

It's Time to Take Charge of Change

 by *Linley Watson*



Pressures

Leaders are always under pressure to get more done, with fewer resources, in a shorter period of time – that’s just business as usual.

But business as usual is no longer enough. Just to survive, organisations must keep pace with the rapidly changing global marketplace, respond to industry and competitive pressures and adapt to shifting customer demands. They must embrace new technologies, continuously look for more efficient ways of operating, find ways to innovate and more. The amount, scope and pace of change required can be relentless, overwhelming and exhausting.

Equip for Change

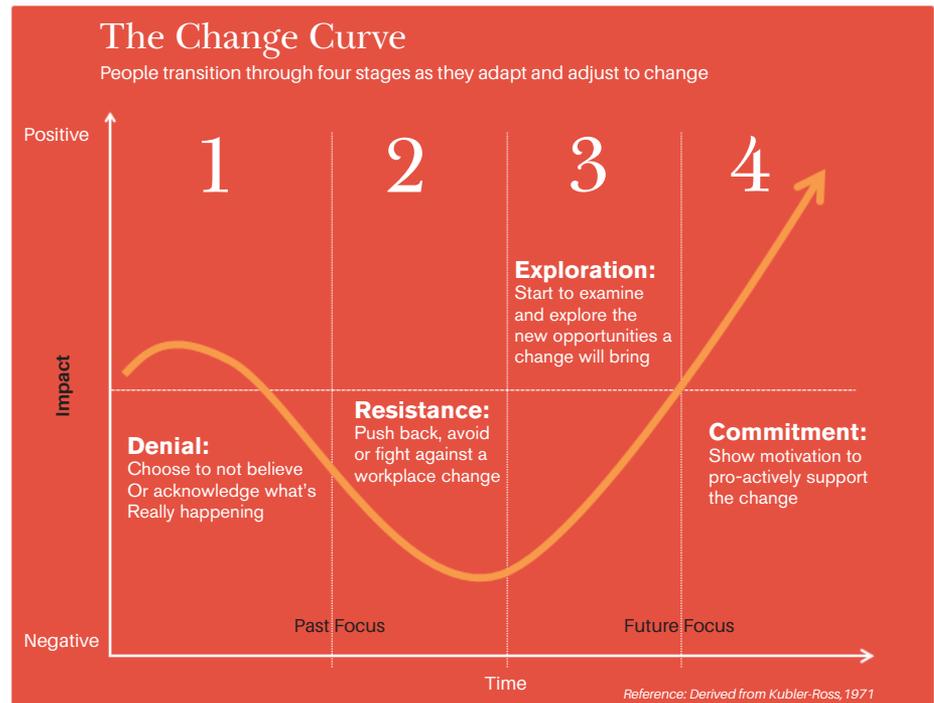
Given that change is inevitable and it is not going to slow down, there is an urgent need to educate and equip people to take charge of change and own their personal change experience.

“Everybody has accepted by now that change is unavoidable ...but change is like death and taxes — it should be postponed as long as possible and no change would be vastly preferable. But in a period of upheaval, such as the one we are living in, change is the norm.”

— Peter Drucker, *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* (1999)

Put your Own Mask on First

Just like in the pre-flight safety demonstration when passengers are directed to put on their own oxygen mask first before assisting



others, leaders need to be in control and look after their own wellbeing first. That doesn't mean looking after number one to the detriment of others, it means purposely developing a set of strategies, tools and resources to help them adapt and manage their own emotions when under the added stress triggered by change.

Only then can leaders be role models and provide the leadership, direction and support their people and their organisation needs to not only survive but thrive in challenging, changing times.

The Emotional Journey through Change

During the change process people experience a wide range of emotions. The “Change Curve” evolved from a combination of psychological models from Kubler-Ross, Lewin and others, and is

widely accepted in the field of change management. It is based on the principle that there are predictable patterns of emotional reactions to change over time. The model identifies four key phases or stages that people move through as they come to terms with change - *Denial, Resistance, Exploration and Commitment*.

By understanding the impact change has on people's emotions and behaviours, leaders can identify and consciously control their own responses as well as offer the most appropriate guidance and support for their people as they navigate their way through the process. Although the patterns of behaviour might be similar, everyone progresses along the curve at their own pace. The idea is to flatten the curve and smooth the transition, helping people move through each of the phases more positively, pro-actively and quickly. ▶

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Moving Beyond Resistance

While most move on, some people get stuck in the resistance phase. Resistance is often rooted in fear and a lack of understanding so education and regular, compelling communication that addresses the “why” behind the change can help people to get with the program.

In any organisational change it is estimated that about 20 per cent of people are ready and willing to embrace change, 50 per cent are neutral – waiting to decide which way to lean and around 30 per cent are resisters, desperately hanging on to the status quo or deliberately trying to make the new way fail.

This group of resisters are hard to ignore but giving them extra attention often just reinforces their problem behaviour, causes the rest of the team even more stress and slows down the change process. It makes more sense for leaders to focus their attention on those 20 percent of advocates who are up for change and engage them in influencing the 50 percent of fence-sitters whom it is necessary to win over.

It is not essential to have buy-in from everyone to move forward

and progress the change. For a good percentage of people, buy-in and commitment comes later after the results are in. Like change itself, resistance is predictable, inevitable and even necessary but leaders need to consider what resistance is reasonable and deal with it appropriately. They should also consider their own attitudes and behaviours and whether they’re leading their team into change or into resistance.

Develop Emotional Resilience

Transitioning through the phases of change can be uncomfortable and stressful and lead to burnout with lingering difficulties. The antidote is to become more emotionally resilient.

Emotional resilience is about having the mental toughness and emotional strength to cope. It’s about being able to adapt, to last the distance and maintain a sense of wellbeing when facing the adversities of change. Most of all it’s about self-awareness and self-control, taking charge in challenging times, recognising what situations cause stress, being able to make good decisions about how to respond and having

resources to call on for help.

Common change-related workplace causes of stress include restructuring, changing roles, implementing new systems and processes, lack of clear direction, customer complaints, ambiguous circumstances and relationship issues with colleagues. The key is for each individual to identify what specifically is causing them stress then recognise the physical, emotional, mental and other reactions that are being triggered. Armed with awareness of their causes of stress and reactions, the next step is to find and acknowledge personal strengths, strategies and resources that can be drawn upon to help them face and deal with these situations successfully. Things like positive self-talk, going for a walk, recalling past positive outcomes, researching best practice, talking with a friend, practicing mindfulness, listening to music and asking a colleague or partner for help are all things that can work.

Focus on What You can Control and Influence

Nobody likes to feel “done to” and feeling powerless is a common complaint when navigating

through change. It doesn't help that there's a tendency for people to spend the majority of their time and energy worrying about and reacting to those things over which they have no control instead of those things they have.

In his famous book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," Stephen Covey describes a Circle of Concerns which contains all the things people are concerned about. Within that is a Circle of Influence that includes those things that individuals can actually influence and control.

"Be Proactive" is Covey's first habit,

which is about taking initiative and responsibility. People may have no choice about the major changes taking place in their workplace but Covey argues that they do have the freedom to choose how they respond to situations and circumstances and the opportunity to expand their sphere of influence and control. One thing that everyone has control over is their mindset. People can choose a negative, reactive stance to change or take a positive, proactive stance and take control of their own attitudes, behaviours, language and ultimately their results.

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Conclusion

Successful people and businesses never stand still. Change can be hard but it can also be exciting, invigorating and full of growth and opportunities for those willing and able to embrace it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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