

“Powerful! *Spark Action* provides the tools you need to start making a difference today!” **MARSHALL GOLDSMITH**, *New York Times*–bestselling author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

SPARK *ACTION*

How to Lead Change
That Matters

GREGG BROWN

Praise for *Spark Action*

“Powerful! Packed with actionable practices and relevant research, Gregg Brown’s compelling new book provides the tools you need to start making a difference today!”

MARSHALL GOLDSMITH, Thinkers50 #1 executive coach and *New York Times*–bestselling author of *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*

“Want to freshen up how you show up? Gregg Brown has so many teachables from his gritty and graceful work with leaders. *Spark Action* is the practical wisdom that can only come from someone who’s helped a lot of people shift into higher gear—for *real*.”

DANIELLE LAPORTE, creator of The Desire Map and The Heart Centered Leadership Program

“Filled with actionable tools and engaging stories, *Spark Action* inspires positive change in you and in the people you lead. Spark your leadership toolkit, and make change that matters. Read this book now!”

ADAM KREEK, executive business coach, Olympic gold medalist, and author of *The Responsibility Ethic*

“Gregg Brown is a natural storyteller, and through his relatable examples, relevant research, and practical advice, *Spark Action* will show you how to be the kind of change-maker that helps people excel.”

MARK TEWKSBURY, CC, MSM, Olympic gold medalist, leader, advocate

“Brilliant writer and speaker Gregg Brown finally answers the deep calling we all feel inside: how we can enact real and lasting change in the world. In this witty, fun, and thoughtful book, Gregg teaches you exactly that and so much more.”

ROBYN YOUKILIS, wellness expert and author
of *Go With Your Gut* and *Thin from Within*

“*Spark Action* is urgent yet compassionate, bold yet pragmatic, and comprehensive yet concise. Whether you’re trying to overcome self-doubt, galvanize colleagues and customers, or change the world, Gregg Brown’s latest book is a fire-starter for those eager to spark their ideas into action.”

HAMZA KHAN, future of work expert and
author of *Leadership, Reinvented*

“The essential road map for inspiring others to make the change you need. A practical springboard for making immediate impact that lasts.”

PHIL BUCKLEY, author of *Change on the Run* and
Change with Confidence

“An original spark, indeed a righteous troublemaker, Gregg Brown puts forth a masterclass book where his wonderful wisdom and tips for action will spawn the kind of good change habits you never knew you needed.”

DAN PONTEFRACT, author of *Work-Life Bloom*

“*Spark Action* will help future-proof you and your business.”

PETER SHEAHAN, C-suite advisor

SPARK ACTION

The background of the cover features several light gray diagonal lines of varying lengths and orientations scattered across the white space.

GREGG BROWN

How to Lead Change That Matters



SPARK ***ACTION***

••
PAGE TWO

Copyright © 2023 by Gregg Brown

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For a copyright license, visit accesscopyright.ca or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Cataloguing in publication information is available from Library and Archives Canada.

ISBN 978-1-77458-322-7 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-77458-323-4 (ebook)

Page Two
pagetwo.com

Edited by James Harbeck

Copyedited by Steph VanderMeulen

Proofread by Alison Strobel

Cover and interior design by Cameron McKague

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books

Distributed in the US and internationally by Macmillan

23 24 25 26 27 5 4 3 2 1

sparkactionbook.com

This book is dedicated to you.
The one who wants to lead change that matters.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

My Story *I*

- 1 A PhD in Yourself *I3*
- 2 Your Brain: Your Enemy, Your Friend *25*
- 3 Be an Apprentice to Change *37*
- 4 Lead at the Edge of Change *49*
- 5 Cocreate Change *59*
- 6 Shape the Future *69*
- 7 Design the Story You Will Tell *81*
- 8 Choose Your Words Carefully *97*
- 9 Go Deeper: Tell the Whole Story *113*
- 10 Build a Bridge with Hot Topics *125*
- 11 Get Past “No” *139*
- 12 Make Change That Sticks *151*

CONCLUSION

Speaking of a New World:

Where We Go from Here *163*

Acknowledgments *173*

Notes *175*

Further Reading *179*



INTRODUCTION

My Story

*“I am my best work—a series of road maps, reports,
recipes, doodles, and prayers from the front lines.”*

AUDRE LORDE, poet

■ WAS TWENTY-SIX YEARS OLD and had just had my contract at a ski resort canceled after one season—which means I was fired.

I was happy about that. The whole thing wasn't a fit. I'd left a structured role, with policies, processes, and a good team, for a very open and different environment. The job—in a remote mountain resort, isolated from my friends and family—was just not for me. So I was relieved. But my work self-esteem took a hit.

I loaded up my car, a big gas-guzzling Chrysler Cordoba, drove back to Vancouver, and camped out in a spare bedroom on a friend's farm.

So what was I going to do with my life? I wasn't in a rush to do anything—I wanted my next job to be a good one. I had bounced around from one job to another every few years, each time growing a little, yet I felt there was something bigger on the planet I was meant to do. But what?

As I was looking through books on a shelf, one popped out at me. I remember it had an orange cover. It was one of those motivational books with religious overtones, but

the important thing was that it included stories of people who had been in situations similar to mine.

I started reading. One line stood out for me, something to the effect of “anything is possible.” While that sounds trite to me today, at the time, I had felt very limited by my options. The stories inspired me to think differently. After all, if other people could turn their lives around, why couldn’t I?

And just like that, a magic wand . . . did not suddenly appear overnight. That’s not my story! However, what did happen is this.

One morning while reading a newspaper, I came across an article about an inmate in a Canadian prison being denied access to health care—I don’t even remember what the reasons were.

My back went up. “This is Canada!” I thought. “Everyone can access health care here, regardless of background or who you are.” And there I was, this naive little white bread kid who grew up in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, all fired up about this man’s fate.

I hadn’t met anyone who had been to jail—that I knew of, anyway. I had no experience with the criminal justice system. Yet the story triggered something in me. I did not question it. I phoned the person who wrote the article and said, “I need to get involved.”

That one call brought me here today.

The Journey

There are two ways to create change that matters. One is as an activist—getting media attention, protesting, putting pressure on causes or organizations from the outside. The other is as an educator or advocate. While activism is very much needed, I'm much more personally comfortable with and interested in how to get people engaged in my ideas.

Ultimately, just like you, I want people to take action on what I'm saying. What's the point otherwise?

While many of you may not work inside a jail, or with people living on the street, or teach sexual health to Catholic nuns (see chapter 10), these diverse early experiences shaped my insights and processes on how to create messages so that people hear you and your points, so you can spark action in others—ultimately, so you can lead and create change that matters. Today, I apply this knowledge in my work with leaders, teams, and organizations on leading change, navigating the future, and other topics related to change and leadership development, and in my volunteer work when I'm mentoring and coaching young entrepreneurs. Whether one-on-one or in a small group of twenty or a large group of a thousand, I want to spark action in someone to do something with what I say.

That's the whole reason for this book: to help you engage others in your ideas so they take action. Any of these circumstances could describe you:

- You are a leader who has an inspiring vision you want your team to engage in—why won't they get on board?
- You are someone in an organization who has to get others to take action on your project, but people see it as another make-work project.
- You are an entrepreneur who has a valuable service to share with the world . . . why won't people buy it?
- You are passionate about a cause.
- You have an idea you think is important and you want to get it out there.
- You are unsure about why people don't take action on your ideas.

The ideas and strategies contained in this book will help you. They've worked for me and I've seen them work for thousands of people in a variety of circumstances. I know that if I can do this and they can do this, then so can you.

Creating the Space for Change

Too often we've been told to sell, sell, sell to people and convince them that our ideas are right. But I've seen from experience that people shut down when we do that. And even if we convince them we're right and they agree with our idea, it does not mean they're going to take action on it.

We can't make people change. It's important we let go of the mindset that we can swoop in and save everybody and make people do things. We can't, and that's not our job. What we can do is create an environment for change, where our audience can hear our message, be receptive to it, feel safe enough to ask questions and discuss issues, and then want to take action.

Often, I was told, the biggest difference I made to the guys in jail wasn't just with the workshops I led; it was also in the way I treated them, shaking their hands and calling them by their first names. Among other things, this created an opportunity for them to hear me. Finding those places where we can connect as humans is critical. We must find a way to relate. There are many similar experiences people share. Finding them is key.

Some years back, a picture of an obese woman who had fallen off her scooter trying to reach an item on a grocery shelf went viral on social media. In the post's comments, people laughed and many said hurtful things. While I did not comment, I did laugh when I first saw the picture. And then I forgot about it—until I opened up a popular news site and saw an article on this woman.

Incredibly, she had decided to hit back at her online trolls. She had scrolled through the cruel comments directed at her and decided to describe the impact that the humiliating experience had on her. What people thought they were seeing in this photo was a large woman tipped out of her scooter because she was too lazy to get out of the cart to grab a case of soda. As it turns out, she has a condition known as spondylolisthesis; its most

common symptom is painful, weak legs. She can't stand or walk for long periods of time. She was simply grocery shopping, and she shamed her trolls for thinking that her obesity was a result of laziness.

Lesson learned.

But there was more. This story ignited a memory of me at ten years old, trick-or-treating as a cowboy for Halloween. Because I had nice, longish hair, blue eyes, and red lips, people assumed I was a girl and at countless houses said something like, "Oh, you're such a beautiful little cowgirl." I can look back and laugh at it now—I *was* rather pretty with nice hair (and I have *no* hair on my head now)—but at the time, I felt hurt. Why couldn't people see I was a cowboy?!

I realized I could relate to the woman's experience of humiliation. Then I knew I had created change within myself.

That's where all good change begins, right?

Breaking Barriers and Finding Your Cause

So the outcome of all my varied career experiences is that I have learned how people tick. And if I have something important to share with others, whether it's an individual or an organization, how can I say it in a way that allows people to hear me and relate?

It's not about shouting from the rooftops or striding across the stage or room with enthusiasm. Sometimes when I'm speaking, I have to be very conscious of not letting my passion override my message. Don't get me wrong:

passion is great in delivery, but you also need to channel that energy into asking the right questions and framing things in a way that makes people able and willing to take action on what you want them to do. I've worked with people on the street and in prison teaching life skills, and I've talked about sexual health and preventing STIs. I've taught leadership development in a corporate setting and worked with entrepreneurs to help them shift and grow their entrepreneurial mindset. The common thread in all of these circumstances is this: each time, I had to figure out what people needed to know about my topic and how I could help them create the space where they could learn. Getting people to hear you and be on board is about breaking through their barriers and perceptions—just like the woman who tipped over her motorized scooter did for me.

There are many important areas of interest in which people could learn so much. You can't cover them all. You can't cover even more than a few. You're just one person! You need to figure out what it is you want to do and where you can create the biggest change. The trick to that is to really pay attention to where your interest and energy go. By that, I mean asking questions like these:

- What makes me feel more open or more closed?
- Does this make me excited or not?
- Do I feel energized when I think about this?
- Would I do this if I wasn't paid?

For me, it was the article about the prisoner—just one of many—who spoke out about being denied access to health care that lit a fire inside. You may have a moment

of realization like that. But you might not. You might figure it out just by following your energy.

Speaking Your Truth

We've all been in that meeting. The one where we present what we think is a good idea and it's shot down almost as soon as we say it: "Oh, that won't work. We tried it before at my previous workplace, and it was a total failure."

What happens next? We retreat into ourselves and clam up, in fear of saying the wrong thing or presenting another "unworkable" idea. Why be insulted and humiliated and accomplish nothing?

These days, we talk a lot about being our authentic selves. Whether it's at home or work, we want to be who we really are, to speak our truths, to live honestly and as simply and straightforwardly as possible, and not have to suffer quietly inside by withholding from others the unique parts of ourselves. But sharing these truths, however liberating, can also be terrifying. It's hard to unlearn the societal and corporate "stuff" we've amassed over our lifetimes. After experiencing admonishment or shame for speaking our truths, we often decide it's safer to close ourselves to the world and open up to only those in our closest circles.

The result is that we disconnect from others, leaving them to decide for themselves who we are, what we stand for, and what our business and life missions are about. We give them all the power to form their own

conclusions and act on their perspectives of us, whether or not they are accurate—and then we blame them for their misperceptions.

In business, we don't really tell people exactly what we offer, so they move on to the next option because they don't understand. Or we put up barriers, create conflict, and fail to negotiate for what we truly want. Sometimes, we react inappropriately.

What's the cost of not getting our voice out? For one thing, it creates a false sense of security. It can also lead to financial insecurity, especially if it comes with an inability to negotiate. Respect and dignity may be lost, as people perceive us as silent followers rather than powerful and inspiring leaders. But one of the most important losses is the ability to create a sense of psychological safety within our team—one based on commitment, engagement, and trust.

Over the years, I've learned that roughly 10 percent of people are probably not going to like me or you for whatever reason—you have too much hair or not enough, you're too tall, too short, too thin, too heavy, you speak too fast or too slow. The list goes on. It's inevitable, so it's not meaningful.

Your education and experiences as you age can obviously give you a bit of confidence and ability—my master's degree gave me confidence in my ability to talk about certain topics, and years of evaluations and speaking gave me more. Skill development and practice can also give you the confidence to engage others in your ideas.

Sometimes we are afraid to bring up our ideas because we think they're not good. The truth is, nobody brings

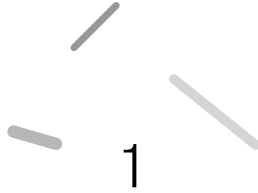
a fully developed idea to a meeting. If we spend time exploring the ideas and allowing them to collide, new, innovative ideas will come to light. Creating lasting change begins with ideas and compelling stories. The best CEOs, corporate leaders, entrepreneurs, managers—any human being who wants to engage others in their ideas—connect to others with their heads *and* hearts. They listen empathically, internalizing what is being shared, and then synthesize their response with stories that best connect and illustrate potential solutions that result in a win-win situation. They create a link to their experience to reframe and communicate in a way that is universal rather than limited. This makes others feel empowered. Valued. But mostly, *heard*. When people feel heard, they are more likely to take action.

Find what energizes you. Speak your truth about it. I will keep speaking mine. We can't change the whole world, but we can work together to make a small or large difference in other people's lives. I believe that's worth doing. It's worth the risk. And you believe that too, or you wouldn't be here.

This book is about how to spark action and engage others in your ideas; how to speak (and listen) authentically, honestly, and powerfully; and how to develop leadership competencies so you can use your voice to create and lead change that truly matters in your life, your community, your organization, and the world.

Are you ready to get your voice out there so others can engage in your ideas to take action? It all starts with *you*! Yes, the wonderful part of you that wants to change the world.

Let's get started, shall we?



A PhD in Yourself

“There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost. The world will not have it.”

MARTHA GRAHAM, dancer and choreographer,
to Agnes de Mille

YOU'RE HERE FOR A REASON.

I mean that two ways. First, you're here on this planet for a reason. We all are. When we find and follow our purpose, we create opportunities for growth and change. When we don't, we're not operating to our fullest potential—and in order to create and lead change, you need to bring everything you've got to the party.

Second, you're here reading this book for a reason. You need to connect and engage with people, which is not as easy as it looks on paper. If it were easier, you wouldn't be reading this book.

Whether you're a coach who wants to get your voice out there in the digital world, or a change leader in an organization, or a consultant trying to figure out your business direction, or a facilitator wanting to engage others in a diversity and inclusion workshop, or a speaker who gives talks on potentially tricky topics like drug addiction, you need to learn how to frame your stories in a way that compels people to hear you and make their own connections. You need to share your "original medicine" (an Indigenous concept) with people so that it

combines with theirs in an elixir of powerful new truths—the kind that conjures action and makes change happen.

To do this, you need to use your voice to create the dialogue that facilitates change. *You* don't make the change happen. You can't make people change. You can only guide others to want the change to happen, and then work together to make it so. The real change happens in their minds first, or collectively within the group, and then the external change processes happen.

Before you can create change, though, you need to know who is leading that change. You need to know what your purpose is, what motivates you, and how not to get in your own way. You need to get a PhD in yourself.

Getting Expert Info on Yourself

The first thing in learning about yourself is to learn how others see you. It's not easy to ask, but you can start by interviewing people who know you well and who have seen you at your best and worst. They know you in ways that may be hard to witness for yourself unless you record and review your own performance (spoiler alert: most people don't have the stomach for that kind of self-reflection). I suggest you ask yourself and the people around you the following kinds of questions.

About you:

- Where do I thrive?
- Where do I shine?

- Why are we friends?
- What do you enjoy about me?

About you as a communicator:

- What one thing could I do differently to make my voice heard?
- What ticks you off about me when we communicate?
- What language do I use that may be problematic?
- What stories could I tell from other people's perspectives for greater impact and connection?

As a speaker who has been onstage as well as teaching workshops for years, I get evaluation forms that give me feedback, so I have a good picture of my strengths and challenges. Other people's perspectives offer incredibly valuable information on which you can build a solid foundation so you can learn to connect with others on a heart level in addition to the informational level. By seeing what they see in you, you learn what you can use to connect with them. A big part of that comes from the empathic ability to see and understand things from others' perspectives.

You also need to observe—and be honest about—what tasks you're good at and when. Managing your energy is important in learning about yourself and how you work best. Different types of work take different types of energy. Administration takes extra energy for me, so I schedule it early in the morning, after preparing for it

the day before. My more creative work also happens in the morning. I can disengage easily from really intense tasks later in the day, and my energy by the end of the day is usually drawn to preparing for the following day. I know not everyone has the ability to schedule tasks when they want, but if you have some control over your work schedule, determine what times are best for you to do certain types of work.

Motivation also comes into play when you want to spark action in others. Challenges will arise and you'll need to be able to get through them. You have to find a way to stay motivated as you lead others down the path of change.

You can ask yourself questions like:

- What motivates me in my work?
- Why do I want to take this on?
- What work am I most proud of and why?
- If I keep doing this work, what will be the outcome?
- What do I need to get out of this to stay engaged and motivated?

Getting Out of Your Own Way

The next thing to become good at is getting out of your own way. You need to learn how to not grind your wheels in the “analysis paralysis” that keeps you from moving forward.

Being unsure about yourself or about how to proceed is not an excuse to stop working on your goal. Even without all the information, you can explore ideas and take action.

As part of my volunteer work, I mentor and coach young entrepreneurs. I was coaching a young entrepreneur whom I'll call Mark. Mark was outlining for me approximately thirty items he was working on. As he went on and on, I gently interrupted him, saying, "You need to prioritize. Pick one of these items and start working the crap out of it."

The one thing Mark really wanted to do was create a podcast. I asked why he hadn't started. His response: "Yeah, I was thinking about it. But then I realized, probably no one's going to listen." He had already talked himself out of doing it before we'd even talked about it.

I suggested that we could in fact *explore* the idea and talk about the factors involved in getting a podcast going without him committing to it just yet. He didn't actually have to start it; we'd just get some ideas out about the podcast, such as a relevant topic that excited him, when he would record the podcast episodes, whom he would interview, where he would post, whom he would advertise it to. Within one hour of just exploring the idea, he had come up with a plan that excited him and sparked him to take action.

Mark thanked me for the great ideas. I said, "All I did was create the space and time for you to explore your idea instead of shutting it down. You allowed your ideas to collide and—*bam!*—you created a plan for a podcast in under an hour."

Your self-imposed limitations about what you can or cannot do are your greatest barrier to change and to getting others engaged in your ideas. So don't talk yourself out of your ideas before you've even started!

You are much more ready to lead change than you think you are. And you can do much more than you think you can.

“Who Am I to Talk About This?” (a.k.a. Imposter Syndrome)

One of the biggest and most common self-imposed limitations is the belief that you're not good enough to be doing what you're doing. This is known as “imposter syndrome.” According to a 2020 study on imposter syndrome by Dena M. Bravata and her colleagues, 82 percent of the population face feelings of being an imposter at some point during their lives. My belief is that the other 18 percent experience it but don't realize it. I've worked and spoken with thousands of people for the past thirty or so years, and, to be honest, I don't know anyone who hasn't experienced it, regardless of age, education, experience, or even the awards they've received.

Additionally, people who work or live outside of the so-called mainstream nine-to-five environment, such as entrepreneurs, coaches, and self-employed consultants, are particularly prone to experiencing this because so many things, such as credit scores, bank loans, mortgages, and extended health-care benefits, are financially geared to the traditionally employed worker. As someone who

has their own business, I see that the system has generally not been set up to align with the work self-employed entrepreneurs do. That can bring up questions for us such as, “Should I be doing this? Maybe I should have a nine-to-five job. How am I going to justify my work and income to get a mortgage?” Many of us entrepreneurs are on our own and don’t have outside input, so we can get caught up in our heads, questioning things over and over. The sense of isolation and not having the overall systems aligned with self-employed individuals can also create imposter syndrome: “Who am I to be doing this?”

And the bigger our goals, the bigger our sense of being an imposter. When we want to spark action and create change that matters, we can often be faced with the questions, “Who am I to create this change?” and “Why should anyone listen to me?” We may be passionate about our topic but feel we don’t have the qualifications or experience to start creating this change. People who have already accomplished much may chalk up their successes to sheer luck.

Minimizing your successes by not owning them is not helpful to your cause. You don’t want to be boastful, yet you need to own what you are good at and why and be able to articulate it in a way that gives people confidence in you, even when you don’t have confidence in yourself. Accomplishing things is harder if you’re undermining or downgrading the person who is accomplishing them—even (or especially) when that person is yourself.

Regardless of how or why you may feel like an imposter, this syndrome is all about the negative stories you tell yourself that may be holding you back from leading and

creating change that matters. It's easy to get stuck in what I call "inner trash talk." But stories matter, as we'll see again and again in this book, and the first stories that matter are the ones you tell yourself *about* yourself.

Here are a few ways I've found helpful to rewrite these stories, so you can step up to what you are being called to do. I've used them myself and with many others. Just pick one and try it!

- Create a "community of understanding" or a "board of directors" for your idea. Find mentors who can guide you. Seek out others who think like you and will support you and your ideas. You can even follow the examples of people you've never met but admire: "How would Maya Angelou respond?"
- Don't wait till things are perfect. Just start! Create a plan, then be flexible in how it unfolds. You may find in six months that you're going in a completely different direction, which is fine as long as it's supporting the overall goal and is something you really want to do.
- Build trust by sharing with others what you are not good at and what you could use help with. You can't do everything, and neither can anyone else! When you focus on working in your "zone"—in other words, on your strengths—the magic starts to happen.
- If something goes wrong, don't get stuck in the self-blame game. Ask, "What can I learn from this?"
- Talk about imposter syndrome with people. When you do, you'll find that other people experience it as well!

We all do, regardless of education, background, or experience. I've met seventy-five-year-olds with it and twenty-year-olds with it.

- Remember, worries are just made-up negative stories. So ground them in fact by asking, “What’s the likelihood of this happening?” and “If it does happen, what will the impact be?” Research shows we tend to overestimate risk and make it worse when we don’t quantify it or put some grading around it, or find other data points related to the risk.
- Write the change you want to cause on your bathroom mirror with an erasable marker. Anything you have around that reminds you of where you want to go can help knock you out of imposter syndrome thinking. You may feel silly writing your goal on a mirror—but guess what, that’s just a negative story too! Reminders work. I know. I have things written on mirrors, and I have a guiding principle written on the window above my desk that I see every day. I don’t care if people think it’s silly—it works!

Remember this quote: “There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you.” So true! This quote is often attributed to Nelson Mandela, but Marianne Williamson is the original author. She continues, “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”

Can I get an “Amen!” to that?

TALKING POINTS

- Learn how others see you—ask them!
- Become aware of self-imposed limitations.
- Overcome imposter syndrome by rewriting the stories you tell yourself about yourself. You are readier to lead change than you think you are.
- Put up signposts, such as writing on your mirror, to knock you out of negative thinking.