Change manager's guide:

This guide aims to provide additional *support for managers leading change* so they can support staff more effectively with the psychological transitions of change.

A step back in time

Go back a few hundred thousand years. It made sense to develop an internal alarm system that reacted quickly to danger, and those early humans that did, survived to pass their genes on. We developed such a system to survive the deadly animal attack; your heart beats more quickly to get blood to where it is needed and you breathe quickly and shallowly to get a rush of oxygen. And there is none of that slow thinking to hinder us – just quick, knee jerk, emotional reactions.

This process is reflected in how our brains are structured. The oldest bit of the brain, evolutionarily-speaking, is the bit at the top of your spinal cord with parts called, amongst other things, the hindbrain. This part of the brain acts as our first filter on the world. It effectively says to the next bit of the brain "you had better pay attention to this, it may be important." One of its function is to notice change, and if it detects it, to pass the information on to the next part of the brain.

The middle part of the brain again has a few working parts but collectively it is often called the limbic system and comprises largely our memory bank, and our emotional centres including the Amygdala. This is particularly responsive to the classic threat responses we have been discussing above and will start a stress response that will eventually lead to the fight/flight mechanism being invoked. Not only that – it actively releases hormones that stop the more logical parts of the brain from functioning.

The final part of the brain is the bit that makes us human. It consists of grey matter (our neocortex) and white matter, together combining in various structures called lobes (four pairs, one in each hemisphere) to form the thinking part of the brain. Specific parts are responsible for planning, judgement, decision making and creativity. This is our frontal lobe; the bit behind our forehead.

Putting it all together

Even this simplistic explanation of our brain's structure helps us to understand something quite profound. Our brain is geared to notice and react to change with caution. It therefore creates an emotional threat response before it starts thinking about change. We can eventually route the response through logic, rationality and decision making areas of the brain but it takes a lot longer and we may not always have time. This really helped when we had to be mindful of immediate dangers, and is still useful when we are faced with an attack but the same mechanism is potentially invoked when we are faced with an angry student or a terse email from the boss. More generally, however, it is often the process behind our reaction to all kinds of change in our home or professional lives – we tend to treat it as a threat.

What this means

Our first reaction to change, which our brain tends to perceive as a threat, is emotional, not rational. The result is the classic *change curve*.

Now, everyone is different and every situation is different. But our responses to change and life's stressful events tend to have some commonalities. So much work has been done in this area that it has almost passed into folklore, but essentially our classic response to change, heavily influenced by the way our brains work, can be fairly predictable.

Firstly, there is typically shock, followed by a period of flat effect – numbness. Essentially, our brains find it difficult to comprehend what is going on and go into protection mode. This may be fleeting or may last for several days as we keep on repeating the circumstances that led to the shock in our thoughts. This is often followed by a period if denial – or even a sense of false optimism and heightened mood! This is our brain's way of putting you into a holding pattern; the event may be just too enormous to deal with right now so it goes into another form of protection mode and pretends it isn't happening for a while whilst it regroups and gets the energy to deal with it. We may steadfastly ignore all the warning signs of an impending change and yet somehow be surprised and shocked when it happens.

Denial is not bad in itself – it is putting things off until we can deal with them – but long term, it can have a dramatic impact if we don't eventually accept the event and go through the rest of the change curve.

This emotional rollercoaster usually comprises anxiety/excitement, anger and sadness or even depression; not always in that order and sometimes jumbled up together so that it becomes hard to separate them. Anxiety/excitement is about preparing for the future or the implications of the change on you or those around you. It is not the same as fear, which is about something real and now, but more about something potential that is anticipated. Our amygdala and hippocampus get locked into a neural loop which seems to feed on itself.

It doesn't just go. We repeat the pattern of thinking and keep on generating the chemical hit, time and time again. We may find ourselves getting angry/over anxious at the circumstances, other people related or even completely unrelated to the stressful event, or ourselves. As we said before, logic and rationality is not our default during times of change. The anger/anxiety may be expressed outwardly or may be held inside, festering away.

Eventually, reality forms and with it the (perceived) challenge of the event and this is where the low or high point occurs. We all feel sad or hope from time to time but this process can also lead in some circumstances to outright depression. Martin Seligman suggested that one of the major causes of depression was *learned helplessness* – where we feel out of control of a situation and that the world is happening to us, instead of us happening to the world. If that is how we feel as a result of the change, it is easy to see how this could have an impact here. Again, the more control we have, the easier it is to deal with change.

Gradually, however, we deal with it. We accept it. It doesn't mean we have to like all of it but we put it more into its correct perspective and achieve some sort of proportionality. This is where we start to make choices and we start looking to the future. Our frontal lobes gain mastery and we start to plan, make decisions and regain control of our mood state.

Section summary; how (and why) we react to change

The aim of this section is to give the reader an overview of why we react to change in the way that we do and what that typically looks like. There are, of course, many variations and variables, but there does seem to be a commonality of experience for most people. The classic sequence of

Shock → Denial → Anxiety/Excitement → Anger/Overthinking → Depression → Reality and Acceptance.

appears to be common to a range of circumstances. Often, this is regardless of logic or proportionality or how concrete or indeed tenuous the "change" is. Just knowing that this is normal and perhaps to be expected can help people be forewarned and help them make sense of what may appear to be rather irrational thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Taking your team through change

Managing transitions (William Bridges)

William Bridges distinguishes between two concepts – the first *change* is the event itself ("we are all going to start hot-desking on the 1st May) and then a *transition* – the psychological readiness to behave in accordance with the change – this determines whether a change will work or not. It isn't an optional extra – it's the transition that makes the change actually happen.

Bridges' model is deceptively simple. It is a three stage process:

1. Letting go of the old. This first stage is the acknowledgement that things are ending, that there has to be a period of letting go psychologically – perhaps to an existing identity – and ultimately deal with loss
2. The in-between time, when the old is gone but the new hasn't yet arrived fully. This is when the crucial psychological adjustment takes place
3. The new beginning. This is when we create our new identity, get used to the new way of doing things and embed the new processes or thinking until it becomes the new normal

The simple premise, therefore, is this. Change of any sort succeeds or fails on the basis of whether those affected by the change start behaving differently. And that is determined by the way you have dealt with the ending of the old – transition starts with the ending.

Dealing with endings

Before we can learn anything new, we have to unlearn the old way. It isn't changing to something new that people tend to resist – it is stopping what they used to do. We certainly have to give some of the rationale and the case for change, but we do have to deal directly with the ending first. This is not to say that we don't talk about the positives of the new – far from it – but the point is, that is not what is going to make people change their behaviour.

So here's how to do it -

-   Identify who is losing what. In the planning stage, determine what exactly will change, who will be affected and in what way. What will be the (not immediately obvious) knock on effects? Ask yourself who is going to have to let go of something – physical things, status things, attitudes, comfort. . . if the change is already underway, it's not too late. Just ask people what they have had to give up or what they miss.
-   Accept the importance of the losses. These losses are subjective but real to those going through them. Treat it – and them – seriously and with compassion. Remember that your view is irrelevant. You won't get commitment if you don't make the effort to understand.
-   Don't be surprised at feels like an overreaction. It is their world that is changing and they may not feel they have a choice. Therefore, threat buttons are being pressed! You don't know what experiences people have had in the past or what previous small changes have led to in other parts of their lives. This does not mean that we avoid the change – far from it – but it does mean that we have to be prepared for big emotions that seem, on the face of it, out of proportion.

- Acknowledge the losses openly. Bring them out into the open. Make it normal to talk about them. Admit that it may be painful for some people. We rarely make things worse by being honest about them. This doesn't mean we have to accept disruptive behaviour, and we may have to make it clear what is not acceptable.
- Try to help people find the "what's in it for them". There may be things you can give back – after all, in your team's minds you may have taken things away, so this may help to get some sort of psychological balance. How can you give them more control, for example. What might it mean for future career choices and skill development?
- Communicate. Then communicate more. Don't fall into the trap of telling yourself that you will only upset people, or they don't need to know just yet, or assume they already know. They may know something and will start making it up anyway, so better to be honest about what you do know, what you don't and when you are likely to know.
- Define what is changing (or over) and what is staying the same. This can help reduce psychological tension and stress levels. After all, if absolutely everything is changing, then that is a complete transformation which is rarely the case. If we don't make explicit what needs to change and what doesn't, then people will make their own decisions on this which may not fit in with the strategic plan.
- Mark the ending. Have an activity to help to draw a line in the sand. Remember that our brains understand the world through story and narrative, so how can you help people picture the ending symbolically?
- Treat the old ways with respect. If you start acting as if the old ways were bad and you are going to save them from themselves, then, that is a fast-track to a system overloads! Try to make any distinctions between the old way and the new way non-judgmentally. Maybe let your team decide what already goes well and needs to be kept.
- Finally, demonstrate how the endings they are having to go through ensures the continuity of what they care about – their jobs, the department's success, reputation. A past idealised is just heuristics, biases or selective memory. They will already have had to make successful changes to get to the point they are at now. Remind them of this and how it can pave the way to future success.

Managing the Neutral Zone

Not dealing satisfactorily with "endings" is a major reason why change projects often are less successful – or at least, take longer to embed – than you would like. Get that bit right and the rest becomes easier. The Neutral Zone, however, has its own challenges, not least the feeling of being trapped between a rock and a hard place.

Just to add to the difficulty, you may find yourself getting pressure from above, especially if you have spent some (worthwhile) time helping your team deal with the letting go. Positive motion seems to have slowed down and old certainties are less certain and the new ones haven't been built yet. This will often be a period of anxiety and reduction in motivation and ultimately performance and productivity. There may be increases in absenteeism and teamwork can be undermined as people retreat into looking after themselves.

However, it's not all bad. This is also a period of high energy and creativity. There may be more new ideas and freedom to just try things out and see what happens. Chaos breeds life, order breeds

habit! The role of the manager is therefore to capitalise on this by fostering innovation and creativity, whilst keeping the ship afloat and your team in one piece.

Here's how to do it:

- Make this period of uncertainty feel normal. Help people to understand that the journey takes time, that it is a process and that this stage is an important and necessary part of that process. It is not a wasted period of waiting and it is important to give the message that it is normal to feel frustrated and "on edge" during this phase. Perhaps you could find a team-appropriate metaphor to illustrate this period; a river of transition, or the winter before the spring, or even the last voyage of the old ship before it sinks!
- Create temporary systems to give some semblance of structure to this ambiguous time. You may be able to protect your team from other changes at this point or at least reframe them into "it's all part of the bigger change". Do new policies reporting lines, roles and procedures need to be created, even if they are just temporary? Are there short-term and relatively easy goals that you can get your team to set? You may also need to manage expectations, within the team itself, with connected teams and with those above you.
- Build strong relations with connected teams. This may help reduce the feeling of being isolated or "all at sea" and may help to stop old patterns or habits repeating themselves. It may help to set up communication channels or even newsletters to keep people feel abreast of progress, foster a feeling of "we are all in this together" and reduce the potential for the rumour-mill.
- Depending on the size and scope of the change, you could consider creating a Change Team (Bridges calls this a Transition Monitoring Team, Kotter calls this a Guiding Coalition). This team should be representative of the team at large and should meet regularly to discuss progress, troubleshoot and facilitate the solving of problems (but not doing it themselves), ensure the communication upwards and outwards is up to scratch and report back to the group regularly
- Finally, use this stage to really enhance the creative output of your team. Capitalize on the breaks in the normal routine to encourage people to think differently. Use facilitation techniques (e.g. brainstorming, 6 Thinking Hats) to add rigour to this process. Model the process yourself to provide a steer that fresh, innovative thinking is not only OK but welcomed – and make sure there is no semblance of a blame culture. Creativity and innovation are the first casualties of a punitive directive culture. As much as you can, reframe mistakes, losses and setbacks as learning tools. Make sure you have some budget for training in new techniques and above all, encourage experimentation (with review systems in place).

The new beginning

If we have successfully navigated our way through the first two stages, this last stage is where we reap the rewards. This is the release of energy into a new direction, where the "stuff" happens and where there are physical signs that things have really moved on. Again, the Beginning is not necessarily the same as the official start date. Beginnings are when people do things differently. There is often a conflict of feelings here. The tension of the neutral Zone has gone and its demise has

been eagerly anticipated, but the New Beginning part is also a scary time for many. So there is a curious mixture of relief and nervousness, of anticipation and resistance.

You will, of course, have outlined what the change is for, but whatever the scenario, you will still need to communicate:

- The purpose behind the change, what you are trying to achieve and why. Some of this will obviously have been communicated at the endings/initial stage but this is where we go into the detail. You may have to sell the problem before you can sell the solution and, of course, you will have done this at the endings stage, but it certainly doesn't hurt to reiterate it now. What is the problem we are trying to solve? Why has this come about? How does this fit into organisational strategy? What would happen if we did nothing? If you, as manager of the team, are unclear about the answers to these questions, how can you find out? Successful new beginnings are based on a clear purpose.
- A picture of what the outcome will look and feel like. Help them imagine it. Purposes are abstract – help your team to see it. What will people be doing? How will they interact with each other and with other teams? What will the office look like? How will work be organised? How will they feel? Use any visual techniques you can get hold of; floor plans, flow charts, organograms, maps. Can you arrange a visit to another team or even organisation that has successfully navigated something similar?
- A plan for phasing the outcome. Help people know what they have to do and when. Some people will get all they need from the picture, but many others will need more guidance and want to know what, when, where and how. They will need the plan of the change, and the plan of the transition. These are different. The transition plan is more people-oriented and starts with where the people are now; a change plan starts with the outcome and works backwards.
- Give each person a part to play in both the plan and the outcome. This gives people new insight into problems and reduces the "us and them" feeling. It taps into their existing knowledge and problem-solving abilities and increases the feeling of ownership and accountability. Individuals will also feel an element of peer pressure and conformity – they won't want to let their team-mates down.

After all this has been done, your role is to continually reinforce. Be consistent in all your messages, make sure you behave like a role model by demonstrating the behaviours/following new procedures yourself and reward the new behaviours, punish (not punitively, obviously) the regression to the old. Try to build in quick wins and celebrate those successes. Change takes a long time and it is easy for the energy to slacken off. Rewarding small but constant successes keeps motivation and drives up and keeps people in touch with the ultimate plan. And finally, turn the dial up on your performance management and team-building skills.

Bridges model of change helps us to deal with the messy, sometimes irrational way we typically react and provides a clear three-stage process for getting the most out of people during change. Change is inevitable, and where there is change, there is Transition. Bridges puts this succinctly:

Change + Human Beings = Transition

Section Summary; taking your team through change

As we have seen, for most of us our default is to resist change because our brains at least treat it as a threat. As a result, we need to go through a process that acknowledges this fundamental fact. Bridges' model helps us to do this by differentiating between a change and a transition, and to get a transition we need to take ourselves as well as our teams through three distinct stages:

- Letting go of the Old. This first stage is the acknowledgement that things are ending, that there has to be a period of letting go psychologically.
- The Neutral Zone, when the old is gone but the new hasn't yet arrived fully.
- The New Beginning. This is when we get used to the new way of doing things and embed the

Further reading

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