

THE NATURE OF CHANGE & PERSONAL REACTIONS

We all know that change is part of life and brings both opportunities and challenges. Both people and organisations need to change to grow and prosper. When things change, either through planned change (e.g., organisational change) or unexpected news, it is natural for us as humans to experience an emotional reaction. Emotions make us take notice of important life events and help provide the energy for dealing with these events.

Change involves a transition from one state/situation to another, from what we find comfortable and predictable to the unknown and new. The actual change that occurs is an 'external' event, but transition is an 'internal' adjustment process. Organisational change can trigger multi-layered transitions – to new task roles, environments, culture, locations, work identity, relationships and futures possibilities. It's no wonder we need some time in the initial stages to absorb the news of change, its implications for us and how we can gain the most from the change.

Because we are all different, and experience change differently, we will also manage and cope with the transition differently. Some people may see the change as a solution, chance or opportunity, others as a threat, annoyance or frustration. Some take it in their stride and others resist. Our personal reactions will also depend on the nature of the change or news (i.e., scope of change, how long, who is involved, how much we know) and how well we feel we can cope with and manage the change or news.

Change can feel stressful and exciting

Change can lead to both a feeling of gain and a sense of loss (e.g., loss of the older ways, relationships etc.). For some people, the change means that they will have to make significant adjustments which can, to some, seem overwhelming at first. If we feel we do not have the skills, patience, time and/or energy to manage a change, we may experience stress reactions. Others can experience the change announcement as an energising period, promoting creativity, building relationships and improving methods and performance.

Change takes time and planning. While it's important to communicate a 'change vision' and rationale early, the finer details and outcomes are part of an unfolding process. This often means the initial news may not provide us with the full picture, and we seek to understand and know the facts and options so we can gain control and move forward. Our minds start thinking about the 'what ifs' and 'what should' before we have a full grasp of the news.

We also may not know how things will eventually turn out, and this causes uncertainty, which can itself feel stressful. Worry, stemming from uncertainty, can be managed.

While change does happen, and it can be difficult at times, we know that no matter what the situation, with the right attitude, support, planning and personal management skills, we can adjust and move on. We can also grow through change and strengthen relationships.

Common reactions to unexpected news or change include

- Shock, disbelief, surprise
- Sadness, a sense of loss
- Worry, anxiety, apprehension
- Confusion, uncertainty
- Frustration and anger
- Stress
- Excitement
- Energy or motivation
- Happiness

If negative reactions are not managed, they may lead to further effects, noticeable at home or at work, for example:

- Tiredness, poor sleep
- Tension, headaches
- Feeling ill, agitation, restlessness
- Memory, decision making or concentration difficulties
- Withdrawing from others
- Worrying about the future, about what will happen next, or about other work mates
- Getting out of step with routine work and life (e.g., not eating or exercising well, forgetting to relax, take time out, etc)
- Thinking negatively
- Diminished work focus and productivity

Staff/team members may:

- Talk more or talk less
- Find that morale becomes higher or lower (depending on the situation)
- Feel more connected or may feel more isolated

In times of significant change, these are seen as common reactions to uncommon situations. If you recognise some of these reactions in yourself, this does not mean that you are 'not coping' or 'have problems'. These feelings are valid and it is important to acknowledge and share them. The severity of reactions will depend on the severity and nature of the news.

While emotional reactions are part of moving forward through important events, if they persist for too long or are too intense, they can exhaust us and may reduce our capacity to fully engage in home and work life. We can get 'stuck' in worry or need more personal direction to get the best out of this change for ourselves.

You can manage negative feelings and maintain your health and resilience with support and effective strategies. Most people cope most of the time with most events. However sometimes we require the support of others to move on and to manage our reactions. Assistance is available through information and face to face or phone counselling provided by your organisation's EAP (Employee Assistance Programme).

Tips for Dealing with unexpected news, change, uncertainty

Accepting

- While change affects each of us personally, try not to take the change announcement personally
- Expect yourself to have some sort of reaction and be patient with yourself
- Accept the differences you see in others and be patient with them
- The reality is there are many things we can't change, however, we can change the way we think about and approach situations

Create a personal and positive focus

- Focus on facts and official communications
- Focus on your personal values and commitment to positive approaches
- Ask for information and be clear on what you do know
- Keep focus on your current work and what you can do now
- Remember past changes that you have successfully managed

Review versus worry

- Review the situation by asking yourself how it will impact on you practically, socially, vocationally (career), emotionally and for your identity (who you are)
- Use a good thinking technique by asking yourself the following questions:
 - What am I thinking or saying to myself about this?
 - Are my thoughts/attitudes about this situation helping me (making me feel better or focused on action)?
 - What can I reasonably expect? Are my concerns 100% likely? Am I jumping to conclusions?

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- Allow some restricted 'thinking/worry time' (e.g., 15mins) a few times a week. Write down your thoughts, fears, ideas and consider plans and contingencies (but don't go too far – you could spend unnecessary hours planning)
- Reduce worry time so your body can rest. Leave the thinking alone and try some relaxing, routine or fun activity to disengage your mind and give yourself a break
- Review your current skills, strengths and styles of working so that you can best prepare for change
- Know your purpose, individual and team goals, your vision
- Focus on your contributions, achievements, skills, strengths, goals and visions
- Look for the positive opportunities that may come from this change or news

Check if you're stuck in barriers to personal adaptation to change

- Stuck in stress, uncertainty and worries – 'what if'
- Stuck in frustration and negativity – 'this shouldn't have happened'
- Stuck in adapting – too fast; need training and/or support
- Stuck in old habits

Keep in balance

- Keep to your routine and look after yourself – including sticking with or starting good exercise, relaxation, diet and sleep behaviours
- Watch stimulants like caffeine, alcohol and cigarettes – increasing these can actually increase stress levels

Support options

- Seek support from peers, family, EAP or HR; talk with others and share your feelings
- Support each other and be positive about adjusting
- Encourage open and mindful discussion with workmates
- During times of change when frustration, misunderstandings and miscommunication can escalate, it is important to actively engage positive communication skills with others

Plan

- Plan for situations which are clearly issues for you or will be changing (short or long term), i.e., work on what is in your control
- Make short-term action plans until longer term plans can be formed
- Look for the positive opportunities that may come from change or news
- Look for the opportunities in change

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- Dare to be the optimist
- Make yourself a positive motto and keep coming back to it – e.g., “this too shall pass”, “one step at a time”

Give yourself and others a fair go

- Give yourself time to adapt and get comfortable with new ways
- Be open to mistakes and to learning from them
- Ask for assistance early
- Check and monitor how things are going
- Don't give up on change, people and the work in the heat of frustration – go and talk about it with a manager or a trusted colleague
- During times of change when frustration, misunderstandings and miscommunications can escalate, it is important to actively engage positive communication skills with others
- Remember to listen, ask, clarify and check, in a calm manner, when you feel unsure or frustrated

Be optimistic

- Tell others about the positives and the learning you've gained
- Help others to engage and lift them up with your own optimism
- Give feedback and praise where it's due
- Be patient with others who might be experiencing the change differently – you may not fully know what's going on in their work and home lives

As a team

- Share the team's achievements and strengths
- Discuss the possibilities and opportunities
- Remember that a lot of good stuff still stays the same
- Manage morale with team support and humour
- Keep up to date with fact, not rumour
- Understand that people react differently
- Encourage open and mindful discussion with workmates
- Encourage assertive communication in times of frustration and misunderstanding
- Focus on what you can change and can manage. Get involved – start problem solving and planning around the issues
- Accept or ask for support from others

Adapted from <http://www.assureprograms.com.au>