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## **Leading Change**

Organizations need prepared leaders to maintain productivity during times of change. Basics about the process of change and how to avoid some of the common challenges when negotiating the change process.

From change management chapter of the latest edition of the Bestseller, [Guide to Stress Reduction](#), by L. John Mason, Ph.D.

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## **Understanding Change**

The momentum of change continues to build. If you or the organization you work with is not prepared for ongoing change then you risk the possibility of being overwhelmed and left for dead by the Superhighway of life! This dramatic metaphor is reported constantly by the predictors of business and economic trends. With technology and Globalization of trade driving these trends, we must learn to adapt, gracefully, to this change or be playing the very difficult role of catch-up.

To illustrate my point, have you notice any changes to your work or family life in the past 30 years? Perhaps you only have to go back ten years. Think back to the late 1980's, home computers were just catching on in a big way (productivity at home, not just games.) Fax machines were beginning to be used on a regular basis in small and large offices. You could still buy phonograph records. Pagers were catching on. Cellular phones were not an industry, yet. E-mail was rare outside corporate networking systems and high tech firms. Cable TV offered 20 choices of programming. The internet was not widely known or used outside of academic and military organizations. I will bet you that even if you have not upgraded into this high-tech world, at a personal level, you find yourself driving down the road with some other driver being distracted by the cellular phone conversation that he is engaged in, instead of full attention to driving.

Some people are actually, techno-phobic about the intimidating rate of change into a technology driven world. This affects business, education, and even social activities. Your children may know more about the internet or computer technology than you do, and if they don't, they are either too young or at risk of missing the "boat." Techno-phobia is an anxiety related disorder that may make people uncomfortable, if not unable to function, in the business world. The competition for dominance in business has driven all the peoples of the world into a race for superiority in high-technology. The rate of this change is increasing exponentially.

The next obvious truth is that we are not physically evolving at a rate that can keep up with this economically driven evolutionary trend. We still have a primitive change response mechanism, the flight-fight response, embedded within us. This governs the way we automatically respond to the stress of change. "Overwhelm" is the subjective, and often physical, response to dealing with the rate of



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change. What human beings have going for survival is that we are adaptable. But the rate and need for adaptation has generally outstripped our abilities to keep up with the rate of change. Younger workers may be more resilient to change and feel pretty good about the exciting new developments, but in mid-life and for us "Baby-Boomers," the resilience and flexibility may be giving way to the aches and insecurities of our reduced adaptation qualities. There are always examples of "genetic-immunes" who give most mortals a bad rap and feelings of guilt because they are so good at adapting to change (Or perhaps, they are in denial and "it" will eventually come crashing down on them).

Knowing this, the balance of this chapter will be spent on offering information and techniques for managing change more gracefully. We cannot stop it, or in most cases, control it, however, we can learn to respond more appropriately. By being aware of how we respond to change and engaging in preventive actions, we can minimize, if not eliminate, the symptoms of stress and overwhelm. The two keys will be awareness and then appropriate and effective self-care.

## **Personal Change Assessment**

First, become aware of what transition and change can be like for you as an individual response. You must determine how you react in your own personal way to change. Do you ever feel anxious about the changes swirling around you? Do you lose sleep thinking about these events? Have you ever become aware that you lose focus or are distracted more easily when you find yourself in a period of change? Is anger or frustration closer to the surface when you are in the midst of changes? Does your stomach act up or do your shoulders or jaw get tight as a reaction to external changes?

Read or reread the first chapter of this book on understanding the effects of change and stress. Take the self-guided stress tests. Note the physical and emotional symptoms of stress that you are likely to manifest. This will help you to understand which systems you will need to learn to control to minimize the impact of change on your work and lifestyle. Remember these physical and emotional reactions are very primitive and all healthy people have these responses built in for survival. Awareness of these patterns and your particular way of responding can give you some control over when you react and how you respond to change.

When you examine the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (in chapter one) note that positive, even enjoyable, experiences can be rated as stress producers. Any adaptation, be it positive or negative, requires your habits or lifestyle to change and this can upset your primitive response mechanisms driving them into a stress response that may rob you of health or efficiency. As examples; a new job, a change in work responsibilities, an addition to your family, or even change in your residence may all be viewed as very positive and yet these may prove stressful as you adapt to these new developments.



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Since you cannot avoid the stress of change and you do not want isolate yourself from positive change, you must learn to control the way you respond to these new situations. Later in this chapter, there will be simple reminders of strategies about relaxation, diet, and exercises that you can adopt to minimize the impact of change. These are brief outlines from other chapters in this book that you may want to study.

## **Change and the Organization**

After your personal assessment process, you need to become more aware of the actual process of change. In the training and consulting work I have done, it has become increasingly apparent that before you can construct a change management system that will work to enhance productivity through change, you must first develop and understand how you and the people around you will respond to the changes that are imposed on you. There are four stages of change that have been commonly identified: Denial, Resistance, Exploration-Emerging, and Commitment.

Remember, with the stages of Denial, Resistance, and Emerging you or your organization may be subjected to a devastating reduction of productivity. Regardless of whether you are in manufacturing, customer service, or research and development; productivity, efficiency, creativity, communication, team work, and certainly "focus" can be impaired if not brought to a resounding halt as a response to change within your life or your organization's operation. Many organizations are in such denial about these negative effects that they stick their heads in the sand as a response and then wonder why key personnel jump ship to avoid the clear danger that this denial brings to future developments.

In the first stage, Denial, the common responses to changes are to pretend that things will just go on and be the same. Assumptions that it will just "go away" or be over soon can turn into apathy or numbness. "Quick fix" motivational programs usually help (if they help at all) only for a brief period. Managers want the problems to go away, but unless they are addressed in a pro-active way, the process can take too long and slow the whole process of change. The best managers will continue to communicate about the change and what will happen. Suggestions of successful actions can be offered and then allow time for these to sink in. Then follow-up with a planning session that will put the preparations for change into action.

The second stage is resistance. Symptoms of this stage surface in many negative forms. Increased anger or disagreements or perhaps worse a withdrawal from the team can occur. People can lose sleep. Workers may feel that they are treated unfairly, having given their best and not be sure that they will survive the coming changes. Self-doubt, anxiety, depression, frustration and fear often increase. Productivity goes way down as the team flounders. Personnel complain and begin to work on their resumes. Sickness, accidents, missed work can often increase. In a company with poor communication



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and weak management, this may not be addressed in a direct way. People need to come together and communicate not to be isolated with their fears and angers. Each person must be made to feel a part of the eventual change and know their role in the successful outcomes of change. Managers should exercise good listening and then acknowledge the feelings expressed. Supportive, encouraging, and empathetic responses by supervisors is a very successful strategy in this phase. Be warned, that as a supervisor/manager, it does not serve the organization by slowing the change process by trying to talk people out of feelings or by telling them to "change" or "pull together." People need to vent their fear and frustration without judgments made against them. Social activities like picnics, luncheons, awards can help to enhance communication and community. Even rituals of letting go of the past and the older, familiar ways must be acknowledged and released to make way for the new programs. A healthy acknowledgment that you are all in the process of change together and that there are normal fears and discomforts as a response to these developments.

Exploration/Emerging is the next phase that follows resistance. It is positive because the energy in an organization can begin to flow again. The difficulties are with this released energy there is often chaos and uncertainty. People suffer from frustration, confusion, too many new ideas, too much to do, over preparation and loss of the ability to focus. For certain people who need structure to function well, there is little or none because the change has removed the foundations of older styles of work. Creative energy is needed to capitalize on the future developments. New teams can begin to form with powerful bonds forged by common confusion and unclear focus. As a new form begins to emerge managers must focus on priorities, follow up on projects, provide needed training, set short term goals, and conduct brainstorming, visionary, and planning sessions.

This will help to lead to the final stage of Commitment. This can be seen as the positive developments of teamwork, satisfaction, and clear focus take place. Teams are now ready to refocus on a plan by recreating their mission statement and then building their action plans to reach their goals. Adaptation takes place and new ways to work together develop. New roles are established. Successful team members will identify with the new set of goals and become more clear on how to reach these goals. A good manager will now concentrate on team building and validate/reward those who are responding to the changes in positive ways.

## **Expediting Change Management within an Organization**

To expedite the change process gracefully the skillful manager will be meticulous about good communication throughout this process. When people are uncertain about the changes they are experiencing, poor communication allows fears to grow and sends the wrong message. Support and full, honest disclosure is important and can speed the change process. If you are managing or supervising a team of people, you have the opportunity to develop your talents and skills of communication.



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Communication training should be an ongoing process. New personnel or projects create continued challenges to the process of good communication. The following suggestions are very brief and do offer the experiential techniques that are required for older, less effective patterns to be modified. If you are in a position of leading your organization, do not neglect this most important interpersonal discipline.

Good communication begins with receiving and not transmitting. Most problems with communication, be they work related or from personal relationships, come from the inability of one or more of the people involved to engage in the process of listening. A distracting thought or agenda can keep people from focusing on what is being said in the interaction. If you are thinking of your answer/response then you are distracted from the present communication. Good listening is difficult, especially when there are tough emotional issues like survival in the communication. To be an effective listener, you need to do more than hear the words, you need to be aware of all the non-verbal messages that are included. Body language such as facial expressions, shoulders/arms, voice tones and loudness, eye contact, even rate of respiration can tell you a great deal in a communication.

People need to be acknowledged and to be appreciated. You must listen and then respond to what has been communicated with an empathetic response that indicates your sincere caring for the received message. This is not easy. However, the communication can be tangled and the process of change slowed or even stopped by poor listening. Especially when there is a lack of an appropriate acknowledgment for what information was transmitted. This breakdown in rapport between members of the communication causes retreats into resistance.

## **Tips for good listening:**

- Reduce environmental distracts and interruptions
- Pay attention with your whole body
- Make eye contact
- Show interest
- Ask Open-ended questions (that encourage discussion of feelings)
- Listen to the feelings behind the message
- Confirm and clarify what you have heard (Restate the main point if you are unclear).

The best communication is often done face to face in an honest and open manner. Communicating the truth and describing how you truly feel can create trust and empathy for the group involved in the change process. Caution should be taken not to fall into the trap of negative gossip or dwelling on the negativity anymore than necessary. Hint: after releasing frustrations then look for the "glass half full" rather than "half empty."



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Clear Communication is most appropriate. In the change management process a supervisor will need to talk to the team or an individual in a face to face meeting. The communication to be complete and clear would include: discussion of the situation (the change to occur), your feelings about this change, what effect the change will have (on you, the group/team, and on the project), and finally, what you want as an outcome. Then you check-in with your partner(s) to assure that your thoughts/feelings were transmitted in a beneficial way.

## **Dealing with Resistance**

Even when communication has been clear, emotions such as anger and fear may still create resistance to change. This is the hardest part supervising a group going through change. Awareness is the first step. Resistance can come from insecurity, threats to feelings of competence, comfort with old systems, and fear of learning new systems. Individuals may manifest resistance through: complaining, errors, withdrawal/apathy/absence, rigidity, or overt anger. A larger organization may see signs of resistance in increased: accidents, worker's compensation claims, absenteeism, sabotage, health care claims, or reduced productivity.

Managers must realize that even though resistance is not easy, it is a sign that people and the organization is going through the change process and not stuck in denial (which can be more comfortable for managers.) Certain individuals may need more support than others with more frequent communication and mechanisms for releasing resentments and guilt. The organization may benefit from appropriate rituals to release the old systems or beliefs as part of the process of moving on to the new systems. Honoring the outgoing systems by communicating the good-byes and associated feelings loss will demonstrate support from the organization and help begin to build a foundation to move on to exploration and commitment to the new changes.

After the releasing of the old systems, the process of embracing the new can begin. For an individual or team, the key to success will be a clear acknowledgment of the purpose of the change and the need to get new goals in place and planning started. This may involve honoring the motivation that drives individuals and the teams they work within. Developing a positive connection between the motivation and new direction will enhance the rate of success. This process of developing the "Buy-in" by participants can be an ignored but potentially important ingredient. If people do not see their place in the future change or understand why they should participate resistance and sabotage can slow the change process.