

## Human Reactions to Change – whether Agent or Target!

Depending where people are and what they have going on, their reaction to change can be fairly “ho hum” or be as extreme as anger and sabotage. Of course, depending on what the change is and how it affects them will be a contributor to their emotions. However, even when change is thrust upon us, we have control over our response and whilst we might see change as threatening and scary, change can also bring opportunities, improvements and personal reward.

It is also useful to recognise that change is sometimes beyond our control. If the change is necessary for the business to survive, however much we dislike it, there comes a point where we have to accept it – or invest energy in trying to fight something that is inevitable. That doesn't mean to say that we simply roll over and allow change to happen, but it does mean that we need to take time to understand it, explore the risks and consequences it brings, ask questions and be curious but most importantly bring an open mind and be prepared to investigate before slamming the door or arranging our own personal protest party! In today's world of business, change is constant. Whether driven by technology, customer demand, competitor activity, legislation, politics, the economy, even a quite unprecedented global pandemic that means change is not an option. The better able to we are to respond positively, to be prepared to hear, listen, understand, explore, investigate and consider, the better not only for the business but for our own mental health! By all means put energy into fighting something if you feel that is the right thing to do, but only once you have taken time to understand it and are clear that it is something that you cannot support. Choose your battles, change is too frequent!

Below are the more typical emotional reactions to change – whatever your role, whether Change Champion, Change Agent, Change Target or Change Sponsor, chances are you will experience these. However, how long you spend in each area, how quickly you move from one emotion to the next and whether you get “stuck” along the way, will be different for each individual. Take some time now to understand the emotional rollercoaster that change can be – especially if that change is forced, unplanned and fast!

| Stage     | What you might see                                                                                                                                                                                                   | What needs to happen                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ignorance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carrying on with the status quo</li> <li>• Oblivious to the need for change</li> <li>• Unaware of external factors</li> <li>• Happy in their “business as usual”</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear, planned communication</li> <li>• Information shared</li> <li>• Risks and consequences outlined</li> <li>• Plan of action shared</li> </ul>                                                                                                                         |
| Denial    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It’ll never happen!”</li> <li>• “They don’t mean it”</li> <li>• Ignore it, it’s not real</li> <li>• Not participating</li> </ul>                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the need for change</li> <li>• Break down into smaller steps</li> <li>• Help increase understanding</li> <li>• Ask for support</li> <li>• Continue with the narrative</li> </ul>                                                                                 |
| Anger     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to see anything positive about the change</li> <li>• Sharing negative views and perceptions</li> <li>• Being emotive</li> <li>• Being aggressive</li> </ul>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don’t take it personally!</li> <li>• Acknowledge</li> <li>• Empathise</li> <li>• Diffuse</li> <li>• Encourage questions</li> <li>• Create opportunity for expressing concern (with boundaries)</li> <li>• Hold one to one meetings to look at individual views</li> </ul> |
| Negotiate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laying out their expectations and preferences for change</li> </ul>                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only negotiate what is negotiable!</li> <li>• Check your level of authority to negotiate</li> <li>• Be open to negotiation, with limits and fall backs</li> <li>• Understand the longer term impact of agreeing concessions</li> </ul>                                    |

| Stage                     | What you might see                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | What needs to happen                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Withdrawal/<br>Depression | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People tend to go quiet</li> <li>• Might seem deflated, disinterested</li> <li>• Loss of enthusiasm and commitment to their job</li> <li>• Seeming “distant”</li> <li>• Feels let down</li> <li>• Starts to realise the change is real</li> <li>• Becomes thoughtful, reflective</li> <li>• Takes a back seat</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage dialogue and Crucial Conversations</li> <li>• Inform and communicate at all times</li> <li>• Help them see the way forward</li> <li>• Explain the value/risk</li> <li>• Actively seek people out</li> <li>• Move people on if this stage is long lasting and becomes toxic</li> </ul> |
| Exploring                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becomes more curious</li> <li>• Asks questions about how they fit</li> <li>• Participates more fully, shares information</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge progress</li> <li>• Encourage contribution and value of it</li> <li>• Present the positive points</li> <li>• Create opportunities for experimenting (safely)</li> <li>• Encourage support of others</li> </ul>                                                                      |
| Acceptance                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People are “getting on with it”</li> <li>• Offering support and encouragement to others</li> <li>• Engaging in learning and development opportunities willingly</li> <li>• Demonstrating confidence and competence</li> <li>• Moving forward</li> <li>• Progress happens</li> </ul>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise accomplishment and celebrate achievements</li> <li>• Understand their way of thinking and share with others</li> <li>• Get their help to bring others along</li> <li>• Share progress and reward success</li> <li>• Reflect on your learning</li> <li>• Continuous review</li> </ul>  |

Clues for each stage include:-

- I don't want the change and will do everything in my power to resist
- I don't believe it is going to happen anyway
- I feel like I am being pushed / this is wrong
- I am willing to explore but am still lacking confidence
- This is too hard
- I think I understand but I need support still
- Yep, I'm on it!

Whether Change Agent or Change Target, we will all experience emotions, regardless of our personal role or circumstances. Often the biggest challenge to change is not the change itself but the people and their fears, wants, emotions – take time to understand their (and your!) state if you want a successful outcome.