

The Dynamics of Change

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Change is Difficult

We automatically avoid making changes because it's a very difficult process: it's almost impossible to alter any single item in our personal or professional lives without affecting everything else around them. Sometimes we're just not ready to tackle something so far-reaching.

In addition, we know we'll experience guilt on two levels: guilt because we want to resist change, and guilt because we don't find it as easy as everyone says, especially when they keep telling us that "Change isn't really so hard; you just have to accept it and do it!"

For years, we've been talking about the ripple effect of small changes in ecosystems. Change has the same way of affecting the patterns and systems we set up in our own lives. Alter a morning ritual, the way we fold our arms, or where we hang clothes in a closet, and we find ourselves making other adjustments. Change jobs, neighborhoods or family size and it could take weeks, months, sometimes even years to adjust. And sometimes we never do.

Imagine the impact of change on an organization when new policies and procedures are introduced, or a team is reorganized, or downsizing occurs, or a new computer system is installed. Whether an organization has few employees or many, even the smallest deviation from the norm can cause tremendous anxiety and resistance, because people are concerned about the ramifications of the change and its ultimate effect - on them and on everything they know.

The fact is that life is nothing but constant change, and unfortunately, it's never going to stop for any of us. Whether it's change in the economy, competition for market share, a new process, a new boss, a new team, or a new email system, change is inevitable. To adjust, priorities of the workday are reorganized. New information has to be assimilated. Familiarity and predictably (i.e. security) is strained. It is no wonder that during times of change, productivity diminishes, performance lags, and ill health and stress increase.

Here are some of the most common reasons why change is so difficult for all of us. If you know about them, understand them, and talk about them, at least you'll share your feelings with others and they'll feel a little more normal. They are also wonderful conferences topics.

Loss of The Familiar

Even though we try reducing anxiety by listing (and re-listing!) all the benefits of a new situation, in the end it may still be unsettling because with every gain there is a loss. Even giving up an unhappy or unproductive situation and substituting a "better" scenario usually has some disadvantages.

In the case of a team reorganization, for instance, there were no doubt excellent reasons for reforming the team, but at least with the old one, the members knew each other, they'd already been through the difficult "storming, forming, and norming" stages, and they had finally figured out who could do what. Now, with new members and a new mandate, each of them had to give up a feeling of expertise or comfortable working relationships and start over.

Even if change is needed and positive, familiarity and predictability will be lost. "But we've always done it that way!" means "We finally got it down! I can't believe we have to change it now!" The fact that a new direction may be appealing doesn't mean that we won't miss the old one.

Loss of Control

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 that ability, and control becomes a real issue.

When we are out of control, we have a tendency to become more controlling, hang on to the familiar, dig in our heels, and insist on maintaining the status quo.

Sometimes we even sabotage our own progress or the progress of others so we don't have to face change and the unknown.

Fear of the Unknown

Whether change is positive or negative, for the better or for the worse, the result is the same. Both create a new situation which is certainly unfamiliar, and possibly scary. And both lead to a fear of the unknown, which leads to stress. We convince

ourselves that we can avoid all this by resisting change or stopping it from happening.

Anxiety About the Future

Anxiety is not really about the present because we know what's happening at the moment. Anxiety is about the future, and it invokes the past. We remember similar situations that didn't work out, or what we went through the last time a change occurred. But then we wonder if we'll learn the new procedure, fit in with the new team, still be on board after the downsizing, or figure out the new networking system.

Anxiety is heightened because we can't predict the answers to these questions, and it's not unusual to make up an answer - often one that further increases our anxiety - just so we can "be ready for anything."

Change automatically vaults us into the future - a place fraught with unanswered questions, unknown possibilities, and uncertain results.

So what do we do?

1. It is essential to recognize that concern, anxiety, resistance, and stress are normal reactions to change. We do not need to add judgment to an already tense situation. If our self-esteem is already strained by having to learn a new protocol, it certainly will not be enhanced by berating ourselves or others for not accommodating the changes. Accept how we and others feel.
2. While enumerating the gains and positive aspects of change, address the losses, too. What are we giving up? What will we miss? What comfort do we gain by keeping the old policies and processes? Don't be afraid to discuss the losses and to find some way to work through them.
3. Learn what has to be done and make a reasonable plan for accommodating the changes. The plan must recognize that everyone will have his/her own way of getting the same things done, and that however they do it is OK because it's comfortable for them. Respect personal style and pace, and to the extent it's possible, take them into account. When people believe their styles will be tolerated, the pressure reduces and they can often make transitions more quickly.

4. Support one another. Those who are able to make changes more quickly can either be non-judgmental and help those who need more time, or they can be intolerant. 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 and shared, you're that much farther ahead. It's rare that we can predict everything, so there will be surprises. If they're seen as normal, we're 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 talk about and a sharing of concerns because it normalizes reactions, lessens isolation, and humanizes the change process.



Change

It's hard to make changes, because it's almost impossible to alter any single thing in our

personal or professional lives without affecting everything around it.

Whether an organization has few employees or many, even the smallest deviation from the norm can cause tremendous anxiety and resistance, because people are concerned about the ramifications of the change and its ultimate effect.

Loss of the familiar, loss of control, fear of the unknown, and anxiety about the future are the common reasons why change has such an impact on us.

It is essential to recognize that concern, anxiety, resistance, and stress are normal reactions to change.

Respect for our own pace and that of others while making changes, lowers anxiety, reduces pressure, and opens up new avenues for dialogue that are helpful and supportive rather than forceful and demanding.