

Helping People Cope with Change

Suggestions to Assist Leaders in Helping Their People and Themselves Deal Effectively with Major Organizational Changes

by Martin L. Ramsay
CEATH Company

1. Understand the Nature of Change

LOSS
PEOPLE RESIST CHANGE.

First recognize that people do not really resist change. Do you resist changing your clothes after work? Would you resist getting a raise? What people really resist is LOSS — the loss of things that have become important to them. Loss might include:

1. loss of territory (physical space, influence, control)
2. loss of relationships (with peers, supervisors, friends)
3. loss of structure (routines, schedules, priorities)
4. loss of meaning (knowing why we do what we do)

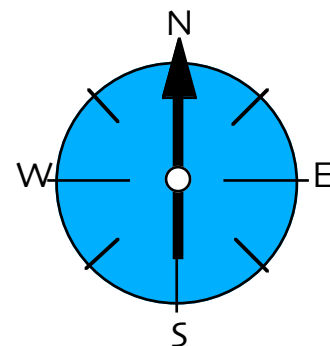
Of course the most significant resistance is the fear of the loss of a future, a future tied to a job and company. Acknowledge that people have this fear, perhaps even that you share it.

2. "Sell" the Problem

To deal with the fear of loss, "sell" the problem. Rather than talk about what's wrong with the economy, the company, or some other department, talk about the realities of what the organization is facing. The truth is the truth — let the truth sell the future. If we don't do something, our fears will come true. We will be worse off if we don't change than if we do. Then shift the focus to those things that won't change (you won't care for people less, people will not be less skilled, their role in the company will certainly not diminish).

3. Know Where You Are Going

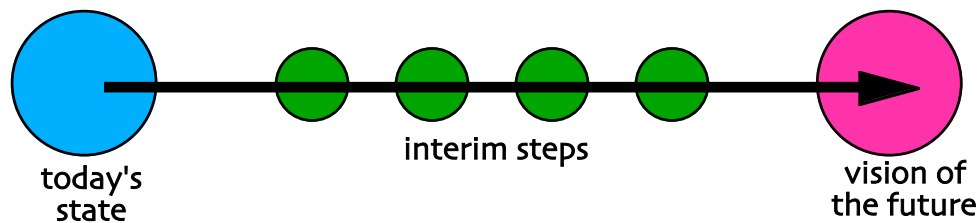
The most critical thing during a change is to know where you're going and why. If you don't know, you'll go just about anywhere, because any road will take you there. To know where you are going dictates that you have a vision — the destination you are trying to achieve. A vision is like a compass; it always points north, no matter how dark it gets or how hard the wind blows. And a compass always points to true north; it doesn't miss the mark, even by a few degrees.



So what does this mean for you and your team? It means that you need a vision of where you are going. If you don't have one, then the most critical task you can accomplish right now is getting clear about "true north" for your team. And with fewer people to do more work, it's worth involving your team in determining your vision. It is also important that the vision be well understood by everyone in your organization. In stressful, changing times like these, a vision will guide you like a compass in a storm.

4. Define the Interim Steps

While defining a vision is difficult, organizational development professionals say that defining the path to "get there," to move toward the vision, is even more difficult. It may be hard to describe how you want your department to work in the future, but it may be even more difficult to determine what interim steps you will need to go through to get there. Once again, involving your people and helping them to use their own expertise is your best method. They, often being closer to the day-to-day operations of the organization, will be better able to describe the myriad details that must be addressed. Utilizing everyone's expertise will better enable you to effect the needed changes and accomplish the vision.

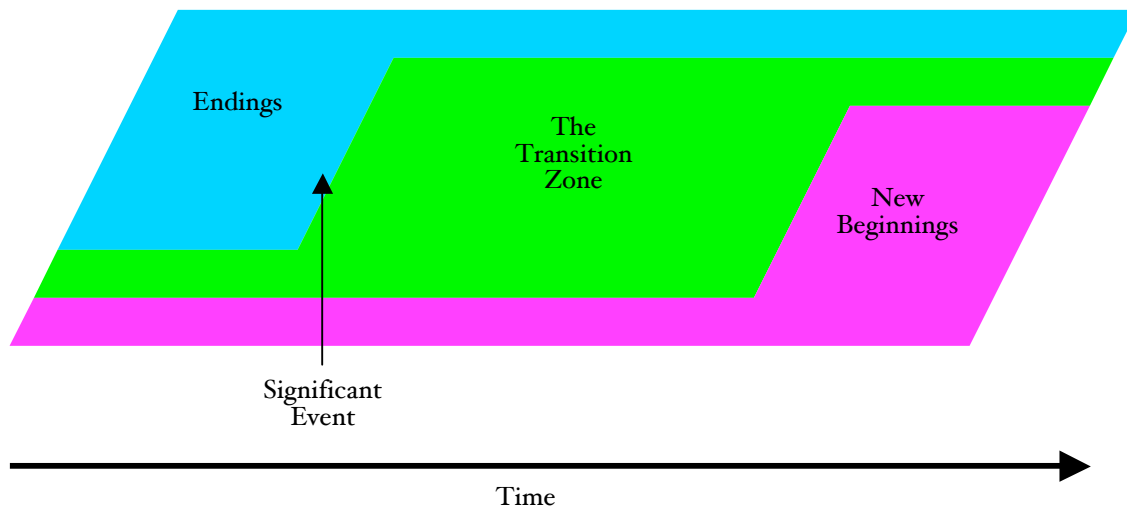


The following process is useful for determining interim steps:

1. Define the desired future. Ask, "What will this department be like?"
2. Define a time frame. Ask, "How soon do we expect to arrive at this desired future?"
3. Review the present. Ask, "What, in reality, is going on today?"
4. Define the half-way point. Ask, "What will have to be going on when we are half way to our desired future?"
5. Define the first quarter. Ask, "What will have to be going on when we are a fourth of the way there?"
6. Define immediate next steps. Ask, "What should we start working on immediately to move us toward the first quarter?"

5. Recognize and Manage the Transition Zone

William Bridges has described a response that human beings have when they experience change. He calls it the "transition zone." The transition zone is necessary time people spend to assimilate and adapt to change. Failure to recognize people's requirement for traversing the transition zone can leave a lot of "walking wounded" who cannot go back and yet cannot move forward.



Bridges notes that there are elements of the new, even in the old. And, even after the transition zone has been traversed, there are elements of the old that remain. It is important to acknowledge this. After the dust settles, your organization will still have its history of where it has been. And, most likely, even before the current changes began, there were signs of business reorganization. Bridges also notes that there is usually some significant event that propels people into the transition zone. The company may have been purchased, there may be a major downsizing, or some other event that says "things won't ever go back to the way they used to be."

Right now, your most pressing challenge is to manage the transition zone. If done well, the transition zone can be one of the most exciting times in an organization's history, a time when it redefines itself and emerges vigorous and with renewed vision. If managed poorly, the transition zone can create legions of people with low morale and fear, who come to work in body, but leave their souls at home. During times of significant change, some people may quit and leave. Even more destructive are those who don't make it through the transition zone, those who quit — and stay.

6. Experience the Mourning

Whenever there is loss, people experience stages of mourning. Your people are mourning right now. This needs to be acknowledged and facilitated through the transition zone. The stages of mourning cannot be skipped, but with compassion and understanding from you, they can be moved along more quickly. They can also

be a great source of learning for you and your people. According to Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the stages of mourning are:

- DENIAL — people will resist acknowledging that the company has changed
- ANGER — people have been hurt by recent changes; they have a right to be angry
- BARGAINING — they will begin to try to salvage pieces of the old way in exchange for going along with parts of the new way
- DEPRESSION — when they realize that the new is coming, people will, to one degree or another, experience a feeling of depression; this is the stage in which there are a lot of "walking wounded" who need your compassion
- ACCEPTANCE — finally, if they successfully work through the transition zone, people will begin to accept the changes that are happening

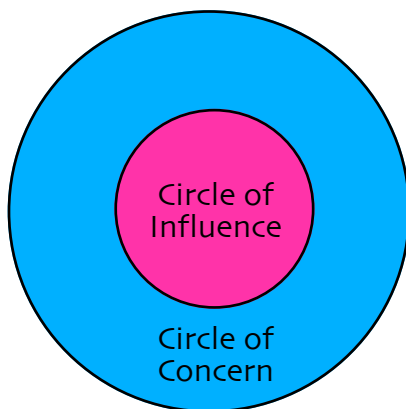
Through the mourning, you will need to accept and understand these stages, show compassion for the loss and depression people are experiencing, and still hold people accountable for moving toward the vision you have worked out. Also be on the alert for learnings; if you are paying attention, you'll find that the transition zone is full of good ideas, innovation, and new ways to get things done.

7. Empower Yourself

No one can give you empowerment; you must make a decision to empower yourself. The natural tendency, in times of great change, is to forfeit power, to wait for someone to tell you what to do. But in the transition zone you need to become more pro-active than ever. Don't wait for a perfect set of instructions from management — everyone else is struggling just like you. The company cannot afford the paralysis of inertia and inaction. Ask for forgiveness later, but don't ask for permission now. Show your people by your example that you are not the victim of ambiguity, but the captain of a ship threading through rough water.

8. Focus on Things You Can Fix

In times of change it's easy to get caught up in worrying about things over which you have little or no control. All worry does is gobble up your energy — it doesn't accomplish anything. Stephen Covey says we each have a "circle of concern" —



things we worry about but can't affect — and a "circle of influence." Empower yourself to focus on your circle of influence. This is where you can do the most good for your company. Work where you can make a difference. For example, you may be able to change a procedure or make a decision. Do so! You may also be able to suggest an idea, but not be able to carry it out. Making the suggestion is within your circle of influence, carrying out the suggestion is in your circle of concern. Focus on what you can do, stretching your circle of influence a little bit larger each day as you go along.

You can help your people, too, by explaining the difference between things they are concerned about, but over which they have no control, and things they can influence. Help them work within their own circle of influence, acknowledge their concerns, and together, help each other to not "sweat the small stuff."

9. Integrity, Always Integrity

Because the rules seem to get fuzzy during major changes, it's easy to compromise on fundamental principles. Don't give in to this insidious temptation! Things like being fair, telling the truth, and treating people with respect should not be thrown out just because other rules have changed. There is a proverb that says that a good person who gives up his integrity is like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain. Both were once sources of good water, but now they are useless, even harmful. Hold fast to your own integrity while moving through the transition zone.

10. Don't Forget Your Own Needs

Because you are a compassionate, caring manager, it's easy to expend a great deal of energy tending to your people, empowering them, providing visionary leadership, and easing their hurts. These are things you should be doing. But don't forget that you, too, are in the transition zone. You, too, have loss to be concerned about, mourning to do, concerns over which you have no influence. While you are leading your people through the transition zone to the new beginnings on the other side, be sure and check yourself occasionally. Do you need someone to talk to? Are you running low on energy?

You can't lead if you're exhausted. Spend a little time on yourself, reviving and restoring, so you can enter the fray with renewed energy.

Need help managing change in your organization? Please contact us at:



CEATH Company
1788 Highway 1016, Suite B
Berea, KY 40403-9110

Tel. (859)986-8702
E-mail: mail@ceath.com
Internet: www.ceath.com

Special thanks to the following sources that contributed to the concepts presented in this paper: Patricia Newmann, change consultant and friend; Stephen Covey, author of Principle-Centered Leadership and The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People; William Bridges, author of Managing Transitions; Price Pritchett and Ron Pound, authors of Team ReConstruction; Richard Beckhard; Warner Burke; Elizabeth Kubler Ross; and the Proverbs of King Solomon.