

Managing Change

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Change, as they say, is the only certainty. Yet most people seek constancy, and struggle continuously to prevent, or adjust to change. At best, these people arrive at a place of “dynamic equilibrium” where the ebbs and flows of life do not result in radical change but allow them to plan ahead with a degree of confidence.

Having said this, some people thrive on change. These “change agents” can lead societal, industrial, and organizational change or change the physical and creative limits of human endeavor. Without such change agents our world would be static, unimaginative, and dull. Yet many people resist the changes and challenges that change agents bring, because they trigger fears that (illusory) control will be lost and that things will only get worse.

What You Need to Know

I have been made responsible for a change program that I know will be unpopular, because it will result in the loss of some jobs and the reallocation of others. How do I start?

There is bound to be a rationale for the changes you have been asked to make. Perhaps you could start by demonstrating you know where the problem lies and articulate this clearly. You may be able to canvas views on the topic and show empathy as you receive people’s opinions. Once you give voice to the problems and identify with the way people feel, you will have started the process of getting people receptive to the idea of change.

I have implemented a change program which I thought was going well until I started to notice people going back to the old ways of doing things. What can I do to rescue the situation?

I wonder if you conceived the change program in a vacuum. Obviously, people have not bought into it sufficiently to make the changes stick. Try opening up a discussion to find out why it is not working and what people would like to see done in order for them to adhere to the change objectives. You may not have followed through with appropriate training or offered a sufficiently robust support structure to assist when things get confusing. Perhaps you could create a “change team” that will take responsibility for the initiative.

We have had a number of change initiatives in quick succession and people are getting tired of responding to the call for change. How can I reenergize people with the desire to keep moving forward?

People become “change-weary” very quickly, especially if the changes are not sustained or do not make a difference. You probably have many confused and uncomfortable people in the organization who are distracted from doing their jobs well. Try to give them a “change vacation” while they integrate the changes that have already been made. Give them a forum to discuss the changes and encourage them to offer each other support.

It is obvious we need to make some rapid changes in the business if we are going to survive the threats that are emerging in our market. People don't seem to realize how urgent it is. How can I get them to sit up and take notice?

Although you can outline the rationale for change, you forget that it is an intensely human activity. You need to give people time to recognize the need for change, to think through their part in it, and to get behind you. Try to be patient. Explain the need for change and outline the threats as graphically as you like; then turn to the people in your business for ideas about what they could do. If they feel they can influence the plan for change, they may become aligned to it more quickly.

What to Do

Understand and Manage Change

Kurt Lewin (1890—1947) is often referred to as the founder of social psychology and father of organizational development. His name is behind the discipline of group dynamics and action research, but he is perhaps best known for his three stage theory of change, which is widely used to understand and manage change processes. Kurt Lewin believed that for organizational, group, or individual change to take place, the total situation had to be considered. It is no good just looking at the little bit that you are interested in, because it is only by embracing factors in the broader environment and internalizing them, that change can occur. It is the boundary zone, the place where the internal and external worlds meet, that should be of interest to the change agent.

Kurt divided the change process into three stages:

- **Stage 1—Unfreezing:** In order for change to occur, the existing individual and/or group mindset has to be challenged and dismantled. As individuals we have a particular way of looking at the world. Our values and beliefs, our assumptions and prejudices, our observations and experiences,

as well as our genetic and formative influences all go to make up our mindset. If this is rigid and impervious to external influences, we will not change. We often have to use influence and persuasion to assist people in overcoming the inertia of the status quo. In addition, people are very often well-defended. They see change as a threat because they fear losing control and losing what they perceive to be certainty. Sometimes a shock is required to “jumpstart” the process of change.

- **Stage 2—Changing:** When the mindset has been dismantled, there follows a period of chaos and confusion. Nothing is known as it was before, and a new mindset has not yet been formed to replace the old one. People who have a dislike of change often intuitively understand that it is a bumpy and uncomfortable ride. What used to make sense no longer makes sense. After the unfreezing stage therefore, comes a period of thinking things through from a different vantage point, of challenging assumptions and beliefs, and of reviewing the way the world is seen and experienced.
- **Stage 3—Refreezing:** After thinking things through from first principles and arranging a new mindset, fundamental change is considered to have taken place. At this stage, most of the hard work has been done and a new level of comfort is gained as the ground solidifies again underfoot. At the refreezing stage, new approaches become habituated to ensure that change has properly taken place.

Another model of change, albeit rooted in the grieving process, was illuminated by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Following a similar path to Kurt Lewin’s three stage model, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s model illuminates the behavioral responses to loss or change.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross uses a five stage model:

- **Stage 1—Denial:** When change is impelled, in the case of grief, living without someone loved, denial is often the first response. Whether this is conscious or unconscious, it represents a refusal to accept the fact of someone’s death. It is a natural defense mechanism to protect us from being distressed. However, some people get locked in at this stage when dealing with a traumatic event. This first stage is also implied by Lewin’s model.
- **Stage 2—Anger:** When change is imposed upon us and our life is deeply affected by this, we often get angry. We see this, too, in the organizational setting when frustration and anger erupt in response to an action or event that prevents us from remaining comfortable and continuing in the old way. This anger is often directed at the person who represents the change, even if that person, him- or herself, has been forced to implement the change. Knowing this natural human response enables us to anticipate and dispel it in a creative way. Once the anger has been expressed, it is possible to continue moving through the change process.
- **Stage 3—Bargaining:** Although it may seem illogical, knowing pretty much that death is final, the bereaved often attempt to bargain with what represents God to them. “If I promise to be good, will you return my loved one to me?” Less surprising is this tendency in organizations when a downsizing initiative is announced. The Unions will do all they can to broker a deal that returns the situation to the way it was or to find an acceptable compromise.
- **Stage 4—Depression:** This is the beginning of accepting that an ending has taken place and that facing a life without someone you love is inevitable. It is a “grounding” emotion that prepares people for grieving. However, it still has an element of emotional attachment to it and is backward

facing. We often see this manifested in organizational cultures as dependency and post-shock inertia.

- **Stage 5—Acceptance:** Finally, acceptance releases the emotional attachment to the loss, and a certain level of objectivity and rationality returns. Indeed, there may even be some signals that someone is prepared to move away from the loss. In an organizational context, this may be seen as proactivity in respect of the options that now exist. Perhaps this will be seen as someone seeking membership of a new team, applying for a training course, attending an outplacement program, or a looking for a different position altogether.

Together, these two models can assist in managing organizational change through understanding the principles and dynamic of change and peoples' likely responses to it.

What to Avoid

You Fail to Prepare Employees for the Prospect of Change

Organizations often try to initiate change initiatives in response to a new and sudden threat. However, unless you have prepared people for the prospect of change, they will lag behind you in their commitment. If you are in a volatile market, you can prepare people by signaling the need to be responsive and by making them aware that change may need to happen unexpectedly. If they fully understand this and recognize the need for change, they will be more likely to respond quickly when the occasion arises.

You Assume People Will Understand the Need for Change

Making the assumption that people will concur with your justification for a change initiative is a mistake. Very often, people have strong and fixed views about the world and if you suddenly change their world, they will have strong and fixed views about that too. Most people dislike the disturbance that a change brings, even if it is ultimately to their advantage. Take time to get their assumptions and beliefs on the table and create a forum for discussion. You will find that peoples' views are not changed by your strength of argument but in discussion with their colleagues.

You Initiate Another Change before People Have Adjusted to the Last

Not giving people enough time to adjust to the change before another initiative is launched is a common problem. People need time to "grieve" the loss of the former situation and to accept and

settle into the new. According to Kurt Lewin, change only occurs when the new external environment has been internalized and integrated. This does not happen immediately.

You Expect Employees to View Change Positively

Expecting that positive change is more easily accepted than negative change is a common misconception. Any change requires an adjustment. At some of life's most positive change points, confusion and depression ensue. This happens in the personal realm as well as the organizational realm. We hear this wisdom in sound bites like "the honeymoon period is over," which might refer to the "low" after the "high" of a promotion. Expect the change process to be challenging whatever its nature.

Where to Learn More

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Web Sites:

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Work911: www.work911.com/managingchange

Free Management Library: www.managementhelp.org/org_chng/org_chng.htm

Change Management Learning Center: www.change-management.com/default.htm

a2zpsychology.com:

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