

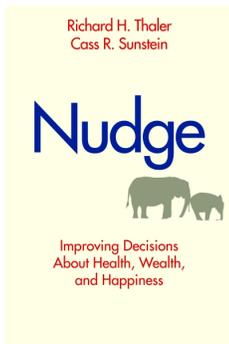


# Nudging People to Make Better Choices

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I'm reading an interesting book called [Nudge—Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness](#). It is by Cass Sunstein, a law professor at Harvard, and Richard Thaler, a behavioral economics professor at Chicago. This book summarizes the social science research that has identified the recurring ways in which people make decisions that are not necessarily good or in their best interest. The premise of the book is that you can nudge people to make better decisions by changing the context in which they make those decisions. The book is much more interesting than I just made it sound.

Here is an example that shows how emphasizing small details (a nudge) can focus someone's attention in a particular direction and change their behavior. The authorities at an airport in Amsterdam have etched the image of a housefly into each urinal in the men's rooms. "It seems that men usually do not pay much attention to where they aim, which can create a bit of a mess, but if they see a target, attention and therefore accuracy are much increased." According to an economist who worked for the airport, "If a man sees a fly, he aims at it." The economist "conducted fly-in-urinal trials and found that etchings reduce spillage by 80 percent."

Understanding the circumstances in which people make bad decisions gives us the potential as "choice architects" to nudge them in directions that can improve their lives in significant ways. Questions about irrational decision making have become popular. Another best-selling book, [Predictably Irrational](#) by Daniel Ariely, a behavioral economist at Duke, addresses many of the same questions raised by *Nudge*. I have not read Ariely's book, but I have watched [his interesting presentation](#) at a TED Conference about the ways in which we all make irrational decisions.



I want to finish the book and think about how it might affect our work. Can we do things that will nudge public officials to make better choices about how to work with the School? Can we help them design public policy that nudges people toward complying with the interests reflected by the policy? If we have a better understanding about how people make decisions, we should be able to serve them better. Let me know if you've read either of these books and your reactions, or if you have thoughts about this general subject.