

Change agent or change victim?

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For many, the current economic situation understandably focuses anxious attention on the looming possibility of intense and unwelcome change to working and personal lives. However, why is it that even in less volatile times, when most organisational change projects don't impact upon individuals to the same extent, those proposals can still be met with high levels of hostility?



Providing an insight into the principles of Change Management, Alison Maxwell of the andpartnership considers how organisations can make change work positively for them so that not only can proposals be driven through as smoothly and painlessly as possible, but also the business emerges the stronger for it.

Contrary to myth people can cope with change. Whether it is taking on a new role or changing a car, people seem to handle change pretty well and even go to lengths to seek it out.



Choosing change

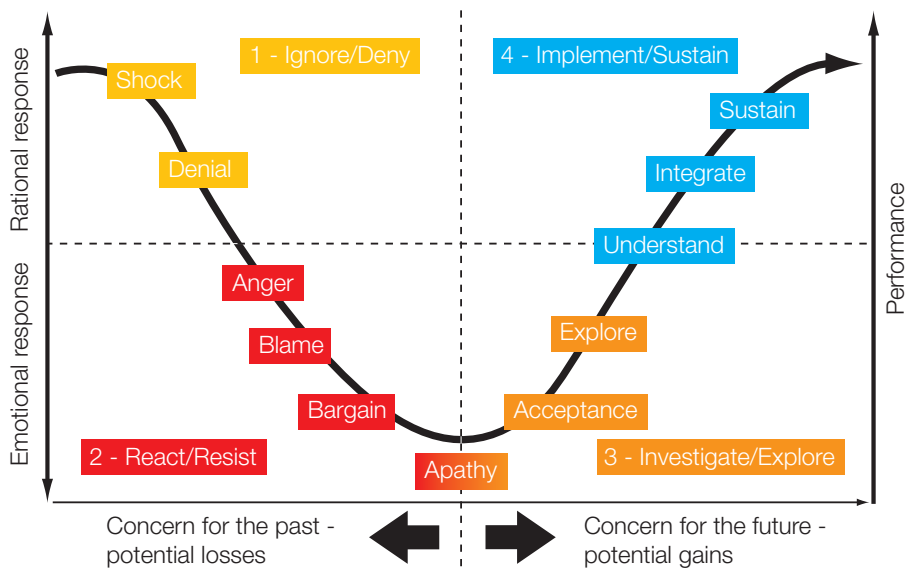
So why do the very same people seem to struggle to accept workplace change and have to be led kicking and screaming through it? The key lies in whether “change” is perceived as chosen or imposed – the simple fact is that when we feel we have choice and control we are far more likely to approach change resourcefully and positively.

Obviously choosing change is much easier in our personal rather than work lives. In organisational life it is often initiated by other people, where those initiating change are inclined to see it as timely and necessary, solving problems to move the organisation forward. However those on the receiving end are more likely to see change as arbitrary, threatening and disruptive. In such a climate it becomes extremely difficult to implement any change, irrespective of its merits. It is therefore essential for all concerned to understand something about the underlying dynamics of change and how people can both help themselves and others through it.

“Whilst change may not be optional for organisations, it is optional for individuals - and therein lies both the problem and the solution to successful change”

The cycle of change

Research shows that people react to imposed change in predictable ways, following a four stage behaviour pattern:



Phase 1 – Ignore and deny

Imagine for a moment a manager standing up in a meeting to announce a restructure, a relocation, downsizing, etc. While the manager uses very rational and logical argument to justify the proposal, it is as if these arguments are falling on deaf ears.

This is because people have entered the first phase of change; “ignore and deny”. Typically the announcement comes as something of a shock or surprise which people struggle to understand, let alone accept. It is therefore easier for people to

pretend change isn't happening and hope it will go away. However, the manager might be forgiven for thinking that the team is on board since he hasn't heard any objections and be shocked to find everyone carrying on as if the announcement hadn't been made.

What the manager does now is critical. It would be tempting to adopt a “shout louder” approach, hitting people over the head to acknowledge and accept the proposal. However the prudent leader knows that it just hasn't sunk in yet and people need time to absorb the message.

How to help:

- Give information and visible support
- Provide factual information, clearly, honestly, compassionately and consistently
- Gentle repetition of the core message – avoid mixed messages
- Link the change to business drivers



Phase 2 – React and resist

After a period of time things will move on and individuals become more likely to voice their objections and concerns, often very emotionally. In this second phase; react and resist, a wider variety of emotions such as anxiety, confusion, anger and blame will be displayed.

Underlying these reactions is a very real fear of what losses the change might represent e.g. job security, familiarity, relationships, etc. These may be real or imaginary and it is not unusual for fears to become magnified out of all proportion.

This can be the most challenging phase for all concerned with people at their most anxious and managers most under pressure both to deliver the change, and maintain credibility with the team. Performance and productivity typically dips during this phase and there is often pressure to push the

change through. However this runs the risk of unintentionally intensifying resistance and deepening negative reactions.

Tempting as it might be to downplay the potential impact of the change, an empathetic approach which acknowledges individuals' fears and concerns is essential. Telling people that they need to "get over it" will only intensify their reaction and prolong the time they spend in this phase. Understanding how to handle resistance and negative reactions is therefore a vital skill in the change manager's armoury.

How to help:

- Give support - listen to individual concerns, acknowledge their reactions
- Be consistent and honest
- Articulate what is not changing as well as what is
- Avoid arguing or ignoring

Phase 3 – Investigate and explore

The shift to phase 3; the investigate and exploration phase, is signalled when the "fight" seems to go out of the situation. People start to show a grudging acceptance that the change will be happening, even if they still aren't committed to it.

Eventually there will be an upswing in energy and attitudes as individuals get more exposure to what the change will mean in practice and start to see its pros as well as cons. Be warned however that some individuals may swing back to phase 2, as they find out more about the practical implications for themselves.

A participatory management style is essential during this phase, focussing on how the change can be implemented and the individual's role in it. This simple strategy helps people to accept change, restoring a sense of personal control and choice,

bringing with it increased engagement and personal commitment. Pushing too hard at this stage only sends people spiralling back into the emotional territory of phase 2.

How to help:

- Give encouragement, create opportunities for people to explore new possibilities
- Make gains tangible, outline the pros and cons of the change
- Avoid pushing, rushing or punishing mistakes
- Don't over sell the change or misrepresent future options

"Change may be the only constant – but it doesn't mean people have to like it"



Phase 4 – Implement and sustain

The final phase involves all the practical work to make the proposal a reality. Once people have genuinely accepted the change, can see the benefits for themselves as individuals as well as the organisation, and know how to make it happen, change tends to happen rather than stalling.

The prudent leader avoids micro-managing at this stage, reinforcing individual action and initiative. However considerable persistence and resilience is required to make sure the change genuinely takes hold.

Tempting as it may be to move on to the next change project, it is important to make sure it is embedded and sustained in 'business as usual'.

How to help:

- Give reinforcement – support delivery of desired outcomes
- Support risk taking and innovation
- Reward effective performance and encourage communication
- Avoid micro-managing, controlling choice or limiting participation.



Using the cycle positively For the individual

Whilst it is easy to see the cycle as a neat linear process it is not experienced by everyone in an identical way. Many will move backwards as well as forwards and some may become stalled, particularly in the difficult second phase. Some individuals just take longer to move through the process than others. However knowledge of the cycle can help individuals understand the process they are going through. Key to moving forward is to focus on what can be controlled or influenced in the situation, rather than on what can't. This simple strategy helps individuals to regain a sense of personal control and choice, and avoids the trap of becoming a change "victim".

For the manager

It is important for the manager to remember that we cannot legislate or plan for how change will be experienced by others. However, leaders can make a huge difference to how it is accepted and ultimately implemented in their organisations. A knowledge of the cycle can help managers diagnose how best to help their people, as well as the strategies to avoid.

"We don't get to choose the changes that come into our lives, but we do get to choose how we respond"

In conclusion

We are all faced with constant change; some of which we control and embrace, some of which may be imposed and threatening. Our working lives are no exception and whilst we cannot individually control the economic climate nor necessarily the corporate decisions made to secure the organisation's survival, we can still find ways to remain proactive. Being better prepared to understand the dynamics of change, particularly the fears and uncertainties it brings, we are more likely to make a positive impact within our sphere of influence and thereby stand a better chance of securing our own future. After all, given the choice, most would rather be a change 'agent' than a change 'victim'.

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