



## Four Lessons for Change

Diogenes was one of the first but will certainly not be the last to recognize that change is the only constant in our lives and we better get used to it. Digging your head in the sand and hoping that change won't come is foolish and a waste of time. Any leader in an organization needs to manage change effectively as part of their day to day responsibilities. Understanding people's response to change is a critical component of this.

What are the things you need to know about people and change? Firstly, different people react differently to change. Some people relish change and get bored with the status quo. Others prefer more stability. Problems arise when the individual's preferences differ from the situation they find themselves in. That is, if a stability oriented person finds that circumstances are changing or a change oriented person finds that everything is the same and there is nothing new.

Typical reactions can be stress, negativity, resistance. The best response from the manager is to explain the reasoning behind the change – put the change in context – and be patient. In times of extreme change managers might want to identify opportunities to pair up change lovers with more stable oriented folk to jolly them through the tough times.

Secondly, people's needs have to be met through an inclusive change process. Psychologist Will Schultz identified three basic needs that people have which are particularly relevant to change:

- The need for control
- The need for inclusion
- The need for openness

This means that in any change process there has to be something the individual can control, they need to be included in the process of shaping the change and they need to feel their managers are being as open as they can about the change.



Thirdly, during periods of change people can often experience a feeling of loss and it might take time for them to adjust to new circumstances. It might be useful to consider the following model which is used to counsel people in helping them come to terms with loss:

- Denial
- Anger
- Withdrawal
- Acceptance

Some people may move through these stages very quickly, arriving at the acceptance stage within days of an announcement of change. For others, it may take months to accept the new set up. For the manager, provide lots of opportunities for the individual to communicate how they are feeling and learn to be patient, particularly as the employee takes time out to think through the change, before finally accepting it. But remember, acceptance does not necessarily mean loving or agreeing with the change.

Finally, enforced change, such as an office move, can lead to raised expectations. With the office move, individuals may see an opportunity for a bright, new shiny office with lots of space. Manage expectations carefully through change, otherwise people are bound to be disappointed. If expectations are not met, people are unhappy. If expectations are exceeded, they are happy. In other words, manage expectations down.

Understanding how people respond to change will inform the manager how to plan and manage the inevitable change which all organizations experience. Based on this understanding managers need to:

- Communicate the reasons behind the change – be honest and open but don't oversell the benefits.
- Give each individual an opportunity to express their concerns and provide reassurances.
- Make lots of time for informal discussions, feedbacks and 'water cooler' chat
- Give people some choices to make so they feel in control and included

Pam Kennett

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