

Fact-File 28: Putting People at the Centre of Change



Extract from *Preparing Yourself for Change - A Personal Action Guide*

Coming to Terms with Change

It's funny how some changes get us hot under the collar, frighten the pants off us or leave us sheer exhausted and confused just thinking about it. It's funny, because life is all about change – so why do we expect the organisation we work in to be any different?



Change happens all around us every day in our society. Lots of it we embrace happily and take on board heartily – mobile phones, email, texting, carbon reduction, healthy lifestyles – the list can go on and on.

- ❑ You can't escape change. It's all around us. And organisations that can't or won't change, fail. It's as simple as that.
- ❑ Whether you're public or private sector, the ability to change is critical to our survival, our job performance and our personal success
- ❑ We expect people to be flexible and able to adapt to change as new challenges arise, new technology comes on line, demand increases or services diversify.
- ❑ No matter what your specific job, there's an expectation that you will be open to making changes to your workroles, your procedures, your processes and your team.

Change is no longer something you do if you feel like it - and how we manage ourselves through it and engage with it is part of every person's job – whether it's written in your job description or not.

The emotional side of change

Change – our experience of it, our resistance to it as well as our willingness to do it – is primarily emotional. How we feel about it plays a prime part in how we respond to and manage change.

Change brings up very primal feelings like fear, apathy, anxiety, threat, uncertainty or excitement, anticipation, enthusiasm and hope. It's often not so much the change itself – it's how we react emotionally and how well we handle our feelings around change that counts.

Our thoughts and feelings feed off each other. Everyone has concerns about change – and it's useful to assess your reactions, thoughts and

feelings about a change you face and reflect on uncertainties, reservations or fears you may have about it. For example:

- ❑ Positive thoughts generate good feelings. If a change generates mainly positive emotions for us, we feel excited, optimistic and hopeful about the good things that might come from it. So we engage with it, give it our time and effort and help to make it happen.
- ❑ Pessimistic thoughts give rise to negative feelings. When a change generates mainly negative emotions, we infect each other with fear, panic, apathy, cynicism. We're likely to resist it, act disengaged, try to ignore, criticise or block it. So we're not very likely to invest any time in helping it to happen.

If we are going to change, what needs to change first is our *feelings* about the change. When it comes to change, heart comes before head. We have to be emotionally convinced first – to overcome negative feelings and develop positive or hopeful feelings about the change - before we can engage with it in any logical way.

If we can understand and regulate our emotional reactions to change – find our feelings and find out what's causing them - this is sometimes all it takes to get us thinking about change in a more positive emotional light.

Personal change reactions

Let's keep change in perspective. We want it as much as we *don't* want it. We get bored with the same old routines. We want to be challenged, excited, energised and inspired. Change can do all that. Just as much as it can provoke anxiety, anger, apathy or resistance.

- ❑ Change means doing things differently – and this can be uncomfortable. It means leaving behind routines we've grown used to, as we learn to try out new ways to do things.
- ❑ Feeling flung into change processes over which we have little control causes us to become instinctively defensive.
- ❑ Denial, frustration and feeling helpless are normal reactions we all have. But prolonged feelings like this detract from your personal and work effectiveness.

Life is really a series of change-resisting events, followed by exploration, experimentation and acceptance of many changes that we resisted

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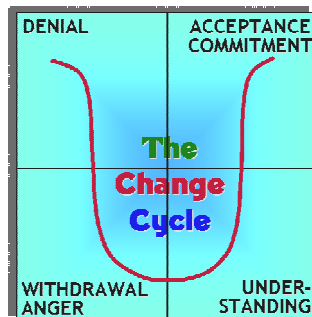
initially. People are so predictable in following this path through change, we can virtually map the stages in the change cycle we all go through.

Stage 1 – Denial: You reject the change and frame arguments to prove this change is useless

Stage 2 - Withdrawal-Anger: You resent the change, get angry or withdrawn. Stress levels go up, you behave badly or go into your shell.

Stage 3 – Understanding: You know you have to do it, so you find out more about this change

Stage 4 – Acceptance-Commitment: By the time you reach this stage you stop looking at the change as different because you've made adjustments, learned new skills and are trying out the changes



By the way, many of our reactions are historical – not hysterical. Because we've all been on the end of badly managed change and been burnt by it.

A personal change roadmap

OK – you heard this change was coming. You probably knew something was brewing before you were even told about it. If you accept that change is inevitable, then you may as well think about how you can cope with it constructively, so it doesn't faze or stress you so much and hopefully, get something out of the change too.

This means *learning how to change* – it means understanding the dynamics of change and how to manage it better personally; identifying the impacts change has on you and reflecting on your responses and reactions to it. It also means finding answers to questions like:

? “What feelings do I have about this change and how is this affecting me?” “What are my real concerns about this change – and how real are they?”

? “What's my orientation to change - what opportunities might it present?” “What would help me get on board with this”?

Hopefully, your leaders held a briefing where you had a chance to hear what the change was all

about and ask questions to help you understand the need for it, its impact and how they see it happening too. Maybe you walk away from this briefing thinking how much this change is needed, feeling excited about the prospects and wanting to get involved in getting on with it. But if you're in the other 50% of a typical change population, that briefing raised more doubts than it did answers.

Either way, here's a 5-step roadmap for engaging personally with change. You need to do some of these whether you support the change or not.

Step 1: Find out more about the change – the reasons for it, what the specifics are, where it will go and what steps are planned for getting there. It's better if you also know a bit about the nature of change in general and acquaint yourself with some basic models, approaches and tools that organisations use

Step 2: Assess the change impact. Before you decide what you think about this change, you need information on: *Who/what will be impacted? What are the benefits and barriers? How will I be affected? What's in it (or not) for me?*

Step 3: Reflect on thoughts and feelings. You may not have control of this change, but you can control your thoughts and feelings about it, which influence your position and your decision to reject or accept it.

Step 4: Work out ways to engage. Most change happens whether we like it or not. Sometimes, we must resist a change because it is morally wrong or goes against our values. Sometimes we must accept the inevitability of a change and decide to make the best of it.

Step 5: Personal change plan. Whether you choose to engage or resist it, you still need a plan for how to manage change and look after yourself as it happens. Depending on the choice you make, your plan may be more of a limited 'coping' one or be more about growing into the change and exploiting the opportunities it has to offer.

Engaging with change

If you decide to engage with change or to help make it happen, you need to find out more about how to get involved and how to empower yourself to move through it too.

You need to know a bit about what mechanisms, steps or roadmaps people are using to implement

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it - so you can at least keep track of and understand the change process (the steps and what's planned) and even have a say or take up an invitation to participate. By the way, we can't promise you'll always have an opportunity to be involved. But if your leaders are change-smart, they'll think about how to involve you because they want you to be on-side.

What can you do if you decide to constructively engage with this change? Here's a few ideas...

- Find out what you can about this change and stay open - don't form hard-and-fast opinions about this change too early
- Try to see this change not just from your own perspective - what about other angles?
- Make a list of the advantages and benefits of this change – not just the negatives
- Talk it over with other people – what are they doing to cope with this change? Can you?
- seek out positive not just negative views
- Step back and take a big picture perspective of what this change is trying to do
- Reflect on your reasons for why you support or oppose this change. Are they just?
- Check your assumptions and stories about this change. How do you know they are true?
- Get involved if you can in a change team or group – it's the best way to be in control
- Check how you're behaving and what you're saying about this change – does this help?
- Think through the consequences – personal, team, organisational – of not changing
- Face up to your real fears about this change – how well-founded are they?
- Check your feelings about this change – are they positive/energising or negative/draining?

Looking after yourself

You need to think about how you can take care of yourself during major change, engage with the challenge constructively, stay healthy, sane and not drive others around you crazy. You need to keep yourself afloat in the face of change and you need to learn how to engage with change and hopefully influence and have a say in it too. To help, try out these attitudes:

- Volunteer** – what can you do to help. It can empower you and keep you in-the-know.
- Be useful** - contribute in change meetings. Even if you don't like it all that much, speak from the viewpoint of *"Well, if I was in charge of this change, what I would do is...."*
- Be open** – find out other people's ideas and views, don't let your own thoughts block you
- Take action:** what small steps/commitments can you make to start changing?
- Challenge yourself** – suspend your negativity and think *"how could this change work, if it is going to happen anyway."*
- Be Creative** - look for new ideas – don't get stuck 'in the old ways', a 'one-best-way' or "this will never work" mentality
- Be available** - don't avoid change meetings and improvement activities. It will happen without you – so better to stay in the loop
- Be team-minded** - think of how others in the team, might want this change
- Be fair-minded** – try to see all sides of a change situation - don't let biases, pet ideas, jealousies or resentments sway their thinking

Change is complex, scary and often very messy. Coping with it is stressful – even for those in control of it. It's twice as stressful for us who don't feel much in control of it at all. Dealing with it is about getting through the emotion, confusion and instability with minimal damage to your blood pressure, career, relationships, and confidence.

To do this you need personal skills – first to cope with change and stay emotionally balanced, then to think clearly about it and understand what's going on, then to engage with it and increase your level of personal 'change-ability'.

The Change Forum runs *Preparing Yourself for Change* programs, designed to increase your level of 'change-ability' and give you personal skills to manage and prepare for change better

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