

Kellogg Insight

The Insightful Leader

Podcast transcript

August 2021 – Loran Nordgren and David Schonthal

**Jessica LOVE:** When you have a new idea, especially one that could solve a problem, you'll likely want to share it! But getting people on board with that idea — whether it be at work or in your personal life — isn't always easy.

**Loran NORDGREN:** When we launch a new idea, there are two opposing forces at play. There are forces that propel an idea forward. We refer to these forces as fuel...but there are also forces that oppose change. We refer to these forces as friction and much like drag, they're not easy to see, but they are operating against change. Friction represents drag on innovation.

**LOVE:** That's Kellogg professor Loran Nordgren. He co-wrote a book with fellow Kellogg professor David Schonthal about this very thing. It's called *The Human Element: Overcoming the Resistance That Awaits New Ideas*.

And the pair argue that getting people on board with your idea...is NOT JUST about selling it well...or "adding fuel" to it. This is actually only half the battle.

**NORDGREN:** Ignoring frictions when pursuing ideas would be like building an airplane and caring only about engines and not aerodynamics. This is precisely what innovators do when they try and get their ideas off the ground. It's no wonder then why so few of these ideas take flight.

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**LOVE:** Welcome to The Insightful Leader, from the Kellogg School of Management. In this episode, we'll hear more from Loran Nordgren, a professor of management and organizations at Kellogg...and a littttle later we'll hear from David Schonthal, a clinical professor of innovation and entrepreneurship. Together, the co-authors will explain how to sell people on your idea...by overcoming the four frictions — the four obstacles — that stand in the way.

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**LOVE:** When we have a great new idea that isn't well-received, or acted upon, we often assume it needs more fuel. We assume we need to come up with better arguments, better examples. Maybe we need to bring better energy to our conversations with others!

But it's often more likely the real problem was friction.

Here's an example. There's a nonprofit that provides social support for children in hospitals. Nordgren and Schonthal were tasked with helping that nonprofit increase participation in a letter-writing program...where community members would write supportive cards — called "Hero Cards" — to the children.

**NORDGREN:** So we ask people, "how would you do that? If you were trying to get people to engage, what would you do?" Two ideas come up again. People say incentivize...use money or something else to incentivize people to write hero cards. Or use emotional appeals, show images, dramatic, vivid imagery of the children, seeing the card and seeing the surprise and delight on their face. So we decided to test those two techniques and we decided to add one of our own.

**LOVE:** Their idea? They added a template to show people what the card-writing process would look like. The point was to make the task easier...and to remove some of the uncertainty and anxiety around maybe even writing the wrong thing.

In the end, the ideas that involved incentivizing and emotional appeals...didn't do much. The template idea performed much better.

**NORDGREN:** The template approach increased engagement by nearly 60%. In other words, precisely the thing that no one thought about was the thing that was most effective at creating change. This little example reveals the benefits of shifting our mindset from fuel to friction.

**LOVE:** Okay, so we all see that friction is a force to be reckoned with...in the quest to get people on board with our ideas. But how can we overcome that friction? Nordgren and Schonthal say that...actually...it's plural. There are four frictions we need to understand before we can grapple with them....inertia, effort, reactance and emotion.

Let's look at how these work...with another example. All four of these forces were in play when the researchers' colleague, a homebuilder named Bob Mesta, decided to build a thousand homes for people who wanted to downsize. Prof. Schonthal will now explain what happened.

**David SCHONTHAL:** After months of research and a lot of detailed analysis, Bob and his team built a thousand homes exactly to the specifications that these consumers said they wanted. A large portion of the individuals that came in toured these model homes actually put down 5% earnest money to purchase one of these houses. And then something really weird happened. Of the 30% of people that put money down, about 70% of those individuals walked away from the deal.

**LOVE:** Why say “no” to a house that was built exactly to your specifications? Particularly when you’ve already paid for part of it? Well, Bob’s customers were facing some frictions that they didn’t initially expect.

That first friction...inertia...is our tendency to stick with familiar habits and routines unless we are compelled to change.

**SCHONTHAL:** Despite the fact that maybe the old home is an imperfect solution for their future needs, there's still a lot about the old home that's familiar, and that familiarity has a substantial anchor to them in the form of inertia.

**LOVE:** In other words, in the face of a decision as large as changing nearly EVERYTHING about how and where they lived, there was a lot of inertia preventing prospective condo buyers from moving ahead with the deal.

The second friction...*effort*... came into play when the buyers thought about everything they would have to do...to move into their new home. They might need to sell their old home, which could involve laboriously going through their possessions, and packing them into boxes, and then unpacking them again. It might involve cleaning, hiring movers and renting storage; changing their address and utilities. All of that ... takes a lot of effort.

And then there was reactance...our third friction. Reactance is that reluctant feeling we get when we feel **PRESSURED** to change. Maybe the homeowners felt pressure from their adult children or other family members to move into a smaller home. Schonthal gives some examples of what that might have sounded like.

**SCHONTHAL:** “Mom, dad, why are you taking care of this house all by yourself? Why not downsize? Why not take some of the money out of your home? You've got a bunch of home equity lined up. Why don't you go have some fun, travel with the cash in the home? Friends are doing it!” All sorts of other things. Age. Maybe they don't feel old, but everybody's telling them they're old and that they should be considering a single floor condo instead of a multi-story home. All of these are absolutely sources of reactance.

**LOVE:** Finally, emotions seemed to have played a part in the buyers’ reluctance to move. Because...they weren’t just moving. They were making a major life change...they were transitioning from one chapter to another. That emotional friction often emerged with one object in particular — an object that holds sentimental value and cannot be easily downsized...the dining room table.

**SCHONTHAL:** The dining room table is a talisman. It is an artifact that embodies all of this good family memory. Are you going to give that thing to Goodwill? Are you going to throw it in the alley and wait for somebody to come and grab it? Probably not. You're going to wait until that

emotional artifact finds another good home, which gives you a little bit of that freedom to move out of your house and move into the new house.

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**LOVE:** When you want to sell people on something, Nordgren and Schonthal say it's important to tamp down on friction as much as possible.

HOW do you do that? Let's return to Bob the homebuilder. He and his team offered staging services to help buyers get their current homes ready for the market. They offered storage space and movers to help on the big day. And about that dining room table...

**SCHONTHAL:** They went into all of the unsold homes and actually knocked down the wall of the dining room. They made the second bedroom about four feet smaller. They made the dining room about four feet bigger, just big enough to accommodate an eight person dining room table and literally nothing else.

**LOVE:** The additional staging, moving and storage services DID increase the price of the condos, but the cost of reducing friction was worth it, for the buyers. And the adjustment to accommodate a larger dining room was also worth the investment for the homebuilders. Removing the emotional friction of losing a beloved dining room table, and the memories it carries, increased sales by over 15 percent.

**SCHONTHAL:** Adjusting your idea to address the emotional obstacles that stand in its way is a hugely valuable way to approach innovation.

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**LOVE:** According to Nordgren and Schonthal, adopting a "friction mindset" can be useful in a lot of situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has required people to change their behaviors and adopt new ideas to keep themselves and their communities safe. Fatal interactions with police have spurred new ways of thinking about policing and systemic racism. But these ideas have faced friction from the American public.

**SCHONTHAL:** I think that if you put these social issues that we're dealing with right now through the lens of friction theory you will also see how these different frictions light up for all of these issues, whether it's social change, whether it's issues around race and culture, it applies fairly universally and it's too relevant to ignore.

**LOVE:** The lesson here is that, when you have a new idea....it's smart to try to get out AHEAD of the four frictions that might make others less receptive to it.

First...does the idea represent a major change? Where, and how much, might it disrupt people's lives? Consider these disruptions and be prepared to tackle them head on.

Second - How much effort is your idea going to require of people? What will it COST them...either in the form of money or energy? Are there ways to alleviate some of these costs, to make people more amenable to persuasion?

Third - Does your audience feel bullied or otherwise PRESSURED to change? Do they feel threatened or caged in by the changes that are being asked of them? It's worth considering how these feelings might lead to resistance--as well as how you might help them regain their own sense of autonomy and control.

And lastly, what negative emotions might this change evoke? Fear? Anger? Sadness? Anxiety? Think about how these emotions might push people away from the thing you're trying to sell them. Can you tweak your idea to take some of these negative emotions out of the equation?

**SCHONTHAL:** Even just starting to think about friction as a force working against you will be enormously helpful. Depending on which friction we're talking about, some of the frictions are easier to spot than others. So spotting frictions around effort tends to be easier than spotting frictions around reactance. And so each different friction has a different set of discovery techniques attached to it. The most difficult is probably emotion because people don't always wear their authentic emotions on their sleeve.

**LOVE:** Sometimes the best way to crack the code of...what's stopping people from buying your idea...is by putting yourself in your audience's shoes. By doing that, you can consider them for who they are, in all of their complexity. In all of OUR complexity, as human beings.

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**Mike SPIKES:** This episode of The Insightful Leader was produced by Jana Rose Schleis (SH-LICE), Laura Pavin, Michael Spikes, Jessica Love, Emily Stone, Fred Schmalz (SH-MAHLTZ) and Kevin Bailey. It was written by Jana Rose Schleis and edited by Laura Pavin and Jessica Love. And it was sound designed and mixed by Michael Spikes.

Special thanks to professors Loran Nordgren and David Schonthal. Their new book is called *The Human Element: Overcoming the Resistance That Awaits New Ideas*. It will be out on October fifth. You can find it and pre-order it online at [kell.gg/qbz](http://kell.gg/qbz)