



Tom Asacker

Can a Book Help You Change? No. But it can help you once you do.

ELBERT HUBBARD WROTE, “The reason men oppose progress is not that they hate progress, but that they love inertia.” I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about inertia—this desire to stay the course regardless of the impact on our lives.

I’m particularly interested right now, as I work on a new book that I hope will help people break free of their business past and move passionately into a more meaningful future. And one question continues to haunt me: Can a book really help people change? A simple question, with a simple answer: no.

Don’t get me wrong; I certainly believe that a book can make a difference in people’s lives. I have my short list of favorites, as I’m sure you do as well. But I’m talking about CHANGE. And the truth is, change isn’t about learning “the new.” Change is about letting go of “the old”—saying goodbye to comfortable habits and ingrained beliefs.

Sometimes I begin my talks about change and bringing ideas to life by displaying an image of footprints in the snow, while recounting a powerful, metaphorical story that goes something like this:

Do you remember when, as a child, you’d wake up to a pristine, snow covered landscape? You’d rush out the door on your way to school, zigging and zagging, pushing and dragging your feet to create a one-of-a-kind path? And invariably, the next kid in the neighborhood would leave his home and follow your crooked path, kicking away more snow on his way. And then the next kid, and the next, until there was a well-worn, precisely defined route all the way to school.

Well, that’s what happens with your mind as well. If you think the same thoughts, or preformed the same task over and over again, you will develop a neural pathway in your brain. Like a dry path in wet snow, it becomes a comfortable route; a path of least resistance. To remove this habit or old way of thinking takes a focused effort. It requires that you step out of your rut and get your brain wet, cold and uncomfortable.

The audience members typically nod, signaling their understanding. And then they leave and go right back into their subconscious ruts, rejecting new concepts and rationalizing familiar ones. Because men, and women, love inertia. They love the status quo—the silent killer of most businesses and, in some cases, entire industries.

Inertia in business, both up and down the chain of decision-making, is no different than inertia in other aspects of one’s life; it has to do with protecting one’s identity, immediate self-interest, and interpersonal relationships. No book can overcome those powerful psychological and social forces. But there is something that can.

Newton’s *First Law of Motion* states that objects in motion tend to remain in motion at a constant velocity unless acted upon by an outside force; objects at rest tend to remain at rest unless acted upon by an outside force. So if you’re stuck, and you know it, it’s time to introduce an outside force and do something new. People who are more predisposed to change have had more experiences than those who are not. Their new experiences created new pathways, thus lessening the affect of existing ones.

As the American psychiatrist Milton Erickson made clear, “Change will lead to insight far more often than insight will lead to change.” Don’t let the silent killer smother your vision and passion. Change. Introduce an outside force. Do something daring and dramatic.

Can a book help you change? I’ve witnessed people radically change their lives by drawing on the inspirational stories and insights of successful people and organizations. But those people had already stepped out of their ruts. They had taken the first, fateful step (or had been pushed). Their minds were already wet with a new experience.

So yes, read a book. Read mine. But first, go get wet and uncomfortable. Step into the snow and then the bright, new patterns will emerge.