

## Take Charge of Change

*Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself*  
*Tolstoy*

By  
Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

Mention the word “change,” and a large number of people will react with horror, anger, or angst. These people are members of a not so elite group of the chronically unraveled. The only change they like jingles in their pockets. In fact, you might be among them. But whether you are or not, chances are some of the members of this group report to you. Steadiness, predictability, and sameness define their areas of comfort. When they are faced with change, especially unplanned change, they can be seen running to the pharmacy where an entire aisle is stocked with aids for the change phobic. These people don’t want or need any of the excitement or new opportunities that may come with experimentation. Things are just fine the way they are, after all. However, the world is not a stagnant place, and stakeholders in the status quo are either experiencing stress, or change initiatives are failing due to a lack of commitment, insufficient training, or confusion about the rationale for change.

John Steinbeck said that “Change comes like a little wind that ruffles the curtains at dawn, and it comes like the stealthy perfume of wildflowers hidden in the grass.” Change may come to individuals like that, but in most organizations, the change is more like a tornado than a gentle wind. Demands of the marketplace, the accelerating pace of globalization, innovative technology, and new alliances—all have created needs for bosses to help their people respond quickly and repeatedly to change. Some people thrive on change; they have trouble when things become too predictable or mundane. Those individuals will need your ideas for developing and challenging their talent. However, this is for those bosses who have direct reports who are change averse or “change challenged.” This not so silent majority would prefer an IRS audit to any change in their software. To help them, therefore, you’ll need to understand how to manage change and its impact on people, skills that are among the most fundamental aspects of leadership.

Bridging the gap between what is happening and what is possible is what change management is all about, but to do this, bosses need to understand their own reactions to change and to have the tools for creating a safe environment for experimentation for those in the trenches. Even if you don't personally suffer from the stress of change, you'll need to avoid being a carrier. Companies will require champions of and agents for change who will plan the direction the organization will take, overcome resistance to it, give their direct reports the help they need, and implement the change initiatives. All will take courage and commitment.

### Understand Change

Centuries ago, a two-part, seemingly contradictory pictogram from the Chinese language indicated an understanding of why people resist change. The bottom part of the symbol meant "opportunity"; the top character meant "danger." To the ancient Chinese, apparently, change included part danger and part opportunity. This ancient symbol helps to explain why people have long resisted change or have become immobilized by it because. They have feared it will bring more danger than opportunity. The Chinese knew this centuries ago, and twenty-first century bosses realize it everyday. People don't really fear the change itself; they are frightened about the loss it might bring.

There is no one single way to understand and deal with change; however, researchers have given us some good information for understanding and predicting people's reactions to it. Change, or transition, involves *movement*, a process that occurs in a series of steps. Sometimes change is instantaneous, and the steps happen almost simultaneously. Certainly September 11<sup>th</sup> taught us that, but more often it occurs over time and involves a transition from one state to another. Knowing that change involves movement and process suggests that we can expect certain predictable things to occur with people during the change process.

### **Stage I: Awareness**

When change comes into our lives, we can react in one of two ways. We can react with denial and resistance, or we can have a sense of challenge and adapt to it. Similarly, when leading others, you can help them with their own reactions to change by managing your own reactions more successfully. Often you won't be a champion of the change. Circumstances or people above you in the organization will force the change on you and your people. You might be angry; you may be scared; you might even be immobilized. Whatever your initial emotions, you will need to put them aside to do the best thing to help your people with their own feelings.

This control over reactions occurs only when you better understand what is going on so that you can go through this stage with a sense of challenge instead of denial.

Stage I is the period of time when we become aware of the change. Sometimes the awareness is sudden and unexpected; other times it is predicted and more gradual. During Stage I employees will need for you to be a true change agent, which means you will need to motivate your direct reports to accept the change by, whenever possible, offering reassurances and support. Open and honest information is the surest way to reduce anxiety at any stage of the change process, but it is particularly crucial during the initial phase. Explaining timelines, processes, rationale, and anything else that is known will help to ease people through this difficult time. As much as possible, your direct reports will want you to let them know what to expect and to reassure them that, no matter what happens, things will be okay

### Coping Strategies for Step I

How can you help your direct reports through this stage? Obviously, if they react with a sense of adventure and opportunity, you won't have to do too much except listen to their ideas. However, if they respond with denial, you will need to be more involved. First, make sure you are communicating your acceptance of the change, even if this is somewhat forced and counterfeit in its early stages. Next, ask open-ended questions that will help people discover what they want to do:

- “What are some options for making this easier?”
- “What opportunities will we have now that we wouldn't have had before?”
- “How might you take an active role in this transition?”
- “What might you gain personally from this change?”

The length of time it takes most people to go through this stage will vary greatly. Some will breeze through in a matter of days, but more typically, people will need a few weeks to let the reality sink in. If people are mired here for more than two months, there may be significant issues at play that will require more help than a boss can give. In those rare cases, asking the direct report to get help from the Employee Assistance Plan or another clinical professional might be advisable. Winston Churchill offered some sage advice for people going through Stage I: “If you're going through hell, keep going.”

### **Stage II: Adjustment**

Usually by Stage II people are finally ready to accept that the change is not going away. This is the period during which people accept that the change is unavoidable, especially if they

want to stay employed, pay their mortgage, and get their kids' braces paid for. However, they will either build obstacles to resist the changes and reject personal responsibility, or they will cope and explore opportunities. Even if they have not skated through the first stage too well, once several months have passed, people start to live in harmony with their changed world. They will still need your help, however, to make wise decisions to reinvent their worlds, or they will be tempted to retreat from coping.

### Coping Strategies For Stage II

Adjusting to a new reality or a new set of realities requires the development of new skills or the honing of skills so they can be applied to a new set of circumstances. Specifically, your direct reports will need your help with problem solving, relationships, and flexibility, the same three skills that you will need for yourself to maintain altitude, airspeed, and ideas.

*Problem Solving* is the ability to deal directly with the difficult situations we face and to make positive changes to resolve them. Effective problem solving involves critical thinking, a global perspective, strategic planning, and the ability to anticipate consequences. When you eagerly probe for understanding, go beyond the obvious, and prioritize effectively, you will help your direct reports see the future as open and malleable. Together you will be able to paint a credible picture of opportunities and possibilities and to communicate your enthusiasm for making them happen. Here are some ways you can help others cope with change by improving their problem solving abilities:

- Encourage people to solve problems as soon as they are aware of them.
- Ask your direct reports to separate problems so that they are manageable. Put each in one sentence by saying, "The problem is...."
- Separate emotions from the problem. Decide *what* is right, not *who* is right.
- Help people determine their desired outcome. Start with the end in mind.
- Brainstorm. List a variety of creative and practical solutions.
- Don't let them get trapped into thinking that there is only *one* solution to any problem. See options as having pros and cons rather than being "right" or "wrong."

Making *relationships* a priority, building time into our lives for the people who are important to us, laughing together, and having fun with each other all create interactions that are characterized by joy and fun. You can't force these kinds of things, however. You can only create an environment in which they are allowed to flourish. During times of change, the wise

boss does well to realize that people will need to spend more time building a sense of connection to people both at home and at work.

*Flexibility* is the degree of organization in our lives and the extent to which we feel comfortable with unstructured and unpredictable situations. Being open to a variety of creative and imaginative alternatives allows us to avoid getting trapped into thinking there is only one resolution. When you encourage your direct reports to avoid rigidity in their thinking, to experiment with innovation, and to seek the input of others, they can become more open to new ways of solving problems.

Once you help people quit fighting the currents and learn to flow with them, they can approach decision making with new dexterity and energy. No one can control change, yet if we're not careful, it will control us. When people are forced to adjust to new, uninvited changes, feeling out of control is a common, normal response.

### **Stage III: Moving Forward**

Stage III is the stage during which most people are truly ready to identify with new goals and clearly focus on how to reach them. They have experienced the transformation of transition and are ready to commit. Reaching this stage is not automatic, however. Sometimes people get stuck in a previous stage, and the change will not be successful for them.

#### Strategies for Stage III:

Your primary responsibility during Stage III is to offer ongoing support. If you see regression, you will need to determine what is going on. Usually a regression in behavior is a sign that the person never really coped with the change. There might be an attempt at moving forward, but if you sense that there's no real progress, this might be an indication that the person needs more help. Weeks or even months of progress can be compromised if a person can't truly move on with the altered reality. Sometimes too many changes that come too close together can cause people to regress. At other times, changes in the personal lives of your direct reports can seemingly gang up on them. Whatever the cause, the boss' reaction is the same. Determine where they are and then offer them the guidance and support they need, provided they will let you. Even if you're the best boss in the world, you can't protect your people from unexpected events that rock their worlds. The best you can do is to develop the skills for helping them when this kind of change does occur, that and planning change every chance you get.

## Whenever Possible, Plan Change

One of the things that 9/11 taught companies is that you can't always plan for events that will impact the way you do business. Air travel suddenly became more difficult; industries that relied on travel unexpectedly suffered losses; and out of the blue, doing business in other countries had its own set of challenges. The fact that your passport photo is hideous is now the least of your worries. No one could have predicted these changes, but those companies that were experienced in planning change had the tools in place to respond quickly to the unpleasant surprises.

Organizational development and improvement depend on the ability to initiate, anticipate, and respond to change, something that most people in most companies are not particularly good at. Whether planned or unplanned, when change occurs, the leader is called upon to navigate the waters of uncertainty, an arduous but sometimes exciting venture. By constantly tying short-term actions to long-term goals, you can ensure that they balance the pressures of today with the needs of tomorrow. This does not happen automatically. The first step is to align the company's mission, vision, values, and goals with the activities of your direct reports. One of the most important things you can help them do is to think through the mission of the business, to ask the question, "What is our business and what should it be?" This leads to setting objectives, the development of strategies and plans, and the making of today's decisions for tomorrow's results. When you and your direct reports can see the entire business, make decisions, balance short and long-term objectives, and allocate resources to realize them, you will be the ones who determine the direction the company will take, and you will have taken an important step toward overcoming resistance.

## Manage Resistance

The simplest explanation for why people resist change is that they fear more danger, challenge, or annoyance than opportunity. Usually change involves loss, even if it's just the loss of predictability or familiarity. Change often creates emotional overload and chaos, two of the most potent ingredients in the recipe for resistance. Therefore, people frequently oppose change for the following reasons:

- They think it is unnecessary or are not confident it will work.
- They fear personal loss.

- They had no input into the decision to make the change.
- They perceive a loss of control
- They feel threatened and fear they won't be able to perform well in the new situation.
- They just like things the way they are.

Preparedness for resistance is the main requirement for successfully managing it. Bosses frequently focus their attention on the abstract process of the change instead of carefully listening to their direct reports about the practical problems that they will encounter in their altered worlds. One of the critical mistakes that bosses make in change initiatives is they seemingly overlook the fact that change usually requires some new behaviors, new ways of thinking and responding, and a new set of practices. Here are some ideas that can work as a protocol for companies that want to streamline the change process:

- Let people know what you're trying to do. Have an achievable goal in mind and clearly communicate it to everyone who will be affected. If lack of communication is the problem, the solution is simple. Through one-on-one discussions, memos, group presentations, or reports, disseminate the facts. If your relationships with your direct reports were characterized by mutual respect and credibility to start with, your willingness to be candid during change will go a long way in reducing resistance.
- As the boss, you'll need to buy in to the change. What if you don't? Fake it. If the change is going to happen, and there's nothing you can do about it, the biggest favor you can do your direct reports is to keep your concerns to yourself. Voice your reservations to your boss, the Board of Directors, your friends, your spouse, or your minister, but spare your direct reports. They need *your* help; you can't rely on them for theirs.
- Gather as much data as possible. Let the facts speak for themselves and then deliver this information to everyone whose life will be affected.
- Resisting a change that they played a role in creating is difficult for most people. Therefore, involve others early in the process, and if possible, use a committee or team to help with the implementation. Some problems can only be solved by those in the trenches. As Taoist sage Lao-tzu put it, "Learn from the people. Plan with the people...When the task is accomplished, the people all remark 'We have done it ourselves.'"
- Listen to feedback and consider concerns. There are no more frequent opportunities to use the GLAD Communication Method than during times of change. The

absolute last thing your direct reports need is a boss who in essence says, “Tell me what you need, and I’ll tell you how to get along without it.” People are likely to have subjective, illogical reactions to unwanted changes, so they will need you to listen empathically and helps them sort out what they need to do. Remember that it usually isn’t what you *say*. The best sermons are *lived*, not *preached*, and the most important words you say will be whispered, not shouted.

- Create a safe learning environment for experimenting with the new procedure. Only when you concentrate on confronting problems squarely and learning from failures can everyone focus on identifying and removing obstacles to everyone’s success, the bumps in your world. For learning to take place, candor is crucial and patience is key.
- When possible, measure outcomes and report progress. Even if people have initially defied the change, once they understand that the new conditions are helping the organization, they are more likely to accept that they stand to profit too. Whenever possible, reinforce the change by demonstrating the relationship between their behavior and organizational success. Peter Senge offered five characteristics of organizations that can align effective behaviors, learn from mistakes, and to succeed:
  1. Everyone agrees on a shared vision.
  2. People discard their old ways.
  3. People think of all organizational processes as parts of a system of interrelationships.
  4. People communicate without fear of criticism or punishment.
  5. People sublimate personal agendas in order to achieve the organization’s shared vision.

## Conclusion



Henry David Thoreau said, “Things do not change. We do.” When bosses don’t change, they endure the consequences of lost opportunities; when they don’t help their direct reports change, they suffer the penalties of lost people. Understanding change, planning the direction it will take, overcoming resistance, and implementing change initiatives are all part of you making the organization’s vision a reality, and each plays a role in you becoming the leader no one wants to leave, not even during adversity or transition. Successful bosses are the ones who can provide their direct reports with the insight, motivation, and opportunity to grow as they manage the process of change. Leaders do not just lead change, however. They must also influence the priorities of multiple stakeholders, align resources, and identify short and long-term consequences of failing to implement the new initiative.

Dr. Linda Henman helps CEOs and Boards of Directors set strategies, plan succession, and develop talent. She can be reached at [Linda@henmanperformancegroup.com](mailto:Linda@henmanperformancegroup.com).