Change for Good

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About the Authors:

Omar Mahmoud is the Chief of Market Knowledge at the international development agency UNICEF and was previously a senior marketing professional at P&G working on some of the world's largest brands including Pringles, Pampers and Ariel.

Bernard Ross is an award-winning management consultant and author who has developed strategy and fundraising campaigns for many of the world's largest INGOs including the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, Amnesty International, Medecins Sans Frontieres and UNHCR.

> " Humans are to thinking as cats are to swimming – we can do it when we have to, but we'd much prefer not to. "
>
> **Daniel Kahneman,**
> *Nobel prize for Economics, 2002*

This handout is a summary of the key ideas in the book **Change for Good.** The book is about how people make decisions — and how anyone involved in the field of social change can help individuals or groups to make positive choices using decision science. It draws on the latest thinking in behavioural economics, neuroscience and evolutionary psychology to provide a powerful practical toolkit for fundraisers, campaigners, advocacy specialists, policy makers, health professionals, educationalists and activists.

At the heart of the book are the fascinating and powerful insights that we have gained in the last 10 years about how our brains work.
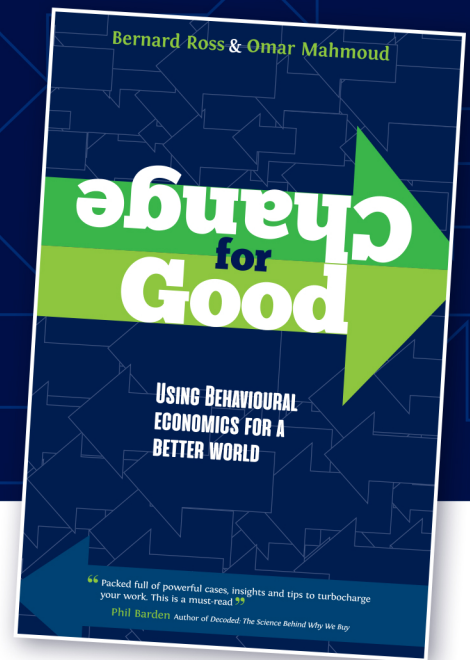
It also shows how techniques in common use in commercial settings can be applied to the social sector. This handout covers the key ideas.

What is decision science?

Traditional decision-making theories start with the assumption that people are rational animals who make decisions based on the facts, assessing costs and benefits, and calculating the utility of any option.

But a significant body of scientific research shows this assumption of rationality doesn't explain much of human behaviour: why we eat what's harmful, or buy a product we don't need, or partner with the wrong person. It also doesn't explain why we help strangers in trouble, give blood, or make donations to causes we have no direct connection with.

Thanks to the work of researchers and academics like Nobel prize winners, Kahneman and Thaler — and others — seeking to explain why people do what they do, a new science of decision-making has evolved.

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Below we've outlined ten key persuasion principles to help you introduce decision science into your work for social good. Each of these principles combines one or more heuristics — such as the IKEA Effect, Priming, Normalising and Bystander Effect. For more insight read the book.

1. Prime and anchor ideas

What is it?

Our choices can be influenced by our unconscious response to a previous experience or prior information. This can happen through two linked heuristics: priming and anchoring.

Priming happens when we're exposed to a stimulus — sounds, pictures, words, touch — that triggers an associated memory. This memory influences our subsequent choices. Even the sequence in which questions are asked or information is given shapes responses.

Anchoring is a specific form of priming, usually linked to numbers. A starting price or fundraising ask influences our assessment of subsequent prices or asks, even if the initial number is unrelated. We evaluate numbers in relative, not absolute, terms.

How can I use it?

Choose carefully the first information — words, images, colours, sounds — you present to your audience. This will impact on their decision, even if it's not directly related. Words to do with 'tiredness' will slow people up; energy words will make them faster.

When seeking donations mentioning higher numbers early adjusts your prospect's expectation of what they should give.

2. Make progress but choose your time

What is it?

People are driven by goals. When they feel they're making progress, they work harder to achieve their goals. Two progress points are particularly motivating:

- at the *beginning* of a project, indicating we have overcome inertia, and moved from nothing to something.
- at the *end* of a project, indicating that we are close to completion, and moving from something to everything.

People can be discouraged by friction — anything that slows their ability to complete. Reducing friction is a key contributor to engagement.

How can I use it?

Break down a big goal into smaller goals and communicate progress on those chunks to demonstrate impact. Stress progress at the beginning of a project and as you get close to its completion. Show progress graphically if you can.

Be aware of the Immediacy Bias, the tendency to respond most strongly to the most recent data or example presented. Ask for support as soon as your cause is brought to the attention of the potential supporter. Make it easier for supporters to overcome their initial inertia by removing friction like too much information, complicated forms, etc.

3. Nudge gently and ethically

What is it?

Nudging is influencing people's behaviour by making small changes in communication, such as the order of presenting items or introducing defaults. Nudging doesn't use incentives or penalties to drive behaviour: it usually works on the subconscious level. Putting healthy food first in a buffet counts as nudging.

Ethical nudging means offering the audience choices and being as transparent as possible. It should be done to promote a positive outcome for the 'nudgee' as well as wider society.

How can I use it?

To use nudging effectively, limit the number of options available. Offer support — such as online decision-making tools that walk someone through their choice. Make choosing easier by asking questions that narrow down the choices based on a supporter's preferences. Power up your nudges by identifying and promoting popular options. Simple communications like text reminders at key times can impact on attendance at doctor's appointments, maintaining non-smoking regimes, or persuading supporters to donate.

You might introduce friction as a nudge, such as putting the unhealthy food slightly out of reach or offering smaller plates to discourage overeating.

4. Find a frame and fill it
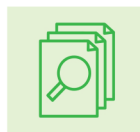
What is it?

As a physical frame influences our perception of the painting it surrounds, the way we present information, or frame it, influences our perception. Reframing can change our perceptions.

We like choices presented in a way that reinforce simple, relative comparisons and avoid extremes. If your roof needs a repair, you get three estimates … and then choose the middle one because it 'seems sensible.'

How can I use it?

Re-framing can be done in many different ways: changing the unit of *measurement* (e.g. $365 a year for gym access vs. $1 dollar a day), using a new or different *benchmark* (e.g. provide clean water for less than the price of a cup of coffee), redefining the *category* (e.g. it's not a soap, it's a cream in a bar; it's not charity, it's a social investment), and *negative* vs. *positive framing* (e.g. 80% chance of success vs. 20% chance of failure), and more.

Creating a 'decoy', an option that no one takes, has an impact. Think of expensive items on menus which makes us think other items are reasonable.

5. Avoid loss and add value

What is it?

Our perception of loss is stronger than that of gain. The pain of losing $100 is greater than the pleasure of gaining $100. Losing what we already have, as opposed to not having it in the first place, is particularly painful, due to the Endowment Effect. Be aware that people use mental accounting — that is treating different types of money differently (e.g. cash vs. credit card, current account vs. savings account, making a donation by phone versus by cheque, etc.) This can influence our perception of *gain* and *loss*.

We value things we made or own more than they are really worth. This is called the IKEA Effect.

How can I use it?

Appreciate the power of loss aversion, and use it to drive behaviour change, provided you can give hope and highlight the possibility of an eventual positive outcome. The story structure of overcoming the odds is a powerful way to mix the positive and negative. (See 7. Tell powerful stories.)

Make use of the IKEA Effect to enable supporters to add value through their own efforts — volunteering is pleasurable and people value it. (People will charge a lot for a cake that they baked for a charity stall.)

6. Be social and reciprocal

What is it?

Historically, our survival has depended on being social animals who communicate and collaborate. Being socially sensitive is part of self-interest — since it increases our survival chances. There are two main elements:

- **Social contagion**: when we don't know what to do, we imitate others. To start a movement, begin with a number of people. (If one person stands in the street and points up, people will ignore them, if four people do it others will stop and look.)
- **Social proof**: when we are uncertain what to do, we act in ways that are similar to the social group we're part of. We also respond to people we see as experts, or even people who act or dress in a way that suggests authority.

How can I use it?

Use social proof (what others are doing) and reciprocity (the need to give back) to influence behaviour. Identify your target carefully and think of which groups, or individuals, are most likely to influence them. Avoid the negative aspects of social proof e.g. the Bystander Effect where individuals refrain from taking action thinking that there must be a good reason why others are not acting.

Gift levels can impact when supporters can see what others give. Ask those close to you to give at times and levels to drive up contributions.

7. Tell powerful stories

What is it?

Stories, our most ancient way of communicating, are a powerful way to share ideas. They are more memorable than simple data. Stories often share something about us. They offer events and experiences from an individual's point of view. They make us engage with the protagonist, share their emotions, and understand their strengths and weaknesses. Stories help us make sense of the world in a **System 1** way, give us a sense of completion, and put our brain at ease.

Strong brands are like the best stories: a consistent narrative, kept fresh with new ideas. Think of the Bond franchise.

How can I use it?

Use individual, emotional stories to move people to action, not data or statistics. Make sure that your supporter is the hero/heroine and give them agency — a sense of power to change. Use the powerful story plot of overcoming the odds, as it starts with the protagonist in a miserable situation, but in the end s/he overcomes the odds, achieves his/her goal, and in the process is transformed to become a better person.

Make sure your organisation has a clear and common narrative — brand — that is communicated consistently and refreshed with new stories.

8. Touch with emotions not data

What is it?

We should be moved by facts and data to decide on key issues. In reality, we're driven by emotional and psychological stimuli. It might seem emotions + reason would be more effective than emotions alone. But in reality, adding facts and data to an emotional appeal is less effective — people switch from the intuitive emotional **System 1** to the reflective rational **System 2**.

There are two ways a supporter can adopt the perspective of the person who needs help: imagining the feelings of the victim; imagining their own feelings if they were in the victim's place. Both approaches can create sympathy. Considering the victim's feelings may motivate the supporter to lessen the victim's suffering. But if a supporter is asked to imagine themselves in the victim's position, it can create personal distress. This motivates them to reduce their own discomfort and be less willing to give away their own resources or time.

How can I use it?

Make sure potential supporters perceive they have something in common with those you are asking them to help. Direct communication of emotions can come across as manipulation: convey them in subtle ways, using images, metaphors, and music.

The *Identifiable Victim* effect means our reaction is stronger when we are told about one person, than about millions. Take care not to induce psychic numbing — when describing challenges where people feel overwhelmed by the scale of a challenge.

9. Make just enough information available

What is it?

When we get information, we don't assess it to check we have everything to make a good decision. We assume we have all the information we need. We don't like to have too much information — it confuses us.

We focus on information that is most available, salient, and vivid. Hence, we're more influenced by the media headlines about a terrible murder or a terrorist attack, than we are by balanced statistics about the main causes of death. We seek information that confirms what we know, using *Confirmation Bias*, and filter out what doesn't fit with our mental models. Social media behaviour confirms this.

How can I use it?

Find out what information matters to your audience, and only give them what they need to decide. Don't ask them to work out complicated things like probabilities. With information, less is more. Convey information in easy-to-grasp ways, by comparing something they don't know (e.g. size of an oil spill) to something they know (e.g. the area of a city or town).

Offer fewer choices and make the decision easier by offering clear default options. It helps if your information is endorsed by individuals or agencies that your audience trusts. (See Social Proof in principle 6.)

10. Keep it normal and personal

What is it?

For behaviour change to take place, two complementary heuristics need to be in place — *normalisation* and *personalisation*.

Normalisation makes certain behaviours acceptable, because they are common and socially accepted. Normalisation has a dark side, making offensive behaviour common, and also acceptable. *Personalisation* ensures that the individual whose behaviour you want to change feels their specific concerns and interests are being addressed.

Normalisation and personalisation complement each other. We like to belong to a group, but we also like to feel special within that group.

How can I use it?

Personalisation doesn't only work formally such as starting an email by saying Dear John, instead of Dear Supporter. You need to offer relevant content as well. In appeals for action or money, refer to your supporter's past behaviour and confirm their self-perception. People like to feel they act consistently. Convey the message that they are part of an in-group that is relevant to your cause.

Build empathy — shared understanding and connection — through the sharing of personal stories: "Hello, I'm here to ask you to support the hospice. My mum was helped by the hospice 2 years ago. And that has made me want to help them too. I guess you'd do the same."

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Three strategies, two systems, three disciplines

The new science, often called behavioural economics in shorthand, says that a person's mental state is best described as one of bounded rationality — that people are constrained by the amount of information presented to them, their limited mental capacities, and the short time normally available for decisions.

Under these circumstances, people resort to one of three strategies:

- **heuristics** — what mental short cuts can I use to make a quick decision here?
- **social reference** — what are other people, like me or that I respect, doing?
- **emotions** — how do I feel about it? (Not what do I think about it.)

Underpinning this science is a model, developed by Daniel Kahneman, Nobel prize winner, suggesting that we have two main mental systems to make decisions: **System 1** is fast, subconscious,

System	System one	System two
Characteristics	• Fast, effortless, unconscious • Looks for patterns • Creates stories to explain events	• Slow, effortful, concious • Looks for logic • Uses analysis to explain events
Advantages	• Responds quickly in a crisis • Comfortable with the familiar • Makes associations	• Demands consideration • Weighs up pros and cons • Establishes consequences
Disadvantages	• Jumps to conclusions • Unhelpful emotional responses • Makes 'mistakes' unconsciously	• Slow to decide • Requires energy and effort • Becomes tired thinking

intuitive, and emotional: *auto-pilot.*

System 2 is slow, conscious, reflective, and rational: *pilot.* Most of the time we use **System 1** to make decisions. **System 2** checks those decisions, usually endorses them, and on rare occasions modifies or stops them.

System 1 is influenced not only by the facts, but also by how the facts are framed. It makes the implicit assumption that What You See Is All There Is (WYSIATI). Thaler proved that a small change in what's called the decision architecture can nudge

people to change their behaviour.

The implication is simple: changing people's behaviour in general doesn't depend on elaborate persuasive techniques or using detailed facts and figures. At the same time there isn't one simple way to change behaviour — you need to test a range of techniques.

Many commercial organisations are now using techniques borrowed from decision science. Some of these uses are manipulative. In the world of social justice, we must ensure that our use of the new sciences is ethical.

The Three Disciplines

In the book, we focus on three disciplines that help explain human decision making. A common theme across all three disciplines is that most of our mental activity happens on a subconscious level.

Evolutionary psychology
The process by which behaviours which have been helpful to our species over millennia are 'programmed' into our behaviour

Neuroscience
Helps us understand how our brains process information and experiences in real time and how we use that data to draw conclusions

Behavioural economics
The phrase used to describe the real world practical rules that people use, often unconsciously, to make decisions and choices