

Win the Challenge of Workplace Change

by
Jay Uhler

Change is traumatic. Even minor changes are upsetting. A friend told me that he gets a cold every time he moves from one location to another—even though he looks forward to the change.

The concepts in this article apply to many facets of change. For an individual it may be a new position or task within the company—a lesser one or even a better one. It may be moving to a different town because of a job change. It may be layoffs. For a company, it may be a different size or location, a new product line or a new direction.

Retirement is an enormous change for people and requires a major adjustment in their lives. You can apply the following information to any type of change, any transition.

The thoughts presented here are not only useful for individuals, they also apply to small businesses, corporations or any type of organization.

I have been assisting people and organizations to move constructively through change for the past forty years as a minister, a therapist, an administrator and consultant.

A company that I consulted with was having difficulty with employees. One person who had never been a problem before began to throw things around the office. He was a valuable employee whom they wanted to keep. When I assessed the situation, it was clear that the difficulties which he and other employees were experiencing were related to adjusting to the many changes that had occurred in the company. It had moved its location, doubled its number of employees, begun a new product line, and as a result shifted from seeming like "one big happy family" to a confusing corporate entity. Adding to the confusion were complicated lines of authority. People were reacting to the change and were upset by the conflicts that were left in its wake.

Another company I consulted with was having difficulty because the oldest member and founder was retiring. This caused a variety of emotional reactions, especially in the two younger partners. The retiring partner was a father figure to the others. His retirement uncovered "family" dynamics which existed in the organization.

It is important for executives and managers to be aware of how emotions impact employees. The chief executives who understand the dynamics of change and the natural human emotional response to it can develop strategies to help employees pass through transitions more easily than when emotions are ignored.

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The owner of a company called me because an employee had difficulties in his family that were distracting from his work. The owner encourage his employee to come for therapy, which included his family. The owner paid for the therapy for his employee. He said, "This is not charity. I know I will get my monies worth." He did!

The corporate leaders who fail to recognize emotions as relevant to workplace productivity will pay dearly. Those who fail to plan for the fallout of change, especially from layoffs will see productivity and profits deminish. The human toll of stress, sick days and illness will be enormous. The financial impact due to employee preoccupation, reduced productivity, health care costs, reduced quality and customer complaints about poor products and service as a result of poor motivation within the workforce will show itself in the bottom line. The companies that plan for and openly and realistically address the emotions of change will have happier, more productive employees and will prosper.

In order to take control of ourselves we must understand our emotions. The more we know what feelings are natural in a particular situation, the more comfortably we can manage them. The better we manage them, the less stressful it is to deal with all of life's experiences, including with change.

We often prefer to focus on the world outside ourselves rather than face the world within. People often focus only what is occurring on the outside because they don't know how to cope with the feelings inside.

This makes life difficult. If we are fighting against what is inside ourselves, as well as trying to manage life outside ourselves, we are surrounded. To fight against ourselves—our emotions—is exhausting and we are waging a battle on two fronts. That battle is difficult to win.

The more we understand and can deal with the emotions inside ourselves, the more energy we have to cope with difficulties that occur on the outside. To accept and deal with our feelings gives us flesibility and strength for life's transitions•for change.

The impact of the change described below will vary with each person and with the situation. An abrupt change is more difficult than one where there is time to prepare physically and emotionally for the transition. A person who is aware of and comfortable with their emotions can move throught transitions more quickly than a person who represses them.

Change has three phases. The first is denial or disbelief. Our body may shut down. When it does, we move more slowly. Our breathing is more shallow. We take big breaths with deep sighs. We feel tired and lose our appetite. We go numb emotionally.

I believe this is our body taking over to protect us from the full intensity of the pain, to buffer us from the trauma.

I refer to the second one as the "letting go" phase. In that phase we either deal with our emotions related to the change and move into the final phase or we stay glued to the

past carrying it around with us wherever we go. That can be an enormous burden and can lead to physical pain or illness.

The third phase occurs when we have finished phase two and become ready to live free from any emotional ties to our lost past. We are ready to go on with life without the important person, position, location or experience that we have lost and we are ready to fully invest ourselves in the new opportunities that present themselves.

Let me emphasize that these three phases overlap. We gradually progress through them. I have presented them as distinct for the purpose of clarity.

The remainder of this article will focus on phase two of the change process.

An important emotion related to change/transitions is **sadness**. It is connected to the loss. When coworkers leave or you leave, for whatever reason, there is the loss of their contribution to your life. When you are moved from one department to another, there is the loss of friends and familiar surroundings. People who have worked together feel the pain of loss, even though they remain within the same company. You may have a loss of self-esteem if your work was your source of self-worth and the new position seems less productive to you.

Retirement has many adjustments due to the loss of the work relationships, the loss of familiar activities that fill your life. Often there is the loss of a sense of satisfaction at helping others or feeling productive in your vocation.

It is common when there is a change, such as a move or retirement, to begin to withdraw your emotional investment in your job. It is a form of anticipatory grief which assists in the preparation to no longer be in the present environment.

The first step to managing **sadness related to loss** is to recognize that the pain of sadness is a natural human response to change. The next step is to talk about the losses with family members, coworkers, or friends. Tell them what you will miss and as you do, cry out the pain of the sadness. If it would be comforting and appropriate, have them hold you as you cry. If not, simply appreciate the presence of a supportive person.

Some workplaces discourage people from expressing their feelings. Healthy ones support it. A man in a company that served the military called me. He had a young officer in his office. He noticed that the young man seemed up tight. He asked him a few questions and, because he was a safe person, the young man began to cry. The kind questioner, a former client, called to have the young officer talk with me about setting up an appointment to assist him with the issues that were causing him pain. People appreciate that kind of support in their company.

Release your sadness as you talk about the good memories and what you are losing—and sob out the pain. Some people are taught that crying is "breaking down" or that they are weak if they cry. I believe that sobbing is **letting go**. The saying, "S/he broke down and cried" is unfortunate. The person is not breaking down. **They are washing the sadness out of their body so that their body won't break down**—so that they can be strong. Much physical illness is the result of holding in our emotions, especially pain.

Letting go brings with it wondrous relief as our sobs and tears wash away our pain. We have more energy to deal with external situations if we do not waste energy holding burdensome feelings inside.

It is unfortunate when a person who is experiencing loss must cry alone. For many people loneliness adds to their pain. It can be very healing for people to cry together. In an astute and supportive company, people are encouraged to share their sadness with safe coworkers or supervisors. It is understood that people are more creative and productive when they can release their sadness.

Frustration occurs with change. Frustration is a combination of **helplessness and anger**. With many changes there is a sense of helplessness that there is not a damn thing you can do about the situation. The anger often occurs due to the sense of helplessness.

When you feel helpless, it is important for you to look at your options. List your options, even ones you do not like, and select one. That creates momentum and often better ones appear. You are taking control, which reduces feelings of helplessness.

You can even feel helpless when there are two positive opportunities, but you can have only one. You may feel disappointment that you cannot have both, but you will experience relief when you make your choice.

Many people think of anger as violent behavior. Anger is only an emotion. It may range from mild irritation to rage. Often when people appear to be angry, they have fear, pain, or helplessness under what is perceived as anger. **It is crucial to make the distinction between an action and the emotion of anger.** Anger is not an action. Anger is an emotion. Once you are aware of anger, you can decide how to, or not to, express it.

Anger may be directed many places. It can be directed toward owners, managers, coworkers, suppliers, customers, consultants—anyone who happens to be around. We must accept our anger as a part of our human nature and then decide what to do with it. To direct it toward undeserving colleagues, friends or family members hurts them and hurts you if you lose their respect or the relationship. To release your anger in ways that benefit you and hurt no one else is most constructive.

Another emotion is guilt. The problem with **guilt** is that it **tells you lies about you**. It tells you that you are bad. If you believe guilt's message of judgment, which is anger toward yourself, you will experience the pain of self-rejection—the most painful of pains.

Guilt does not like ambiguity, so it goes looking for a peg upon which to hang itself. It selects a past event and says, "If only I would have done *that* differently." If your job was changed to less responsibility, guilt will tell you that you should have worked longer hours, or you shouldn't have told your boss that s/he looks like a giraffe, or that you should have told him/her what a good job s/he did leading the previous company project, etc. If you got a promotion, you might feel guilty that you got it and another deserving person did not. Guilt can take many deceptive forms.

In a company to which I consulted, some of the senior officers felt guilty that they hadn't taken steps to change the company's structure earlier, telling themselves that they

could have avoided financial complications if they had. The truth is that they had done their best, yet they felt guilty anyway.

When you are in a situation of change, you need to remind yourself that guilt is one of the feelings that you will experience. Then remind yourself that you did the best that you could with the circumstances that existed. Finally, remind yourself that you are a good, caring persons. Often those who try the hardest to do their best, experience the most guilt.

To avoid the pain of guilt, you must talk to yourself saying, "Oh, there you are guilt. I'm glad that I know you are there. It's natural for me to feel guilty about this. I know what a liar you are. I really try hard to do my best. I do a good job and I am kind to people." When you talk to yourself like this, will be far less painful. (Talk to yourself. If anyone questions you, tell them that a psychologist said to do it. Well, maybe not!)

Another feeling related to change is the feeling of **fear**. There is **fear of the unknown future**. Even though there may be excitement about the changes, you will be afraid. "Can I do the new job well? Can I get along with my new supervisor? Will it take time away from my family? Will I have the equipment I need? Will my support staff be adequate? What will I do with my time after I retire? (Most retirees wish that they had more time to do the things they want.) Will my mate and I get under each other's skin?"

It is helpful to remember that fear does not predict the future. It only tells you that you are afraid.

People can also be frightened by the intensity of their emotions when change occurs. This is especially true if you were taught that you should not have these feelings or were never taught what to do with them when you do have them.

Be clear that **all of these are natural, human emotions that accompany change**.

Emotions may be combined to form **ambivalence**. You may feel sadness and loss, and at the same time relieved, or even excited to move on.

I was an after luncheon speaker for a multi-national corporation a few weeks before Christmas. My role was to assist people, who had been laid off, to enjoy the holidays. As they introduced me, my son Matt, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Go get 'em, Dad."

After my talk, a woman who had been "downsized", told me, "I was glad that I was laid off. I felt sad at the loss of my colleagues, but I was delighted to have the opportunity to do many things that I couldn't do while I worked." She had ambivalent feelings—sad and happy—at the same time.

If you have gained nothing else from this article, I hope that you have come to the conclusion that as a human being you have feelings. If you fight them, you will loose. If you accept them you have control over them—and of yourself. Then you are in a far better position to master the circumstances around you—to win in life.

I wish you well as you go through the process of change. My hope is that I have assisted you—both personally and in your organizations—to make the transitions in your life more smoothly. Best wishes to you as you face the challenge of change.

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