

## Managing Change

Kathryn Critchley

Isaac Asimov famously said: '*The only constant is change.*' (Cited in Hartung, 2004).

So why is it so difficult for most of us to understand, manage, or embrace change?

Coping with change can be challenging for many and, depending on the change and what the impact or outcome of the change means to the individual, will depend upon how well they embrace and accept it. Should a person be fearful of change then it is natural that they will attempt to resist it which in turn can cause high levels of stress and anxiety.

Understanding how we typically react to change also helps us to cope better and manage change. The Kubler-Ross (2009) Model of Change is perhaps one of the best known and most applied models within clinical environments (her original work being around the five stages of grief) which is now also applied to businesses and organisations when looking at changes in the work place such as loss or change of job.

The five stages she refers to are:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

A common example used to explain this model is to understand how we would typically respond to an unexpected change such as a dead car battery.

### The dead car battery

Just imagine it is a cold winter day and you are dashing to get to work already running late...

You jump into the car, place the key in the ignition and turn it on.

Nothing happens, the battery is dead.

Applying the Kubler Ross Model to this situation, this is how a person may typically react:

Denial - This cannot be happening! Try again. And again! Check the other things in the car are working such as the lights and radio. Try again but still nothing.

Anger - Arrrrgh you stupid car!!! I'm sick of this car!! Why is this happening today of all days!! Slamming a hand against the steering wheel.

Bargaining - (realising that it really isn't going to start and that you're going to be late for work)..., Oh please car, if you will just start one more time I promise I'll buy you a brand new battery and keep you clean and tidy. Please just start this one time.

Depression - Oh no! What am I going to do? I'm going to be late for work. I give up. I don't really care any more. What's the use?

Acceptance - Right I need to do something. It is not going to start. I need to call the breakdown service and ring into work.

The above example is a simple example yet I'm sure most of us have experienced it or something similar quite often. If you apply this to a situation where the stakes are far higher such as a sudden loss or change of a job, bereavement, house, relationship etc which may impact upon so many things including stability of finances, family, health and other forms of security, then you may be able to see the harsh effect this could have on an individual during this time.

Often individuals add to their stress by expecting themselves to be able to cope with such events. It is important to understand it is not about strength or weakness but about human nature to react by demonstrating the signs of loss and grief. Organisations, managers and individuals need to be understanding and supportive when situations like this happen.

Another way of understanding and coping with change is to consider what goes on in the mind of the individual at the time of the change and what it 'means' to them. Some people see risk and uncertainty as exciting and embrace change (depending on the change), whereas others can be fearful of any change, even

those perceived to be minor changes, as for them any change is seen as a risk and takes them out of their comfort zone.

**The comfort zone**

Your comfort zone is where you are fully able, competent and comfortable. The job that you can do with your eyes shut or routines of life where you know exactly what you are doing. You may feel slightly challenged now and then, but there's nothing you cannot easily handle.

When invited to step outside their comfort zone – or if they're pushed outside of it - many people react with resistance. This is because of the human fear of failure which, when you look into it more deeply, comes from a desire to be accepted, liked and even loved. When most people 'fail' they feel embarrassed, ashamed, silly or stupid because they feel they can't or couldn't do whatever it was they tried.

So it's understandable if at work, or any area of life where there is change, people react with resistance. Change is the unknown, and if you don't know whether you can do something – especially if you have a 'Be Perfect' driver – you could have fears over whether you can do it, can be a success or even cope. Everyday changes such as new computers or telephone systems, new staff, new jobs, new routines and procedures, new management, merging of departments, sections or whole companies or, on a personal level, exams, weddings, divorce, births, deaths, moving house and so on, are all high on the list of stressors due to change.

**How big is your zone?**

Are you resistant to change? If you are, you're causing yourself stress. Imagine what size a child's comfort zone would be compared to an adult's. Children do not have inhibitions and fears; it's only as we grow older that we learn to feel fear, that we learn what embarrassment is and how to feel silly or stupid – that is, we learn to have an ego. This restricts our ability to have the freedom to learn, grow and be open to change, as we are nervous about asking questions for fear of looking silly, or trying new things for fear of failure, and we avoid doing anything that may cause us to feel embarrassed.

By being more fluid and open to change, accepting any fear and dealing with it effectively, you would not only grow your confidence and self-esteem, but you will be free to develop your life with more happiness and less stress.

By looking at change differently (for example, recognising that change can also be a good thing; focusing on the possible positives from a situation rather than being quick to look at the negatives from a point of fear and therefore resistance) stress can be greatly reduced.

Choose to flow with change rather than resist; choose to step out of your comfort zone and grow the size of your comfort

zone daily. Aim to have a comfort zone the size of a child's where nothing can faze or worry you, and you will notice a huge difference to the amount of stress you have in your life.

'The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can change their life by altering their attitude of mind.' William James (cited in Maxwell, 2007).

Remember – the only failure is not trying again. If we fail at something at least we know what NOT to do next time!

**Identifying your zones and being rational**

Following are three simple exercises you can complete to help you to gain a rational perspective on understanding how you cope with change and also being solution focused when embracing change.

The zones of change help us to understand the different levels of comfort or 'risk' and where changes may sit in terms of their perceived meanings to the individual.

**Zones of change**



**Exercise 1**

*Think back to a significant change in your life or work (something from the past).*

What were your perceived risks at the time?  
 .....  
 .....

What did you lose?  
 .....  
 .....

What did you gain?  
 .....  
 .....

This exercise demonstrates that our ‘perceived risks’ at the time of a change were often far different than the reality of how the change occurred. It is also common for an individual to notice that their ‘gains’ can be larger than their ‘losses’ (time can play a factor in this too, often a change can seem a disaster at the time but over time a person can look back and be glad it happened in comparison to how their life is now.)

**Exercise 2**

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*Think of a change that you are currently undergoing.*

What aspects of the change are in your ‘comfort zone’?

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What aspects are in your ‘risk zone’?

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What aspects are in your ‘high risk zone’?

.....  
.....

What do you need to make the ‘high risk’ into ‘risk’ and the ‘risk’ into ‘comfort’?

.....  
.....

This exercise is excellent for considering a current change and how it may affect a person.

Actually listing in categories the level of ‘risk,’ or even drawing the zones on a piece of paper and writing in each change in the place on the zone where the person believes it sits, will give a rational perspective.

Once all the ‘risks’ are highlighted then that is the time to minimize ‘risk’ and find solutions for the individual to cope or manage that change. This is good for action planning and allowing a person to take control to embrace a change rather than being reactive once the change has occurred.

**Exercise 3**

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*Think of a life or work change which is going to occur in the future.*

Blockers

What I’d be sorry to lose.

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.....

My fears and concerns.

.....  
.....

Drivers

Benefits of the change.

.....  
.....

What I’d be glad to leave behind.

.....  
.....

Answering these questions assists a person to determine how much resistance they may feel/have towards a change. Listing potential blockers will identify fears and concerns of the change as well as the levels of risk and loss. Listing drivers will encourage the individual to consider the benefits of the change, the gains, and that change can also be a good thing.

Typically, whichever list is the longest or has the most meaning/impact will be the strongest for that person. If this is the blockers they will resist the change and cause themselves pressure and stress. Therefore addressing the zones of change and looking for ways to reduce risk would be a good strategy in action planning to manage the change well. Should the drivers be the strongest for the person then they are likely to embrace the change more readily although they may still need to address their thoughts and rationale for any blockers listed.

**Change tips:**

- Embrace change, as if you don’t accept it someone will push you into it.
- Take every opportunity to grow your comfort zone.
- Have the attitude that there is no failure and only learning and development – when we ‘fail’ we know what NOT to do next time.
- The worst rarely happens, so why waste energy focusing on it and enforcing irrational fears?
- Change CAN be a good thing.
- There is always a solution, it may take time for you to see it, but if you look, you will find it.

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**Competing Interests**

None declared

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