

Leading People Through Change

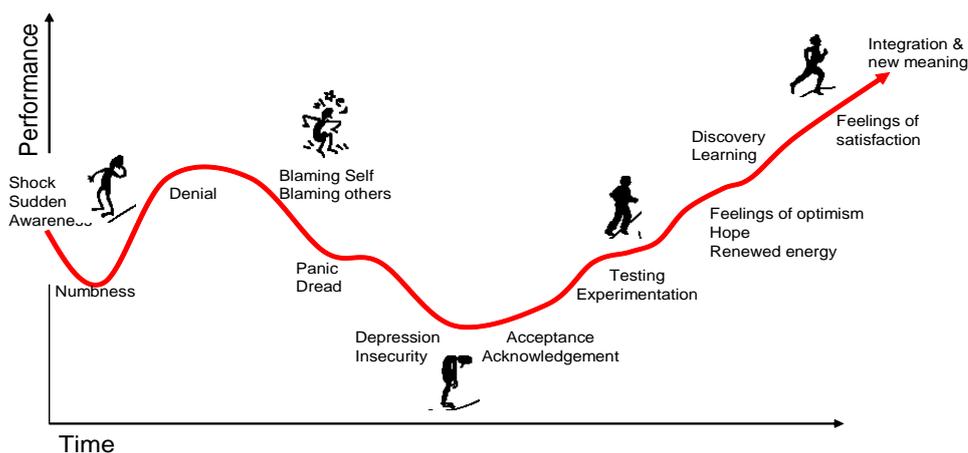
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When people in organisations are confronted with change they react in different ways. In any effective change management process it is important for the leaders of change to understand this. One of the key points in enabling this process to be somewhat smoother and perhaps a little faster is to understand the psychological and emotional components of change.

The idea that humans go through a psychological process during change became evident due to research in the area of terminally ill patients published by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (*On Death and Dying*, 1969). Her work is based on the idea that when facing change in the external world an individual can experience a variety of internal psychological states. Later research showed that individuals going through changes within organisations can have very similar experiences, though perhaps less dramatic and less traumatic

Kubler-Ross realised that patients – given the necessary conditions – would typically go through five stages as they came to terms with their prognosis. The stages were: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance.

Transitions Curve



Denial

A person faced with such potentially catastrophic change would often not be able to accept the communication. They would deny it to themselves. That is they wouldn't actually take it in but become emotionally numb and have a sense of disbelief. Some would argue that this might be a way of allowing the person to prepare themselves for what is to follow. On a more trivial scale some of us have experienced the numbness and disbelief when our favourite sports team is defeated. There's little that we can do but in a sense 'shut down'. We don't want to accept the news and expose ourselves to the heartache that that would bring.

Organisationally this might happen if an external agency issues a negative report or perhaps there's an unexpected change in leadership.

Anger

When the person allows themselves to acknowledge what is happening they enter the second stage, typically that of anger. They can ask questions such as "Why me?", "How could such a thing happen to someone like me? If only it had been someone else", "Surely it's the

responsibility of 'them': they didn't see it coming, are taking knee jerk action, haven't thought it through"

Anger and frustration can be focussed externally, but for some of us it's ourselves we blame. Why didn't we see it coming? It's always me who gets into trouble.

In some ways we can see this process as a continuation of our not wanting to accept the change and of wanting to do something, anything, other than fully believe in it. Anger is yet another way of displacing our real feelings about the situation.

Organisationally the authority might attack those who have issued the report or maybe turn the blame upon themselves – or someone else within the authority (Members blame officers, officers blame members!)

Bargaining

When they exhausted themselves by attacking others (or themselves) they may still want to wrest back some control of the situation. Bargaining is the stage that people now enter.

Once again we can see this stage as a deflection of the true gravity of the situation. This is bargaining, perhaps verging on panic. The person is desperately looking around for something, anything, to remedy the situation. "If only I could get it fixed or sorted everything would be all right."

Organisationally we might call this 'negotiation'!

Depression

When it becomes clear that no amount of bargaining is going to provide an escape from the situation, perhaps then the true momentousness of it kicks in. How might we react? We might become depression where we are mourning or grieving for what we will lose.

For some, this depression can take the form of apathy or a sense of pointlessness.

For others it can take the form of sadness, and for some a mixture of intense emotions and disassociated states.

Organisationally we can see a drop in moral and a turning in on itself.

Acceptance

Kubler-Ross saw many people move out of their depression and enter a fifth stage of acceptance. Perhaps we might add the word quiet acceptance because it isn't necessarily a happy stage but it is a stage where the person can in some ways come to terms with the reality of their situation and the inevitability of what is happening to them. The person has a sense of being fully in touch with their feeling about the situation, their hopes and fears, their anxieties. They are prepared.

Organisationally we see the beginnings of an acceptance of reality – for example, we still might not agree with the results of the CPA but we are prepared to accept that it has its own validity and that we need to respond to it.

Further management researchers have added to Kubler-Ross' five stages. In particular Adams, Hayes and Hopson (1976).

Relief – At least I now know what's happening now, I had my suspicions, I wasn't just being paranoid.

Shock and/or Surprise – Really a subset of denial but characterised by a sense of disbelief.

Denial – Total non-acceptance of the change and maybe 'proving' to oneself that it isn't happening and hoping that it will go away.

Anger - Experiencing anger and frustration but really in an unaware sort of way i.e. taking no responsibility for your emotions.

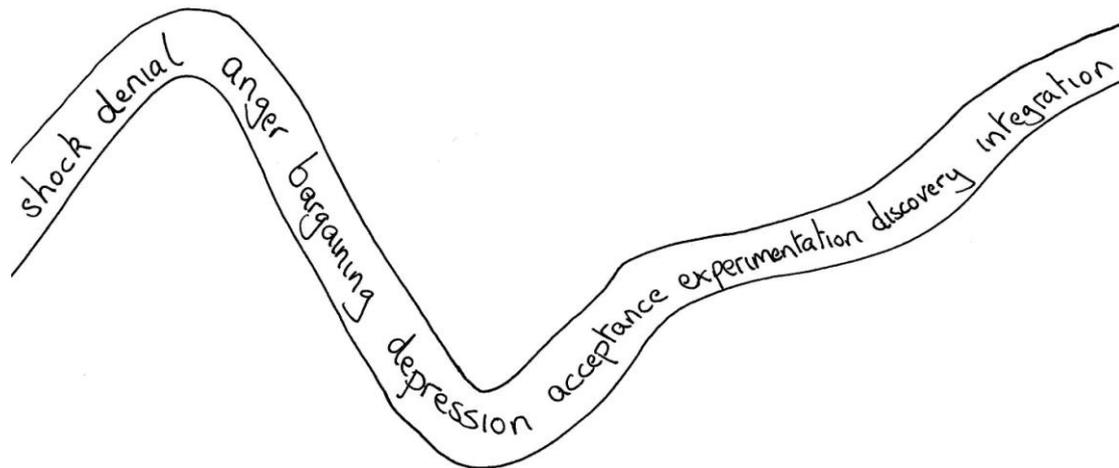
Bargaining – The attempt to avoid the inevitable.

Depression – Hitting the lows and responding (or being unresponsive) with apathy or sadness.

Acceptance - The reality of the situation is accepted.

Experimentation – Having been very inward looking with acceptance, the idea arrives that perhaps there are things 'out there'. Perhaps some of these changes might be worth at least thinking about. Perhaps I might just ask to see the job description of that new job.

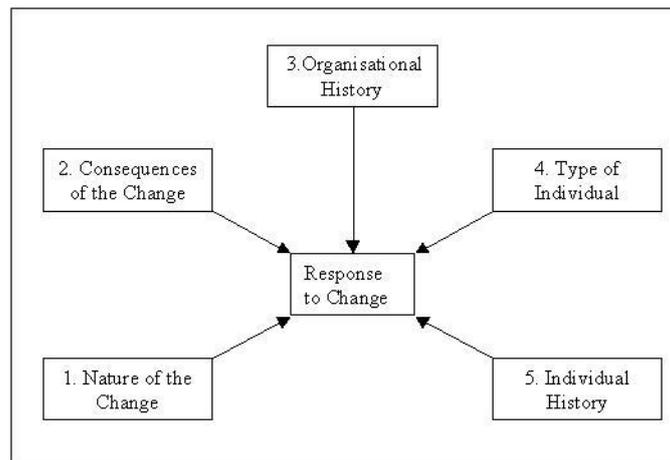
Discovery – As you enter this new world that has changed there may be the discovery that things aren't as bad as you imagined, perhaps the company was telling the truth when it said they would be new opportunities and a better way of working.



Propensity for Change

We have isolated five factors that have an influence on an individual's response to change. As a leader of change you will need to pay attention to these five areas if you wish to achieve positive responses to change.

- **The nature of the change varies.** They can be externally imposed or internally generated. They can be evolutionary or revolutionary in nature. They can be routine or one-off. They can be mundane or transformative. They can be about expansion or contraction. Different types of change can provoke different attitudes and different behaviours.
- **The consequences of the change are significant.** For whose benefit the changes are seen to be (employees, customers, the community, the shareholders, the Board). Who will be the winners and who will be the losers?
- **The organisational history matters too.** This means: the track record of how your organisation has handled change in the past (or how the acquiring organisation is perceived), what the prevailing culture is, what the capacity of the organisation is in terms of management expertise and resources to manage change effectively and what the future, beyond the change, is seen to hold.



- **The personality type of the individual** is a major determining factor in how she or he responds to change. The Myers Briggs Type of the individual can give us an indication of how an individual will respond to change. Their motivating forces are also important - for example, are they motivated by power, status, money or affiliation and inclusion?
- **The history of the individual** can also give us clues as to how they might respond. By history we mean previous exposure and responses to change, levels of knowledge, skills and experience the individual has, areas of stability in their life and stage in their career. For example an individual who has previously experienced redundancy might re-experience the original trauma and upheaval regardless of how well the current one is handled. Or they may have acquired sufficient resilience and determination from the previous experience to be able to take this one in their stride.

What action is possible? Leading People through Change:

The diagram below summarises leadership activities that might be useful when moving people through the transitions curve.

Leadership through transition

