea, it should provide insight, and it should ultimately be something that comes from the core message (not from out of left field). If something about your idea is new the audience (and it should be or you wouldn’t need this book), something about it runs against the intuitions of your audience. Find those elements and emphasize them. Once you get past their preconceived notions, you have the opportunity to help them reform their conceptions of your idea. The authors provide the example of how new employees are versed in customer service at Nordstrom, where standards for customer service far exceed normal conceptions of “good” customer service. This is done by providing examples of unexpected services provided by Nordstrom employees such as gift wrapping items purchased at Macy’s, warming up a customer’s car while they the customer finishing shopping, and even providing a refund on a set of tire chains (despite the fact that Nordstrom doesn’t sell tire chains). These stories disrupt new employees’ common sense conceptions of good customer service, allowing them to be replaced by Nordstrom-level standards.

The second element of unexpectedness involves creating a perceived gap in knowledge. If the audience believes they already know what they need to about the idea, it will not stick. But if you can highlight gaps in their knowledge that the audience then feels compelled to fill, the idea starts to stick.

**Concrete.** If proverbs are the inspiration for “simple,” then fables are the inspiration for “concrete.” A concrete idea uses sensory language such as the “sour grapes” in Aesop’s fable about the fox that could not reach the grapes and

then decided he didn’t want them anyway because they were probably sour. Concrete ideas paint a mental picture for the audience by removing abstraction in favor of concepts the audience can easily envision. The drive to put a man on the moon within a decade is a great example of a concrete idea that stuck and inspired many people.

**Credible.** A credible idea is one that is believed and that people will be reasonably likely to agree with. A good place to start is finding someone to back your idea who the audience will find especially credible (this is why celebrity endorsements are such a popular method of advertising). Perceived honesty and trustworthiness is what makes a credible messenger, not status, which is why a friend’s endorsement of a product would be more effective than a celebrity endorsement seen on television. Another component of a credible message is vivid details that are human and compelling as well as symbolizing and supporting the core idea. Personal stories that encapsulate the core of the idea are a great way to convey vivid details to the audience.

In public finance, statistics and numbers are often part and parcel of a new idea, so making the idea stick means making the numbers accessible. A powerful way to do this is to reduce numbers to a human scale. For example, most people can’t fully comprehend the millions of dollars many government budgets are measured in, but the amounts become much more accessible when they are reduced to measures like the impact a budgetary change will have on a citizen’s property tax bill or how much more or less will be spent on an individual student. The authors provide a final piece of advice about

numbers and statistics: Emphasize the relationship of the number to an issue that the audience would care about, rather than the number itself. If the audience understands the relationship, then your idea is that much closer to sticking.

Finally, showing that an idea has succeeded elsewhere is a powerful way to establish credibility. This is one that governments should find relatively easy, given their willingness to share success stories.

**Emotional.** The emotional component of an idea gets people to care. Hence, the idea should appeal to some core emotional interest of the audience and invite them to step out of an analytic frame of mind. Highlighting the impact of the idea on an individual is a great way to send an emotional message (as opposed to focusing on a

larger group); this is why charities often frame a donation as sponsoring an individual child rather than combating poverty more generally.

Words also matter when trying to give an idea an emotional appeal. Avoid “semantic stretch,” or over-relying on words the audience is accustomed to hearing. In the world of public finance, it might be best to avoid words such as “efficiency” and “effectiveness.” While most audience members probably care about efficiency and effectiveness, the words are so often used that they are unlikely to spark any emotional interest. Hence, public finance officers need to find more distinctive associations for their ideas.

The authors also address the common “what’s in it for you” method of promoting an idea, but they add a twist. Research shows that people are power-

fully motivated by higher-order human needs like learning, esteem, and realizing potential, but they also believe that other people are more motivated by baser needs like money and physical comfort. This means that the “what’s in it for you” aspect of an idea should carefully address higher-order needs.

Finally, the authors cover appealing to the audience’s identity — a set of characteristics people associate with a group they belong to (e.g., profession, cultural group). Self-identity characteristics often override self-interest. To illustrate, the State of Texas wanted to reduce roadside littering because its budget for litter clean-up was becoming unmanageable. Standard public awareness campaigns and higher fines made no difference; the introduction of the state’s “Don’t mess with Texas” campaign made the difference. The

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campaign was designed to speak to the identity of 18-35 year old males — the primary offenders for littering who were not influenced by the potential fines or the standard anti-littering messaging. The campaign was designed to convince the listener that people *like him* did not litter. It used spots featuring well-known Texans (football players, musicians) modeling the desired behavior in a way that would appeal to the target audience (e.g., football players crushing beer cans on the side of the road with their fists). The impact was astounding: In the first year litter was reduced by 29 percent, and by 72 percent in six years.

**Stories.** Stories help people act on the idea, as a sort of rehearsal for what putting the idea into action might look like. Stories prime the audience to take those actions themselves. When the

details of an idea are put in the form of a story, people can more easily imagine themselves taking those same actions.

Stories can also be inspiring; the Subway restaurants’ “Jared” campaign is a well-known example. The authors identify three basic inspiration story plots:

- **The Challenge Plot.** The protagonist overcomes a formidable challenge and succeeds. Think David versus Goliath, the underdog, rags-to-riches, and so on.
- **The Connection Plot.** A story about people who develop a relationship that bridges some kind of gap — ethnic, demographic, etc. Think Romeo and Juliet.
- **The Creativity Plot.** Someone makes a mental breakthrough, solving a long-standing puzzle or

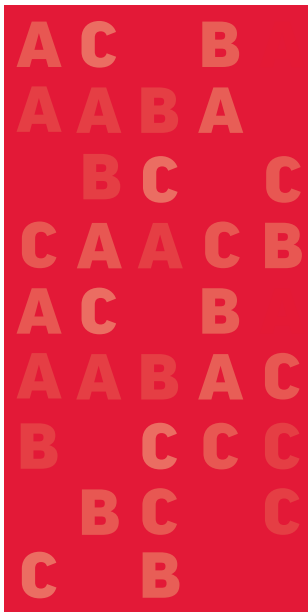
addressing a problem in a creative way. Think *MacGyver*.

## CONCLUSIONS

The authors encourage readers to use the SUCCEsS framework like a checklist when thinking about how to promote a new idea. This approach has potential for helping finance officers gain acceptance of new ideas inside their organizations and in helping hasten the spread of public finance best practices, helping packaging them in a way that is more accessible, inspirational, and interesting to those whose support is need for success. |

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