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Managing Change: For Managers

Contents

Why do we resist change? 3
Why should managers learn about Change Management? 4
Change vs. Transition 4
Models of Change 4
- The Kubler-Ross Change Curve 5
- The Bridges Transition Model 5
- The Problem with Models 6

The Role of Manager 6
- The Five Managerial Roles 6
- Communicator 6
- Advocate 7
- Coach 7
- Liason 7
- Resistance Manager 8

Managing the Transition Process 8
Shine a Light 8
- Create a Vision 8
- Communicate Openly and Often 9

Offer Support 9
- Gauge 10
- Appoint Change Advocates 10
- Resistance 10

Get the Ball Rolling 11
- Motivate 11
- Remove Demotivators 11
- Teach 12
- Reflect 12

How iHASCO can help 12
Appendix 13

Why do we resist change?

> *"Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like."*
>
> - Lao Tzu

The sun rises, the sun sets. The joyous blue skies of daytime give way to darkness for a short while. Somewhere out there, a billion stars are forged from the fragments of a billion stars which came before. Planets spin and swirl, dancing their own unique gravitational ballet. Life begins. Life grows. Life slows. Life ends. And all the while, the sun rises, the sun sets.

Change is an undeniable and integral part of our existence. Even we are changing. You are not the same person you were when you were a child, and you're not the same person you will be in years to come. Your body has grown and aged since infancy and it will continue to do so. Your cells renew every ten years or so, creating a brand new version of the you that was. Yet, despite all of this, change is still something we resist and even fear.

The reasons behind our response to change are not entirely understood and there are many theories trying to explain it. It could be because we are naturally hardwired to trust things which have stood the test of time and to resist anything new. This was illustrated in a study where two groups of participants were both shown the same painting. One group was told that the artwork was completed in 1905, the other group was told that it was painted in 2005. The group which believed the painting was older said that it was better and more aesthetically pleasing than the group which believed it was newer.

Another theory rests on the uncertainty which accompanies change. In neuroscientific studies, scans taken of the brain revealed that we process uncertainty in the same way that we process an error because our brain is telling us that it's a mistake. This theory puts "accepting change" in the same category as skydiving or bungee jumping. People naturally fear jumping, because their primal instincts are telling them that falling from such a height will kill them[1], yet they do still jump because, rationally, they know they'll be safely strapped in.

But, as most thrill seekers will tell you, resistance to jumping - whether from the side of a plane or by embracing the uncertainty of change - is internal. Resistance and fear are both perfectly natural responses to change, but with a little practice and guidance, we can learn to better handle our feelings towards change, and respond to it in a way that benefits us.

Why should managers learn about Change Management?

As a manager, you have a responsibility to help bring about the changes that are taking place at work, ensuring that they're a success; and to help your team transition from the old to the new, making the process as smooth as possible for everyone.

By understanding how many of us naturally respond to change, you can ensure that you're equipped to communicate effectively with your team before changes take place; to support them as the changes are implemented; and to ensure that they feel secure and empowered after changes take place. This enables both your team, and the organisation as a whole, to adapt, grow, and thrive in the face of the inevitable. And perhaps, in the process, you may come to understand your own feelings a little better too.

Change vs. Transition

Let's begin by making a very important distinction between **change** and **transition**[2].

Change is external. It's the things which are taking place around us, affecting our lives, banishing the old and ushering in the new. Change can happen slowly - though this tends to be less of a problem; or it can happen very quickly. It could be a new business strategy at work, a change in leadership, or a merger; it could be the end of a relationship, the death of a loved one, or moving house; or, on a larger scale, it could be a global pandemic, a financial crisis, or a change in political leadership. Whatever it is, change is often out of our control.

Transition, on the other hand, is internal. It's our psychological and emotional response to the changes that are taking place around us. Some people find transition easy to deal with while others find it more of a struggle. Just like bungee jumpers, some people are prepared to simply go, whereas others need some time and encouragement before they're ready.

Change is inevitable and there's often very little people can do about it. However, the inner **transition** from old to new is absolutely *within* our control. As a manager, you can make that journey easier for your team and yourself. You can help them navigate the unknown, gain perspective on their emotions, and, with a little time, show them the glimmer of light on the other side.

Models of Change

Throughout the years, psychologists have tried to understand our reaction to change by creating models that represent how we feel on the inside.

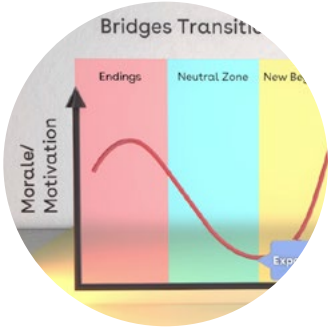
The Kubler-Ross Change Curve

Possibly the most famous of these models is the Kubler-Ross Change Curve[3]. Originally created by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, it describes the various emotions that people feel during different stages when they are approaching their own death or have recently experienced the death of a loved one. Over time it has been discovered that the model has a much broader application and can be used to describe peoples' experience of handling change in a more general sense.

The model moves through a series of emotional stages beginning with shock or denial, then anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. It does have to be said, however, that not everyone moves through these stages at the same pace, nor do they necessarily experience them in the same order. Some people may become stuck in a particular stage for some time and others may regress to an earlier stage altogether. This is, in fact, one of the major criticisms of this model. However, as a generalised depiction of the kinds of emotions that a person might experience when faced with a major change in their life, the model has proved useful.

The Bridges Transition Model

Another popular model used in business is the Bridges Transition Model[4]. This theory sidesteps the problem faced by the Kubler-Ross model by avoiding a prescribed list of emotions which an individual may or may not feel. Instead, this model splits the entire transition process into three distinct stages: the Endings phase, the Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings.



All changes begin with the **Endings Phase**, as *the old* is left behind. People may feel a range of emotions during this phase from the familiar shock and denial of the Kubler-Ross model, to frustration, confusion, or even joy and excitement. However a person may feel about this stage, what remains the same is that it is a loss or *'letting go of the old'*.

After a while, people accept that *'how things were'* has gone and a new way of doing things is replacing it. However, the new way often hasn't quite sunk in yet, so things are still a little strange and unfamiliar. Welcome to the **Neutral Zone**. During this stage, people come to terms with the emotions they felt in the first stage and learn to control them; they begin exploring the possibilities that the change might bring; and they begin to build a new sense of identity. Their brains are aligning themselves with *'the new'* and building new patterns which will, sooner or later, begin to feel familiar. This stage is typified by feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and low levels of engagement.

Finally, however, people begin to embrace the change and enter the phase of **New Beginnings**. This is when people have found their place and can begin looking to the future

with some sense of certainty. It's often a time of lots of energy. People are keen to learn new skills, explore new possibilities, and become more involved in the new way of doing things.

The Problem with Models

Models are useful for helping us make sense of the world, but they also come with certain limitations. Life isn't a perfect model, human emotions aren't neat and tidy, and people's experiences don't fit nicely into ordered categories. Life is simply a big, beautiful mess.

The moral is that, though we will be exploring certain ideas brought up by these models and formulating a strategy for helping your team deal with change, we can't cover every base and you can't anticipate every need. But, by being aware of the *kinds* of emotions and issues that commonly arise you will at least be better prepared than you were before.

The Role of Manager

Though the transition process is a deeply personal one, experienced differently by each individual member of your team, *you* play a pivotal role in how successful that process is. Studies[5] have identified that support from management is crucial to the success of major changes within an organisation. This is due to the relationship you have with your team and your ability to become directly involved by supporting, coaching, guiding, and influencing individuals, identifying who needs help and how, and by acting as a link between employees and your employer.

The Five Managerial Roles

As a manager, there are five critical roles you need to perform in order to successfully lead your team through the change/transition process[6]. You need to be a(n):

- Communicator
- Advocate
- Coach
- Liaison, and
- Resistance Manager

Communicator

When we're faced with uncertainty, our own imagination can become our worst enemy. We tend to fill in the blanks with imaginary monsters, suspecting the worst case scenario. This

process is fueled further by gossip and rumours. The only thing worse than no information is incorrect or misguided conjecture.

You need to raise awareness of change, provide information, answer questions, and, in general, shine a light onto what is for many, a confusing and uncertain time. This doesn't mean sugar-coating information, as that'll only make the reality that much more difficult to deal with when it arrives, but rather it means being **honest, transparent,** and **forthcoming** with information. In particular, people want to know *what's* happening, *why* it's happening, why it's happening *now*, and *what* it means for them.

Advocate

Simply put, if *you* aren't behind the changes that are taking place, your team won't be either. You need to visibly support the process and sell it to your team.

If those senior to you haven't asked you to already, take some time to *truly* understand the benefits of the change - even negative changes come with some silver linings, so find them and communicate them with your team.

Coach

Change will very likely have an effect on the day-to-day tasks performed by the members of your team. Some of them may have been performing these tasks for years; they may be second nature, comfortable, and familiar. Suddenly, the safety of what they've grown to recognise has been upended and without support they may feel vulnerable.

Coach your team by ensuring that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in their new environment. If their role is changing, explain exactly how and why and make sure that they know what's expected of them so that they can hit the ground running; if there are new systems, softwares, or procedures in place, make sure that everyone is familiar with them and trained in the specifics, if needed. More broadly, help your team to emotionally adapt to change by offering resilience training[7], for example.

Liason

You are the lynchpin which connects your team to whoever is driving the change within your organisation (the **change leaders**). Your ability to liaise between the two groups is crucial.

Making sure that information is passed down to your team is important, but it's also

important that feedback is passed back up the chain too. If your team isn't coping well with the new change in any way - for example, if change is happening too quickly or if your team doesn't feel supported enough - then the **change leaders** need to know so that they can make adjustments. Simply forcing through change regardless of how well a team is coping is unsustainable. You need to communicate any problems and ensure that your team gets what they need to both survive and thrive.

Resistance Manager

Nobody is better placed for identifying and addressing resistance within your team than you are. You know your team better than anyone, you understand their strengths and weaknesses, you know who will embrace change and who might find it challenging, and you know how to approach each of them and offer them the support they need to persevere.

Managing the Transition Process

As you've seen, your role during the change process is multi-faceted. We've spent some time identifying the different managerial hats you need to wear to help support your team through change, but now we're going to put it all into practice by looking at the stages of the transition process and seeing what you can do to help your team along the way.

Shine a Light

When we receive news that something big is going to change in our lives, our stomach drops. We're shocked, confused, and disoriented. The future can feel dark and uncertain, and this can make us much more resistant to the changes we face.

As a manager, you need to shine a light into the darkness and be both a **Communicator**, by helping your team understand what's happening and why, and an **Advocate** for change, by remaining positive and showing them the benefits they stand to gain[8]. And don't forget to shine a light into your own future too.

Create a Vision

In the face of uncertainty, people want to know where they're heading and why. This means communicating, being transparent, and sharing information. A good starting point is to share the *big picture* with your team. Start with your organisation's core values or its business strategy and then create a narrative which explains how and why the changes that are taking place *today* will help you achieve this vision *tomorrow*.

For example, preparations to expand into new markets can be explained as the next logical step in your organisation's mission to *"seek constant improvement"* and *"make a genuine difference"*.

Even negative changes can be seen as a step in a positive direction within the narrative you create.

For example, let's say that your company's main goal is to always give the best customer service it possibly can, but due to the large number of services you offer and the small number of staff you employ, wait times were too high and workloads were too stressful. By reducing *some* services the focus can go back to giving the *best* service possible, meaning less stress for staff and a happier customer experience.

Whatever narrative you create will serve as the basis for how you communicate the change with your team going forward.

Communicate Openly and Often

Providing clear information is the difference between a successful transition process for your team or an unsuccessful one[9]. There's a lot to communicate and you'll be doing it throughout the entire process and so it's important that you get it right.

Consistency is crucial. People are confused and disoriented already, a confused or misleading response from their manager is just going to make things worse. This is where having a clear narrative is helpful. Your responses should be tied to the narrative you've created, helping to bolster the positive vision of the future you've created.

Be honest when you don't know something. Try to focus on what you *do* know, but if you don't have the answer to a particular question, tell your team that you don't know and reiterate your commitment to being open and honest and say that you'll follow up as soon as you know more.

"What's in it for me?". People are much more likely to get on board with changes being made if they understand exactly how it'll benefit them personally. It's one thing to say that the company will benefit but people want to know what *they* stand to gain. Will it make their jobs easier? Will they have better access to resources or support? Will there be pay increases or other company benefits?

Offer Support

As the realities of the change begin to sink in and the initial feelings of shock and confusion begin to subside, it's common for people to begin feeling some strong (often negative)

emotions. People may feel anger towards the changes taking place; sad at what they've lost; fearful about what the future holds; they may experience symptoms of depression at (what feels like to them) a hopeless situation; they may actually feel excited, relieved, or positive about the changes; of they may feel nothing at all.

Gauge

It's important to know how your team is responding to the changes taking place and to **manage their resistance.** Set up forums, troubleshooting meetings, invite drop-in visits to your office, set up online chat rooms and safe spaces, or have informal, one-on-one chats with your staff. Allow people to communicate their thoughts, feelings, concerns, and the things they're looking forward to in a judgement-free environment.

What you learn will serve two important functions. On the one hand, in your role as **Liaison**, you need to know how your team is coping so that this can be communicated up to the **Change Leaders** so that changes can be made to the whole process, if necessary.

On the other hand, knowing exactly how the individuals in your team feel about everything taking place will help you manage their emotions and confidently lead them forward.

Appoint Change Advocates

Some members of your team will feel more positively towards the changes taking place than others or may be more resilient and better able to deal with their emotions. These people can be a real benefit and can do a lot of good for everyone else.

Consider appointing them as **Change Advocates**[10]. You could set up regular Change Meetings or a Change Network, appoint a few advocates and ask them to prepare a short talk about the benefits of the changes taking place, how it will positively impact them and their colleagues, and answer some questions.

People are often much more likely to accept this kind of information when they receive it from a peer. Also, by involving certain members of the team in the actual change process itself, you'll help build a sense of responsibility, commitment, and support which you might otherwise have lacked.

Resistance

In your role as **Resistance Manager**, it's very useful to know who may find their emotions more challenging to deal with or who find change more of a struggle.

Spend some extra time with these people. Find out what their concerns are and take steps to address them or perhaps make these topics to be addressed by your **Change Advocates**.

Get the Ball Rolling

Eventually, stronger emotions give way to the beginnings of acceptance. But you're not quite there yet. This is the *Neutral Zone*. By this point, people have accepted that *"the old"* has gone, but *"the new"* is still strange and unfamiliar.

Motivate

It's fairly typical during the early stages of the change/transition process for people to experience a (sometimes drastic) drop in motivation and morale. By this middle stage, however, things should begin to plateau. Your goal now is to help bring the levels back up by **coaching** your team.

The first thing to remember is to be *patient*. People are still adjusting, so getting frustrated that certain people aren't up to speed or still haven't learnt the new systems etc. is only going to demotivate them further.

During this time, **be quick with praise** - don't force it and don't be insincere about it, but make an effort to always praise a job well done, no matter how small.

And **avoid criticism** where possible. This doesn't mean letting mistakes or bad behaviour go uncorrected, but there are more subtle ways of making things right. For example, instead of telling somebody that they've done something wrong and that *this* is how they should have done it. Have a conversation with them, go over the key points of the task, the goal they were supposed to achieve, and guide them towards discovering the answer for themselves.

Helping people find their *own* solutions is a great way to improve morale and is much more motivating than simply being criticised and corrected by their manager.

Remove Demotivators

Identify and remove things which demotivate your team[11]. Demotivators can be psychological like unfairness, boredom, or a lack of confidence in the organisation or in senior management; they can be physical like noise, a lack of resources, or poor building/office quality; or certain people can be demotivators within the team.

Whatever the source, do what you can to remove the problem and remember that you can always speak with your line manager, the **Change Leaders**, or an HR representative if you need support, resources, help, or advice on handling demotivators.

Teach

Far from just being a swamp where motivation goes to die, the *Neutral Zone* can actually be quite an exciting time, particularly as those motivation levels begin to pick up. Encourage people to consider what their new future looks like and provide opportunities for them to learn new skills, utilise new resources, experience new software, or meet new people that they'll be working with.

The future can seem a lot scarier when you feel unprepared for it, but by giving your team the tools they need to thrive as they move forward, you'll make it seem a lot less daunting.

Reflect

Sooner or later, your team will find their place, build new individual identities, and will establish new routines. The unfamiliar becomes familiar, the dark becomes light, and the scary and uncertain is now just another Monday morning.

This is great and exactly where you wanted to end up from the very beginning. Take a bit of time and encourage your team to enjoy this moment, it's what all the hard work has been for. Ask them to think about how they felt at the very beginning when they *first* learnt of the change and compare it to how they feel *now*. The difference in feeling between those two moments is evidence of just how much each person has grown.

But let's not forget about **you**. Your team has successfully made the transition through the change at your workplace, but **you** led them through it. Enjoy your own success and take a moment to dream - what's next?

How iHASCO can help

Our Responding to Change Training Course will help employees learn to better handle their feelings and confidently respond to change. In just 10 minutes, all staff can better understand their natural reactions to change and how to handle them, which means that their response to change can improve - and in time - their feelings about change can change too.

At the end of this training, users will take away 4 easy, actionable steps that they can apply to their lives to help them respond to change.

Appendix

1 https://www.inc.com/scott-mautz/science-says-this-is-why-you-fear-change-and-what-to-do-about-it.html
2 https://www.caravelcoaching.com/change-vs-transition/
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8 https://hbr.org/2018/10/dont-just-tell-employees-organizational-changes-are-coming-explain-why
9 https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/how-to-beat-the-transformation-odds#
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11 https://www.managers.org.uk/~/media/Files/Campus%20CMI/Checklists%20First%20Management%20Role/Motivating%20your%20employees%20in%20a%20time%20of%20change.ashx