

# Managing Change

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Life would be more comfortable if clichés helped. "Change is the only constant." "Without change we'd never have progress." "Change should be embraced." If only it were that easy.

Scientists talk about the ripple effect of one small change on ecosystems in the natural world. Change has the same effect on patterns and systems we set up in our own lives.

Imagine, then, the impact of change on organizations; leadership transitions, offices making changes necessary to adapt to new requirements; reorganization: redefining departmental vision; merging departments and trying to bring together two different cultures.

Even the smallest diversion from the norm can cause tremendous resistance for the following reasons.

- When we are in transition, we are, at least for a time, deprived of knowledge. Knowledge is the basis of power, and power gives us the ability to influence. When our power base is eroded, we feel we no longer have the ability to influence, and control becomes a real issue.

- When we are *not* in control, we have a tendency to hang onto the familiar. Often we dig in our heels and insist on staying with the old ways.

It's the basis of resistance. Sometimes we sabotage our own progress or the progress of others (a phenomenon known as "success sabotage" or "fear of success") so we don't have to face change and the unknown.

- Anxiety increases and is not really about the present because we know what's happening at the moment. Anxiety invokes the past (we remember what we went through with past transitions) and/or it is about the future (we anticipate the worst).

Change automatically vaults us into the future - a place fraught with unanswered questions, unknown possibilities, and uncertain results. It can be very exciting to be sure, but excitement and anxiety co-exist with great regularity.

- There is a loss of the familiar. We may be giving up a feeling of expertise, old habits, or comfortable working relationships. Even when the changes are needed and positive, we are losing familiarity and predictability, which leads to a loss of confidence. "We have always done it that way," means we know how to do it that way and it is no longer a struggle." In a world of tension and inherent difficulty, sameness can be calming and soothing. The fact that a new direction is appealing does not mean we don't long for the old.

- Stress increases. Stress results, not merely from hard work, but from the gap between working hard and not accomplishing what needs to be accomplished. Changes increase that gap.

- Finally, positive change can be just as stressful as negative change because with every gain there is a loss. There are trade-offs, both anticipated and unanticipated.

## So what should we do?

1. Recognize resistance, concern, anxiety, and stress as normal reactions during periods of change. We do not need to add judgment to an already tense situation. If people's self-esteem is already strained by having to learn a new protocol, for instance, it certainly will not be enhanced by berating them for not accommodating the changes. In other words, accept how people feel. Feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are. If they exist, they're valid.
2. While enumerating the gains and positive aspects of the change, address the losses, as well. What are they giving up? What will they miss? Identify the roles of familiarity and predictability and acknowledge them as assets. Listen to what they're telling you about the trade-offs. People don't have to be right, they just need to be heard.
3. Learn what has to be accomplished to accommodate the changes and make a reasonable plan for getting it done. At the same time, recognize that everyone has his or her own pace. Respect personal styles - and to the extent possible - take them into account. When people believe their unique approaches will be tolerated, the pressure reduces and they can often make transitions faster.
4. Support one another. Those who are able to make changes more quickly can either be intolerant of those who need more time or they

- can help them in a non-judgmental way. Helping is rewarding and builds a team atmosphere.
5. Try not to have a narrow view. Acknowledge that a single change affects the entire system. To the extent those ramifications can be anticipated, you'll be that much farther ahead. However, it's not possible to predict everything. Expect the unexpected. If the surprises are seen as normal, people will be less likely to be negatively affected by them.
  6. Accept the notion that even though change can be exciting, progress-oriented, and beneficial, most of the time it's very difficult. Allow plenty of time to talk about and share concerns because it will normalize reactions and lessen isolation. Humanize the process.
  7. It is essential to communicate far more often than usual even when there is not much to say. Keep as few secrets as possible. Have more meetings rather than less, despite time constraints. Time taken now will, ultimately, save time later.
  8. And, most important, include employees in the decision-making process whenever possible. The people who do the job every day know how to solve the problems. The more their expertise is tapped, the more invested they'll be in the outcome.

Employees need to trust their executives and executives need to trust their employees. Be accessible and available and, please, realize that a one-time announcement is simply not enough. If, as most say, "your employees are your greatest asset," reflect that philosophy as you facilitate change within your organization.

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