



5 Ways to Respond Effectively to Change Reactions

By: Siobhan Brown, CTDP, PMP

Whenever change occurs, there are always going to be various reactions. For some, change can cause fear, doubt anxiety, insecurity, or perhaps ambivalence. While for others, change means excitement, anticipating opportunities, and looking forward to a new future. Regardless of the type, magnitude or speed of the change, no matter how positive the benefits are anticipated to be for the stakeholder personally, without having a formal approach to change management that addresses staff reactions with the intent to gain commitment, the change initiative will likely fail.

Different Change Reactions

According to the Ottawa Business Journal article, **How Change Affects Teams**, by Ruth Gmehlinⁱ, the four common, yet distinct, behavioral reactions to change are:

- **People who thrive on change** – These individuals tend to be direct, demonstrate a results-oriented approach, embrace quick decisions and changes, and are usually the ones that initiate the change by challenging the status quo.
- **People who aren't bothered by change** - They are optimistic, enthusiastic and try to keep everyone motivated during times of flux by using their creativity to develop innovative solutions to handling change.
- **People who resist change and need time to prepare** - They are steady decision makers that do not like to be rushed and may appear to “put-up” with change since it may be difficult to determine how deeply they are impacted by the changes until much later.
- **People who are concerned with the effects of change** – They are the cautious, careful, and objective thinkers who seek to maintain the high standards regardless of the changes going on around them.

Recognizing Resistance

If you have identified yourself as being among those who automatically resist change, you have lots of company. Even those who embrace and thrive on

ⁱ Gmehlin, Ruth. How Change Affects Teams (July 28, 2005). Online: <http://www.obj.ca/Other/Archives/2005-07-28/article-2146286/How-Change-Affects-Teams/1>.

change, and those who usually aren't bothered by it, can suffer initial resistance. The key is to train yourself to be more mindful of your reactions. First, you must recognize and acknowledge your resistance. Are you simply resisting change because it is your nature to do so, or is there a valid reason?

Some people who resist change fail to look for the potential positive in the change. They are so negative and close-minded that they are unable or refuse to view changes objectively.

Acknowledging Your Own Reaction

Become aware of your reactions. To successfully lead change, as a leader, you must understand your own personal reactions to it, especially if you haven't initiated it. Your actions as a leader will inspire emotion and action in others. Leading people through change is often difficult if you are not on board with the change yourself. That doesn't mean deny your feelings. If you have concerns, discuss them with your direct leader. Chances are your team members will have similar concerns and look to you for answers.

Did You Know...?

Managers who communicate change effectively can improve their direct reports' performance by as much as 29.2% (Corporate Leadership Council, 2009).

Recent research found that leaders who don't embrace change increase their employees' resistance to it, and that those who focus on creating a positive vision, lower their employees' resistance to it.

Overcoming Resistance

According to BlessingWhite's article, The 3 C's of Change, "when organizational values and individual values are both clear and congruent, individual commitment to the goals of the organization are significantly higher."ⁱⁱ Here are five ways to gain commitment to the change from the individual:

1. Give people information - Be as open and honest about the facts as you can without giving overoptimistic speculation. Share the vision and

urgency of the change. This will build trust and confidence in you, as a leader. The last thing you want to do is set unrealistic expectations. Develop a communication strategy that ensures information is disseminated efficiently and comprehensively to everyone

2. Speak to team members directly - Don't let the rumour mill take over. E.g., Tell everyone at the same time. Then follow up with individual interviews to create a personal strategy for handling the change. This helps to identify personal values and deal appropriately with individual reactions to change.
3. Acknowledge losses - Where change is involved there is usually a loss. Identify what will remain the same and what might replace that loss - loss is easier to cope with if there is something to replace it. This will help alleviate potential fears.
4. Give people time - Where change is too much and too fast, people feel overwhelmed. Wherever it is possible, give individuals an opportunity to express their concerns and share their views. As a leader, show support for their decision making, provide coaching, counselling or information as appropriate, to help them through the loss curve and providing reassurances to help relieve their apprehensions.
5. Evaluate systems and structures - People will revert back to old habits if there are no consequences to remaining the same. Systems and structures need to be re-evaluated and aligned with the change to ensure that the desired behaviour will be sustained.

Your role as a leader is to share the vision of the change, identify what is changing, what is not, why change is urgent, and why employees should accept it. Equally important is demonstrating that you, the leader, believe in that change. The sooner you can align your support with the change the easier it will be for you to lead it.

ⁱⁱ BlessingWhite, The 3 C's of Change (2010). Online: <http://www.blessingwhite.com/content/articles/enews/May2010.asp?pid=2>.