From Chump to Chimp to Champ

by Larry Chester

Background

The new Corvette weighs 3444 pounds, accelerates from 0-60 in 3.9 seconds, brakes from 70-0 in 146 feet and gets 29 miles/gallon.

The 1973 Corvette weighed 3520 pounds, accelerated from 0-60 in 7.2 seconds, braked from 70-0 in 242 feet and got 14.5 miles/gallon.

We are getting better performance today and twice the mileage. Performance has virtually doubled over the past 40 years at half the operating cost. In most technological arenas, we are getting substantially better performance today than we did forty years ago. For example, Moore's Law stated that the number of transistors and other devices in an integrated circuit would double every two years, a trend that has been mainteained for the past 50 years. That trend has not been maintained for change projects.

Victor Vroom wrote a book in 1973 called *Leadership and Decision Making*. In that book he stated that the success rate for project management and change management was about 30%. He defined success as meeting the agreed performance objectives on time and within budget. Forty years later the level of success is still about 30%, despite training hundreds of thousands of people in project management and in change management. Something else must be happening.

Victor Vroom closely examined the projects that did work and discovered two conditions for project success:

- The team believes that this is the best possible solution (decision quality)
- The team is committed to project implementation (decision buy-in)

The best possible decision requires better information, more creative solutions, and better evaluation (costs/benefits/risks) of the alternatives against our objectives. Buy-in depends on the involvement, participation and engagement of the team—the more, the better. I persuaded participants in my training courses to ask better questions, to listen very carefully to the answers, to evaluate more effectively, and to get agreement, commitment and support from the team and the stakeholders. I used a whole-brained thinking approach that gathered the facts, generated more creative solutions, evaluated those solutions to choose the best possible solution, and got involvement of the team and the stakeholders to build buy-in and commitment. It improved their project performance—but not enough. Change management (and project management) is more than completing the templates, even when we do it well. We need to do more.

Daniel Kahneman in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, discussed the differences between System 1 and System 2 thinking. He seemed to especially admire System 1: It was faster, more intuitive, more instinctive, could handle large volumes of complex information, and it just *felt right*. System 2 was more thoughtful, more considerate, but took longer, was more rational but seemed more sterile. System 2 was also lazier; it only got involved when System 1 requested help, which was not often enough.

Jonathon Haidt in the *Happiness Hypothesis* also expressed a preference for System 1 thinking over System 2. He called these two different aspects of thinking: Motivating the elephant and directing the rider. Of course, the elephant is always much stronger than its rider. The emotional aspects of a decision will always outweigh the logical aspects of any change. He also favoured the emotional aspects for implementing change.

For most of my career in training and organization development, I had highlighted the **limitations** of System 1 thinking:

- We make assumptions, some of which are unrealistic, instead of gathering the facts
- We jump to conclusions, often ignoring risk, and make some difficult-to-implement choices

My erstwhile solution: If only we could get our people to pause, ask a few questions and listen carefully to the answers, we would have better decisions, more successful projects and improved corporate results. In other words, use System 2 to get better answers and, by involving your team, to get more buy-in. I got my students to ask the right questions and to listen very carefully to the answers. I even stated that, if they did not pause to ask questions and listen to answers, they would be labelled as chumps. And nobody wants to be a chump.

I was aware that these questions impinged on both the emotional and the rational sides of the brain, so I ensured that the questions linked to both operational and strategic corporate performance, that the answers made sense, that they could be logically defended, that they were transparent to all parties, and that they had the commitment, buy-in and support of the people affected.

It seemed to be a losing battle. Participants would leave my courses with the best intentions to do as I suggested: Pause, ask the right questions of the right people, and listen carefully to their answers to get better decisions with increased commitment to implement. I even gave them mnemonic job aids to remind them:

- Gather information to ensure understanding
- Generate ideas to avoid jumping to a solution
- Evaluate ideas to choose the best combination of cost, benefits and risk
- Seek agreement, commitment and support from the stakeholders

They would then go back to "noisy" work environments where speed was more important than the quality of their solutions and implementation was always too hurried. Human nature intruded. Rather than work against human nature, I I wanted to work with it. Rather than push, I wanted to find better ways to pull. As in judo, I wanted to use the momentum from our fundamental human nature to help our deciding and implementing, not have our instincts work against us.

About this same time, I read a wonderful book by Andrew O'Keeffe called *Hardwired Humans.* It showed a better way to solve problems, to make decisions and to implement successfully by understanding and harnessing the nine fundamental human instincts. Eureka: A rational questioning process and the nine human instincts seemed to work together more effectively to produce better results.

The nine human instincts represent the behaviours that come with being born human. They are the behaviours that we have carried through the long journey of human history and our recent change in habitat from the savannah to workplaces. The 9 instincts are not all unique to humans – they exist in Nature with big-brain hierarchical species, with the most similar comparison being chimpanzees. . So, by utilizing the human instincts, which closely parallel System 1 thinking, with the more thoughtful, more rational System 2 thinking processes, we can arrive at better solutions with a much greater chance for successful implementation.

This is the thinking progression that we sometimes see on change projects.
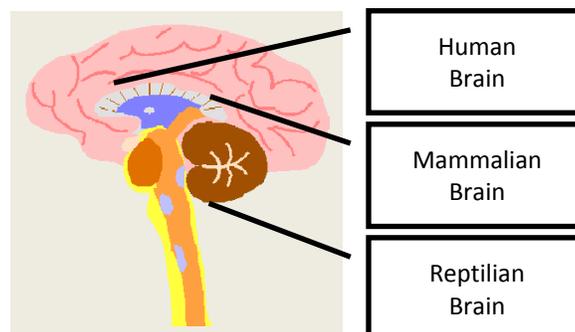
The reptilian brain reacts immediately—fight, flight or freeze—which is not terribly helpful for arriving at better conclusions with greater buy-in. Our chance of success for this issue could be high or low by sheer happenstance; our chances for success on the larger project evaporate with this kind of thinking.

I had focused on the more human thinking processes: ask the right questions of the right people; get more and better information; generate possible solutions; choose the best possible solution and gain the buy-in and support of the organization or its stakeholders.

I had been bypassing the System 1 thinking, the "thinking" processes we share to some degree with big-brained primates like chimpanzees and, to a less extent, with the gorillas and other large apes. Yet, System 1 thinking is much quicker, much more intuitive, much more emotionally appealing.

Kahneman said that System 1 will usually trump System 2:

- Emotions trump reason
- Risks or losses trump benefits
- The short term will always trump the long-term
- Certainty trumps probability

For example, I know at the rational level that I should not eat that extra piece of caramel walnut cheesecake, but at the emotional level I grab it quickly before others can change their minds. Or its opposite: I often arrive at the best possible, most rational solution but it sometimes lacks emotional appeal and nobody wants to do it. So, what are these human instincts that we share with other big-brained primates?

IMMEDIATE   SECONDS   MINUTES →

Chump (Reptilian)
- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze

Chimp (Mammalian)
- System 1
- Nine instincts

Champ (Human)
- System 2
- Gather info
- Generate ideas
- Evaluate ideas
- Agree

By understanding the nine powerful instincts that underlie our rational thinking processes we can from chump (no thinking) to chimp (instinctual thinking) to champ (rational thinking). These nine instincts help to explain why some changes are easy and some are much more difficult. They seemed to be especially useful when leading projects and when leading change.

What do the chimps know that we forgot we know but that make a difference when implementing change?

The Nine Human Instincts

Instinct	Definition
Social Belonging	Humans create strong bonds within family-sized groups of around seven people and a sense of belonging in groups of up to 150. We have a very strong sense of loyalty to the team and a strong loyalty to the group. Beyond 150 people, we seem to naturally form silos: them and us.
Hierarchy and Status	Humans seek superiority or security in hierarchical systems. We actively seek status symbols, recognition and elevation within the hierarchy. We want to know where we are in the pecking order and we want to be at or near the top.
Emotions Before Reason	People trust their emotional instincts above all else and use their emotions as their first screen for all information received. We hear negative news first and loudest.
First Impressions to Classify	We quickly classify people, situations, and experiences into categories (good or bad; in or out) based on first impressions and gut feelings. Most of us do this within two seconds or within the first seven words we hear.
Loss aversion	We seek to avoid loss; we only reach out when we feel secure. It has been demonstrated that most of us hate to lose at least twice as much as we like to win.
Gossip	We seek and share information, especially with others we like and use information to build alliances. We love to tell and to listen to stories; stories have great power to move us.
Empathy and Mind Reading	We use empathy and mind reading—through tone of voice and body language—to build relationships. We use empathy to understand what other people want and we use reciprocity—doing other people favours incurs favours—to get what we need.
Confidence before Realism	People follow people who radiate confidence. We allow confidence to conquer realism and to get what we want. We want to build enough confidence to offset any thoughts of loss.
Contest and Display	We seek to impress others; we continually demonstrate our worth as a means to gain advantage and to build relationships.

So what are the implications of these nine human instincts?

Instinct	Definition	Implications for Change Managers
Social Belonging	Humans create strong bonds within family-sized groups of around seven people and a sense of belonging in clans of up to 150	The core members of a project team work best with 7-8 people; when projects go beyond 10 people, cliques, or teams-within-teams, start to develop. Do team building exercises at the beginning of the project to foster a team approach: • Good teams almost always do better than the average individual • Great teams usually do better than the best individual Great teams understand the three minimum conditions for team success and build awareness and skills in these areas: • Common purpose: We all understand why we need to do this change • Interdependence: I need you; you need me; we need each other to make the change happen • Common process: We share a common thinking process and language for initiating, defining, planning, implementing, monitoring and controlling, and measuring change success; we understand the ground rules for working together Break the project into bite-sized chunks with separate teams and team leads, attempting to maintain the 7-9 target for each team. Other non-core subject matter experts (SMEs) can be added as needed to do specific tasks. In *Hardwired Humans*, Andrew O'Keeffe suggests that the leader on a large project with several team should: • Know the names of their people • Know 2-3 important things about each individual that defines them as individuals • Know their roles in the team and demonstrate that you value their roles • Establish directions, goals and purpose for the team • Create an environment where everyone pulls together • Convene social functions to build a sense of community • Coach the team leads to address any freeloaders who are diminishing the community's efforts and interests Also, a key role of the manager is to integrate new members into the team: provide introductions, confirm goals and objectives, obtain resources, and assign work locations and desk space. One way that people build bonds with other people is to do them favours. Social animals believe in reciprocity: If someone does something good for me, I want to do something good for them. Find ways to reward people: recognition, provide work they enjoy, measure results and provide feedback to give a sense of achievement.

Instinct	Definition	Implications for Change Managers
Hierarchy and Status	Humans seek superiority or security in hierarchical systems. We seek status symbols, recognition and elevation within the hierarchy.	As people on project teams perform better and better, their contributions need to be recognized. As they perform better and better, their role needs to expand: They move from team member to team lead; they move from team lead to project manager. As they gain more experience, skills and stature, they become portfolio managers, managing a portfolio of projects and several project managers to meet strategic goals. People in positions of relative power are more likely to contribute ideas, help others, and assume a leadership role within the group. Find a way to give additional recognition and status to people who perform well; this can be a great motivator. Be careful about putting people in positions of power who have no desire to lead others. If they have no motivation to lead, they will not step up to the plate. One difficulty with putting people in power is getting them to use it in an escalating way: giving people the "look," verbal warning, written warning, removal from the team. The temptation is to drop the atomic bomb at the first transgression. Use of power can be hazardous: too much and people vote with their feet; too little and things may not get done. Remember that 80% of people who leave a team, leave because of their relationship with their immediate manager.
Emotions Before Reason	People trust their emotional instincts above all else and use their emotions as their first screen for all information received. We hear negative news first and loudest.	Projects are all about communication. Many change managers do not realize that a hierarchy of information exists: • Anecdotal: Events, situations, or examples: My neighbor took his uncle to that hospital and three days later he died. Do not ever take your relative to *that* hospital! • Qualitative: Comparative information: Ambulance drivers tell me that if they have a heart attack victim, they always take them to another hospital because the death rate is lower. • Qualitative: Hard numbers and facts: A survey of all 150 hospitals in the country revealed that this hospital had the second-highest death rate. Qualitative information is often the most persuasive from a rational perspective, but anecdotal information appeals more to the emotions because it involves people at the personal and emotional level. Show how this change makes things better for the people involved: for the customer, for the team, for the organization's employees, for your suppliers. Also, since emotions almost always trump reason, find a way to engage people in the change. Let them know the purpose; let them know how it will affect your customers and employees; let them know how this makes a difference. Engagement buys several things: • Additional discretionary effort: They will often volunteer to work overtime to get the change completed

Instinct	Definition	Implications for Change Managers
		• Happier customer who is served by a happier employee • Better project performance: Completed on time, within budget and to our initial expectations • Higher retention of our people Also, most people have a burnout point—when stress gets too high. Many people do not realize that stress has two components: task stress and relationship stress. If you reduce relationship stress at the beginning of a project; then you can increase task stress to get the project completed without encountering burnout. Build a great sense of urgency. We really, really need to do this project: Look at the impact on our customers and our people. Consider where emotion fits: • Perception: See it or hear it • Classify: Is this good or bad • Emotion: How do I feel about it? • Results: How well do I perform? The more positive the emotion, the more likely we will get the expected results.
First Impressions to Classify	We quickly classify people, situations, and experiences into categories Good or bad; in or out) based on first impressions and gut feelings. Most of us do this within two seconds or in the first seven words.	If the situation is bad, my brain immediately goes into fight, flight or freeze mode. I react and sometimes not well. If I believe the situation is good, I start to think about its implications and ways to make this work even better. If I am not sure, I assume it is bad and my reptilian brain takes over: Fight, flight or freeze. Demonstrate the "burning platform" as an opportunity to improve: • We must increase our revenue, our funding, or our market share • We must increase customer value to become even more competitive • We must reduce our delivery cost • We must comply with new regulations or new legislation In other words, we are doing a good thing, not simply eliminating a bad thing. Bad things get their attention; good things maintain it.
Loss aversion	We seek to avoid loss; we reach out when we are secure. It has been said that we hate to lose at least twice as much as we like to win.	Since loss, or at least the perception; of loss, is in the minds of the people affected by the change, ask them to identify the losses they believe will affect them. Show them that by anticipating potential risks and losses, we will do everything we can to avoid loss (prevent it from happening) and when we cannot prevent it, then we will mitigate its impact. Every good change plan will identify, assess, avoid and mitigate loss. By addressing risk, we build even greater commitment to the change.
Gossip	We seek and share information, especially with others we like and	Build the tone of the gossip to reflect, "This is good, not bad." For example, when making a major move, one company spread the

Instinct	Definition	Implications for Change Managers
	use it to build alliances. We love to tell and to listen to stories.	word that their business was doing so well, it was now necessary to move to larger quarters: This change is good; we need to do it. Make sure that the gossip around this change—and there will be—is good, not bad.
Empathy and Mind Reading	We use empathy and mind reading (through tone of voice and through body language) to build relationships. We understand how to use empathy to give people what they want and we use reciprocity to get what we need.	The need for face-to-face communication, especially at the beginning of the project when determining objectives, understanding their importance and gaining commitment to them. Albert Mehrabian said that the understanding of a message depends on: • Words used (7%) • Tone of voice (38%) • Body language (55%) Great change leaders read body language and hear tone of voice, the better to understand and to be understood. This has also been expressed as one of the seven habits of highly-effective people, and is especially important for project and change managers. Make sure that your words, your tone of voice and your body language are consistent; otherwise, your body language will be all that they "hear." We use our empathy to understand what motivates others and to become better motivators. We also use it to recognize when people are on board, or not. We use empathy to gauge the level of commitment to the change project.
Confidence before Realism	People follow other people who radiate confidence. We allow confidence to conquer realism and to get what we want.	It has been said that there are two kinds of people: • Those who radiate confidence about the success of a project and, even if the project fails, they will be remembered for being enthusiastic • Those that display misgivings about the project, its potential for failing to meet its objectives and the risks that will be encountered. Even if the project succeeds, they will be remembered for their lack of enthusiasm The ideal is the combination: Be enthusiastic in public about the change; in private, identify the risks and develop a mitigation plan to deal with those risks
Contest and Display	We seek to impress others; we demonstrate our worth as a means to gain advantage or to build relationships.	Aristotle said that these are three influences that get us what we want: • Ethos: Our own personal credibility is so high that others will do whatever we suggest • Pathos: We appeal so strongly to others emotions—happiness, sadness, fear, anger—that our solution and its impact on people will get their support • Logos: Our logic is powerful; we have the numbers to back us up; this solution makes great sense The ideal strategy is to develop all three areas to get what we want: We generate the best possible answer with a high level of commitment for its implementation.

The jump from chump to champ is a big one, perhaps too large for most of us to make. Carefully examine the intermediate step, think like a chimp: Consider the human instincts that normally operate at the subconscious level: Do not fight your natural instincts; use them to make change happen.

So, in summary, use your whole brain: Go from chump to chimp to champ and change will become much easier and more successful.

INCREASING SUCCESS

Chump (Reptilian)
- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze

Chimp (Mammalian)
- System 1
- Nine instincts

Champ (Human)
- System 2
- Gather info
- Generate ideas
- Evaluate ideas
- Agree

May the process be with you.

Larry Chester
Process Design Consultants Inc.
August 30, 2013