

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

DEALING EFFECTIVELY WITH INEVITABLE CHANGES AND CHALLENGES WITHIN THE BUSINESS

Change has earned itself a bad reputation – or rather ‘Change Management’ has. Change itself is part of life, but the change management ‘industry’ has grown around concepts such as ‘downsizing’, ‘strategic realignment’ and ‘cultural development’ – jargon that leaves most people uncertain and at times fearful about what lays ahead.

Do we like change? It depends. Human beings are by nature risk averse – that is, they prefer to avoid risk rather than seek it. Yes, there are shades of grey on the risk aversion continuum (which is why some people love bungee-jumping and others prefer lawn bowls), but by and large, humans prefer predictability over uncertainty, stability over disruption.

The challenge then with large scale organisational change (such as for example, an organisational restructuring like council amalgamation) is that it by definition creates disruption and uncertainty. When faced with such disruption, a single-person’s response can be significant, but multiply it by the 100s and 1,000s of people in an organisation... and the rumours, the uninformed water-cooler conversations and the often rapid change in management personnel with little time for accurate information dissemination... and you have a hotbed for fear and resistance to change.

This paper looks at the practical implications of change in an organisational setting and provides insight and tips for dealing with change as an ‘insider’ – not an external management consultant who can spruik the benefits – but from the perspective of the people who are truly affected by the change – the people working in the organisation, who have to continue doing their jobs, whatever their jobs may be even while they don’t necessarily know what those jobs are anymore. It is broken into the following sections;

- Understanding the natural responses to the change process and how to deal with it
- How to stay motivated personally despite the unpredictability
- How to take a leadership role – both at a personal level and an organisational one – during times of change
- Within that leadership role, how to be one of the effective communicators, therefore being part of the solution, not perpetuating the problem of ineffective communication that is commonplace during times of change

KEY CONCEPTS

Incremental change is the natural change process that organisations go through as part of their evolution. This change, by its nature, is generally not traumatic or stressful on the organisation or the people in it.

On the other hand, **radical change** is change that results in a major makeover of the organisation and its component systems.¹ This change is most often associated with the change management industry and is the one of interest today.

RESPONSES TO CHANGE

Given its unpredictability, and human nature to prefer predictability, radical change is often met with resistance. Such resistance is a normal response and arises due to;

- Fear of the unknown
- Need for security
- No felt need for change
- The threatening of vested interests
- Contrasted interpretations
- Poor timing
- A lack of resources (perceived or real)

There can also often be feelings similar to grief as people struggle to 'let go' of the old and welcome the new scenarios. The grief cycle, described by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her 1969 book, "On Death and Dying", has been applied widely to understand our responses to any trauma (such as organizational restructuring), not just the ultimate trauma of death.

The grief cycle as originally developed by Kubler-Ross exists of 5 phases²:

1. Denial – consciously or unconsciously, a person refuses to accept the reality. It is a perfectly natural defence mechanism.
2. Anger – People can be angry at themselves and/or with others. In the organisational change context such anger is often directed to those 'inflicting' the change but understand that people can manifest anger in different ways – and it may be directed towards people completely unrelated to the change itself.
3. Bargaining – In the organisational context, people can look to negotiate a compromise.
4. Depression – This can be described as the 'dress rehearsal' for the actual grief or aftermath. The manifestation of depression is different for everybody but often has elements of sadness, regret, fear and uncertainty.
5. Acceptance – this stages generally indicates some emotional detachment and objectivity to the situation

¹ Wood, Chapman, Fromholtz et. al 2004

² Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, 1969

While described as a 'cycle' it is important to understand it is not intended to provide a rigid series of sequential steps. It's not a process as such, rather a model or framework for understanding the various responses. The stages are not linear and people do not necessarily move through all of the five... humans are complex beings and their response to stress and grief is as individual as they are.

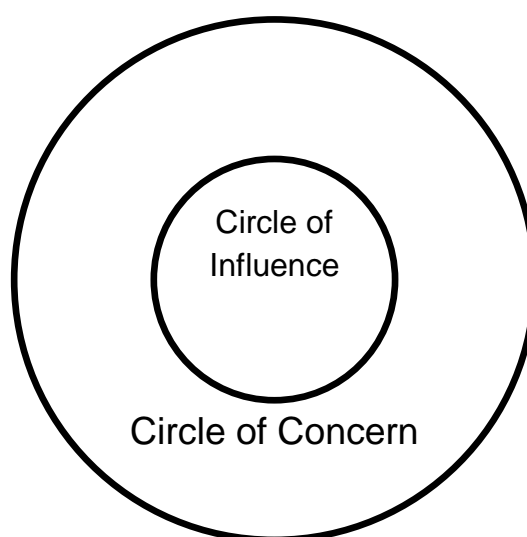
Knowing these natural responses to change is often comfort enough, however understanding the emotions and concerns involved also provides insight into how best to support ourselves, our team and other people around us. For example, for each of the above reasons that people resist change, there is an apparent solution. To address fear of the unknown, provide information and encouragement; to overcome no felt need to change, demonstrate the benefits and the improved condition.

STAYING MOTIVATED

The key to staying motivated in any changing context is to stay focussed on the reality – not the 'made-up' or 'dramatised' story. Stick with the facts and the apparent consequences when considering the impact of change on your situation – and seek out more information from reliable sources when the facts are hazy. Reliability is critical in an organisational context, as the rumours and innuendo often drown-out the factual information.

Further, take a reality check as to how the change is *really* going to impact your situation. In many organisational changes, many people's day-to-day existence can remain very similar to the previous situation – their job is the same, their immediate reporting hierarchy remains the same, even their desk or working environment stays the same. So while there might be significant changes occurring in the wider context, your day-to-day life may not change that dramatically. Realising this can be a huge relief to people.

Another strategy is to recognise what elements of the change you can or can't influence. In his book, 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People', Stephen Covey talks about the *Circle of Influence* and the *Circle of Concern*.



The outer circle, the circle of concern, represents everything that a person is 'concerned' with – or everything that is on a person's radar of awareness. For example, you are aware of the stories you saw on last night's news, you are aware of the general state of the economy, who is our current Prime Minister, as well as

elements closer to home – what you're going to do tonight or on the weekend, what work is on your plate and so on.

The inner circle, the circle of influence, represents those things *within* your circle of concern that you have influence over. For example, you can influence how you spend your time or what work you're going to do, but, at least until the next election, you have little influence over who is the current Prime Minister.

This model is useful to staying motivated because it helps us to realise that even if we don't like the situation, unless it's in our circle of influence, we can't do anything to change it. Therefore it's useful to accept the situation, stop stressing or worrying about it, and focus on the things you can influence.

TAKING THE LEAD

By focusing on your circle of influence, you instantly demonstrate strong personal responsibility (or personal leadership). Such a focus demonstrates emotional maturity and helps to put you in a more proactive frame of mind. For when you are focussing on your circle of influence rather than your circle of concern, you stop complaining or whining about how you would like things to be – instead you get on with your life and do what you can to make the most of things.

Personal responsibility also positions you well to lead those around you – whether you are a nominated leader or not. In times of change and uncertainty, people look to those who appear to be calm and in control. As such, be aware of what you are communicating – both consciously and unconsciously. How you conduct yourself speaks volumes to others – and if you demonstrate a calmness and confidence, others will believe that 'things are alright'. If on the other hand you demonstrate a level of stress or worry about the change, you perpetuate the concerns and uncertainty of others.

Within the context of personal responsibility, you can focus on your role within the new-look organisation. Ask yourself;

- What is my role here?
- Who do I communicate to?
- What are my organisational objectives?
- What are my personal objectives?
- Given the above, what is required of me?

Such a framework helps to push aside the 'noise' of the change and enables you to continue to be a meaningful contributor to the organisation – not only positioning you favourably with management, but also giving you a sense of contribution, job satisfaction and security.

If you are a 'nominated' leader – that is a supervisor or manager with a team of 'followers', you can use the above questions within the team context. It is also useful to spend time aligning individual goals with those of the organisation so people can see where they fit... and how being part of the organisation is of benefit to them. Such a process helps to stabilise people within the changing organisation – it gives a sense of foundation and roots in contrast to the noise and perception of chaos that can often accompany change.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

One of the casualties of change is often effective communication. This is caused by a number of factors, such as the slow-down or disappearance of normal communication methods like newsletters due to staff movements, the resulting increase of gossip and speculation, the change of personnel within key positions and the changes in organisational structure, the merging of different departmental and/or organisational cultures and a lack of management attention to communication as they focus on other priorities.

However of all the strategies for effectively managing and leading change, communication is the most important.

As a leader then, it is important to be as effective in your communication as possible.

First of all, understand the barriers that may exist to effective communication. Fear, personal agendas and lack of time all compound the usual barriers such as language, gender differences and stereotypes. Minimise such barriers as much as possible and to avoid misunderstandings, take longer than normal to communicate... and communicate frequently with repeated messages. In marketing it is understood it takes a buyer up to seven times to hear a message before they act – apply this to the organisational change process and consider how you communicate key elements of the change up to seven times to ensure people receive the message you want them to hear.

Also be aware of how you communicate when it comes to the uncertainties. If you are often saying “I don’t know how this will work” or your discussion fades into comments like “we’ll have to wait and see”, you contribute to people’s sense of uncertainty and unpredictability. There’s no harm in not having all the answers, but consider your responses. “We’re working on that” or “that is in hand and they will be letting me know soon” conveys a greater sense of confidence than “we haven’t been told yet”.

By being aware of how you communicate, by taking personal responsibility and focusing on your circle of influence, you will be much better placed to deal with the changes within the business... and therefore more able to just get on with your job.

Change is challenging at the best of times – radical change truly tests us. Choosing how you respond to the change is the critical factor in staying motivated... and succeeding through the change. As Charles Darwin put it,

It's not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.

Cat Matson is an organisational development consultant, specialising in optimising business performance. With 15 years experience in both running her own businesses and consulting to a wide range of clients in the private and public sectors, she is all too aware of the often negative impact of change on organisational performance. Her focus is on providing practical solutions to her clients and supporting them to be highly successful in their own context.

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