

Coping with Change at Work

BRITE TRAINING NEWSLETTER | BRITE@MEDNET.UCLA.EDU | WWW.FPG.MEDNET.UCLA.EDU/BRITE

Technical systems change overnight. A wire connected, a button pushed, and presto: old becomes new in a matter of hours! Human beings, however, require time to adjust to change, to reorient themselves mentally and psychologically. For many employees, change represents a transitional period marked by mental strain and emotional upheaval. If this is happening to you, take heart—work place transition, by definition, begins in confusion and ends in direction; be patient with the process.

Letting go of the old and familiar is rather like parting with a favorite pair of jeans—you know, the ones that feel more like a friend than an article of clothing. Eventually, new jeans become old jeans. Dealing with workplace transition is much the same: letting go of the past requires living and working in the present, doing your best, and believing that eventually, new systems and new ideas will become familiar and comfortable—just like your favorite pair of jeans.

Truth is, we cannot make change go away, especially in our professional lives—and we shouldn't want it to go away. An organization that doesn't change is unlikely to grow and survive. That goes for people as well. Once this truth is fully understood and accepted, you are less likely to be surprised or flustered when a change at work arises. Remember that while it is true that we may not have a choice about if things will change, one thing that we always have a choice about is how we choose to react to it.

Four Common Change Reactions

According to an Ottawa Business Journal article entitled *How Change Affects Teams*, there are four common, yet distinct, behavioral reactions to change in the workplace. Each one is outlined in the following numbered list:

- 1) **People Who Thrive on Change:** Direct, results-oriented people who embrace quick decisions and changes, challenge the status quo, and initiate change activity with an organization.
- 2) **People Who Aren't Bothered By Change:** Optimists whose enthusiasm and creative solutions to handling change keep others motivated during flux situations.
- 3) **People Who Resist Change and Need Time to Prepare:** Steady decision makers who don't like to be rushed and appear to "put up" with change.
- 4) **People Who Are Concerned with the Effects of Change:** Cautious, careful objective thinkers who seek to maintain high standards, regardless of changes going on around them.

Which of the above categories do you fall into when confronted with change? If you happen to fall into either the 3rd or 4th category above, there is action you can take to minimize your resistance, improve the way you handle change, and alleviate change-induced stress.

Recognizing Resistance

If you have identified yourself as being among those who automatically resist change—and you have lots of company—train yourself to be more mindful of your reactions. First you must recognize and acknowledge your resistance. Are you resisting change for a valid reason, or are you simply resisting because it is your nature to do so? Immediately resisting something new and different can cause you to miss the potential positive in the change.

Avoid Bitterness and Blame

One of the factors that keep us from accepting something new and different

is the very natural desire to blame someone for disrupting our comfortable lives. Perhaps we think we have been treated unfairly. When dealing with change, it is easy to feel bitter, to hold grudges, or to blame the boss or "the system" for failing us. But the more we hold tight to that bitterness, the harder it will be to accept that there is no going back to the comfort and predictability of the past. More importantly, focusing on how you've been wronged, takes precious time and energy away from actually dealing with the situation itself. Be aware of this type of unconscious thought behavior and choose to get beyond it. Look forward not backward.

Do Some Anchoring

When change appears to be happening all around you, it helps to find something stable that isn't going to change, no matter what. Perhaps it will be your commitment to always provide the best possible service for our patients by placing their best interests above all else. Or it could be your dedication to support the success of your team in any way that you can. These values should always be rock-solid; and if they are a part of who you are, then they won't disappear or transform just because change is going on around you. These immovables can serve as anchors to help us weather the storm of change. ▶

Five Reasons Why People Resist Change

1. They don't believe the change is necessary.
2. They don't believe the change will work.
3. They believe the old way is better and still works.
4. They don't trust the motives of the change agent.
5. The pain associated with changing is greater than the pain of remaining the same.

Key Tips For Coping With Change

Strive for Balance

Even when change is welcome and positive (e.g., getting a promotion) it can still be stressful. Strive for balance when it comes to change. Too much change at once, or even a moderate amount of change over a long period of time, can be a lot to handle. Too little change can leave you feeling stagnant and will prevent you from growing as a professional. Balance is the key.

Be Open and Flexible

Knowing that change is a part of our workplace lives and can happen at any time helps you to accept and adjust when it occurs. Most people are eager to settle into comfortable routines, but keep in mind that it is always possible that your current comfort zone could change. Be flexible and remind yourself that change is a normal part of a professional lifestyle.

Take Care of Your Health

Make a concerted effort to eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep. Make time for fun and relaxation in your life, and listen to your body when it's telling you to take a break. Do not underestimate the importance of these suggestions in terms of helping you to be more prepared to deal with the stress of change.

Keep The Situation in Perspective

If things are changing in your professional life, it's easy to feel like your entire world has been turned on its head. Remember that while the change may seem scary at the moment, it is only temporary. What seems uncomfortable now will eventually seem like second nature to you. Remind yourself to keep a clear head when looking at the change in order to keep the situation in perspective. Remember only a part of your life is changing, not your whole life.

Be Supportive

If you are a person that handles change well, take the time to offer something positive to someone who is struggling. A non-judgmental ear, a kind word, empathy, useful information, and encouragement can all go a long way in helping a colleague feel more comfortable with the change taking place.

Don't Lose Your Sense of Humor

Your ability to laugh and keep your spirits high will go a long way in easing stress and dealing with change. Although it may not always be easy, strive to find the humor in situations that you may have normally viewed as negative. Like the famous saying goes: "change the way you look at things, and the things that you look at will change."

Evaluate Yourself

When you find yourself faced with an unexpected change, take a moment to evaluate your emotional response. Ask yourself are you happy, sad, frustrated, resentful, threatened, excited, or indifferent? After you've determined what you're feeling, it can help to ask yourself some or all of the following questions:

- Am I overreacting or misinterpreting this situation?
- Is there another way to look at this?
- Is there an opportunity here?
- Would more information help me cope better with this change?

Reactions to Avoid

Sometimes workplace change can produce exaggerated reactions on the part of the people affected by the change. Some of these reactions can not only keep us stuck in a negative frame of mind, but it can also cause us to lose sight of the positives that change often brings. Some reactions to avoid when faced with change are:

- 🚫 **Turn the situation into a catastrophe:** "This is unbearable! I can't take this anymore!"
- 🚫 **Expect an unreasonable level of perfection from yourself:** "Oh man, now I can't make a mistake or I'll lose my job!"
- 🚫 **Lose perspective and become a victim of the change:** "This computer system is completely ruining my life!"
- 🚫 **Disengage from the change process by losing interest in your work:** "This is just a job to me now. I'm just here to survive each day and collect my paycheck every two weeks."
- 🚫 **Vow to get even with the organization for forcing this change on you:** "They are going to be sorry that they did this to me!"
- 🚫 **Incite fear and paranoia by starting baseless rumors:** "Hey, did you hear that everyone in our department is going to be fired by the end of the week?"