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# **The Challenge of Change**

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# The Challenge of Change

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It seems as though the only constant in our lives today is change. Of course, we know that change is inevitable, yet many of us have a difficult time dealing with it even when we know it's a good thing.

In today's organizations, both public and private sectors, change is the rule rather than the exception. Downsizing, new technology, budget cuts, new laws and regulations, and a diverse workforce are creating more pressures and placing more demands on employees at all levels to manage and deal with the challenge of change.

As an everyday, ongoing occurrence, change can be exhilarating or frightening. It's all a matter of how you approach it. Although there is no "easy way" to deal

with it, the following tips and techniques will help you and those you manage navigate successfully through the murky and often turbulent waters of change.

## Manager's Role as a Change Leader

As a leader in your organization, you are the key to change. Your attitude and the way you approach change are critical. *How* managers implement change is the determining factor in the more successful transitions and transformations.

In a sea of uncertainty, managers themselves can display either positive or negative behaviors (sometimes even both). Unproductive behaviors fall into the categories of hide (pretend it will go away), wait and see (could be another passing fad), or blame (senior management is creating this chaos and there is nothing I can do about it). On the other hand, productive behaviors involve (1) helping your employees deal with change and (2) acting as a change agent within your organization.

As a change agent, you are often expected to facilitate a specific change easily and effectively with a minimum of disruption and with maximum support from the group. So, how do you do that? Before you can be successful at leading change or helping others deal with change, you first need to deal with change yourself.

## Dealing With Change Yourself

Start by asking yourself how you feel about the change. Be honest. It's okay to have negative feelings. Recognize them and find ways to overcome them.

### Recognize your own resistance to change

Recognize that many people (perhaps even yourself) are resistant to change, even when the change is positive. In general, people resist change for a number of reasons:

- Fear of the unknown. Specifically, people fear losing their jobs, status, business contacts, perks, or favorable working conditions.
- The way the change is introduced. Often the change is announced bluntly and abruptly, accompanied by few details or specifics. It may appear that no one, from the lowest to the highest in the organization, has any idea what may happen next. Many people (perhaps yourself included), however, believe that senior management has information but is withholding it on purpose.
- Don't understand the reasons for the change. People want and need to know why a change is taking place. Is there a real reason or just some whim of someone in power?
- Think the change requires too much effort, responsibility, or work. For example, in some employees' minds, technology changes translate into fewer people which means "more work for me with no more pay."

- Have negative feelings about the organization, the person introducing the change, or have been negatively influenced by their peers. Negativity breeds negativity – an obstacle you will need to overcome.

If you understand the reasons for resistance (especially your own), you can take measures to greatly minimize it. The key to handling resistance is to have a clear strategy for implementing change.

### **Seek out information to better understand the change.**

The more informed you are about any situation, the less scary it is. Ask questions about what the change involves, how it came about, what you and others can expect, and what exactly is expected of you.

### **Look for ways you can benefit from the change.**

Whatever the change is, begin to view it not as a threat but as an opportunity. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How will I benefit from this change?
- How will the organization benefit?
- How will the employees benefit?

By identifying the benefits of the change you will begin to develop a more positive mindset.

### **Seek out others for support.**

It's a pretty good guess that you are not the only one in your peer group who is uncomfortable with the change situation. It's helpful to seek out others with whom you can talk about your feelings surrounding the change. However, don't spend time complaining about it and focusing on the negative aspects of the change. Rather use your support network to openly acknowledge your concerns, reservations, challenges, and yes – even fears – and then discuss ways to deal with these reactions and emotions in a constructive, positive manner.

**Conduct frequent “reality checks” by assessing your strengths, weaknesses, and needs.**

Draw on your skills, experience, and resources to build and strengthen your resilience so that you can bounce back in times of challenge and adversity.

**Practice healthy, life-style behaviors such as eating right, exercising, and getting enough sleep.**

It’s important to keep yourself in shape mentally and physically so that you have the stamina and resilience to handle whatever challenges the impending change may present. When you are exhausted, feeling overwhelmed, and in poor physical condition, you simply do not have the stamina to cope.

## **Helping Others Deal With Change**

Once you have dealt with your own reaction to change and have either embraced the change or at least accepted your role as a change leader, you are ready to help others.

### **Strategy for Introducing Change**

When introducing change to an individual (or group), start by empathizing. Try to put yourself in the other person’s shoes. Imagine how he or she must feel. Understand that it is natural for people to experience negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, confusion, frustration, resentment, or bitterness.

Think about how the individual or group members will respond to the change. Create an empathy chart to help you understand and deal with people’s reactions to change. Across the top, write down the categories of possible reactions such as resent, resist, neutral, accept, welcome, and don’t know. Down the side, list all the people who are likely to be affected by the change, then check how you think they will react. This exercise will help you determine *how* you are going to introduce the change and how quickly to implement it. Keep in mind that people are at different

levels of readiness for change. The more resentment and resistance you anticipate, the more carefully and slowly you should proceed; however, the sooner you announce that change is coming, the better. The longer the lead time, the less the shock, and the easier the emotional and intellectual adjustment.

A successful change initiative depends on effective communication. Gather as much information as you can about the change and be ready to share it. Tell people what is going on and why. People don't like being left in the dark. If they don't have information, they will fill the void themselves. Lack of information tends to fuel the rumor mill, causing more problems and resistance.

Regardless of whether the change is large or small, establish a climate that invites participation. Ask for comments and questions from the people affected by the change. Anticipate questions and plan your response.

In both your plans and announcements, be sure to include training. People want to do a good job, so prevent the fear of failure by promising and conducting supportive training. This is particularly important when introducing technological changes. When planning or designing the training, keep in mind that people have different learning styles and are at various levels of comfort and experience.

Recognize and accept the fact that productivity will decrease during periods of change. So, be patient, knowing that things really will get better over time. Don't expect major readjustment overnight. Plan for a step-wise change, fast enough to keep the energy up but slow enough so each step can be carried out smoothly.

### **Introducing Change to Others**

Let's take a look at the actual process of presenting change to an individual or a group.

- Give the background and explain why the change is necessary. Give people as much information as possible and the sooner, the better. Try to tie the change into the big picture. For example, on an organizational level, if you are going through a downsizing, explain what prompted this action and when the employees can expect to see actual changes take place.

- Explain how the change will affect the employee or employees. And be honest about it. Be enthusiastic and positive, but deal openly and frankly with the negative aspects. While you certainly do not want to add to their anxiety, you do not want to mislead them either.
- It's important to empathize and stress the benefits to them. For example, in a reorganization, employees can benefit from new opportunities to learn new or different skills, grow professionally, and maybe even open up advancement opportunities that did not exist before. However, be careful not to make false promises. Tell them that many decisions will have to be made along the way, including staffing needs. The possibility exists that some people might be reassigned to another areas. Others might find their position eliminated.
- After you have presented the change, solicit questions by asking, "What questions do you have?" Listen and respond openly. Take whatever time is necessary to fully communicate and respond to their questions and concerns. If you don't know the answer, say so. Give people as much information as you can. In some cases, you may have information but cannot share it. If that's the case, tell them that you are not at liberty to share certain information at this point, but you promise to do so as soon as you are given the green light. Trust is a big factor here.
- Ask people for help in making the change work. Actively seek their input, suggestions, and problems they may have or anticipate. It's important to get their buy-in. By asking, discussing, accepting, and group problem solving, not only will people buy into the change, they will improve on it and make it more workable.
- Allow time to vent resistance. Sometimes people just need to express their feelings of anger, disappointment, fear, or anxiety without any response from the boss. Letting them blow off steam in a group planning session or even one-on-one first can clear the air for rational thought.

There is no doubt about it. Change is scary. How you handle change personally and how you present it to others will largely determine the success or failure of the change initiative. Change produces both challenges and choices. You can become part of this exciting and enormously challenging change effort or you can sit on the sidelines dreaming of the past and mourning what was. The choice is yours.

### **Checklist for Helping Others Deal With Change**

*Use the following checklist to guide you in helping others deal with change.*

- Think about how different people will react to and be affected by the change and try to put yourself in their shoes.
- Explain the reason(s) for the change as fully as you can.
- Communicate honestly how the change will affect the people involved.
- Involve others in the change by asking for input including problems it creates, benefits, and ways to implement the change.
- Plan how you are going to introduce change to others.
- Present the change positively by stressing the personal benefits and opportunities.
- Give people an opportunity to express their feelings regarding the change.
- Help people through the change by providing information, training, and support.
- Ask the people for their help and commitment in managing the change successfully.
- Recognize and reward those who support the change through their efforts, advice, and input.

## About the Author

*Karen Lawson, PhD, CSP, is an international consultant, executive coach, speaker, and author. She has built a successful organization and management development consulting firm working with Fortune 500 companies as well as small businesses. Dr. Lawson specializes in cultivating outstanding leaders who enable their organizations to outperform the competition. For a complete list of her products and services, contact Lawson Consulting Group, Inc. at 215-368-9465 or at [www.LawsonCG.com](http://www.LawsonCG.com).*

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