Topics

Responses to Change: What Leaders Need to Know  3
Using the SCARF Model to Understand Reactions to Change  8
Building Resilience during Change  9
Responses to Change: What Leaders Need to Know

The Change Curve describes the stages people go through when faced with a major change in their lives. These stages usually happen in sequence as people deal with change and loss. In work groups, people may be in different places along the curve. Some employees move more quickly through each stage, and some employees bounce back and forth between stages. Employees with more knowledge about a change may be in a later change stage than one who has just learned about the change. In a situation where some in a group are affected and others are not, those directly unaffected may still experience the ups and downs of the change model. This is a normal reaction.

Stage 1 Losing Focus: At this stage, employees know change is coming. They may be confused, uncertain, and anxious. Even with positive changes, people are often moving in many directions at once and may be distracted from day-to-day activities.

Stage 2 Minimizing the Impact: People in this stage are seeking comfort by avoiding a realistic look at the change. They may be caught up in denial.

Stage 3 The Pit: Once people realistically assess what they are losing and gaining in a change, they typically enter “the pit” – a place where things seem very uncertain, and there is a strong sense of loss.

Stage 4 Letting Go of the Past: Once people begin to move out of the pit, they are ready to let go of the past and focus on moving ahead. Groups develop more positive energy around the change and begin to focus on the future.

Stage 5 Testing the Limits: As employees begin to explore the future, they seek to figure out what works and what doesn’t. They will test limits and create boundaries for the new work.

Stage 6 Searching for Meaning: At this point, employees are becoming more comfortable with the change. They are ready to engage in defining the new reality.

Stage 7 Integrating: The change is now incorporated into the work; the group is ready to move forward.
Here are some things that leaders can do to understand and take steps to work with people experiencing change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of Change</th>
<th>Symptoms</th>
<th>Steps Leaders Can Take to Help</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 1, Losing Focus</strong></td>
<td>• Sticking with the familiar.</td>
<td><strong>Communicate</strong></td>
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<td>• Distraction and inability to focus on day-to-day work.</td>
<td>• Communicate relevant details and information about the change.</td>
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<td>• Avoidance; acting as if nothing is happening.</td>
<td>• Clarify the mission and set the short term direction for the group.</td>
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<td>• Statements such as “I’m fine” or “This really doesn’t impact me.”</td>
<td>• Provide consistent information with other leaders around you.</td>
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<td>• Increased self centeredness.</td>
<td>• Educate employees on the impact of the change – what it does and does not mean.</td>
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<td>• Silence and withdrawal.</td>
<td>• Supervisors may think employees support the change because employees are quiet and continue to do their jobs.</td>
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<td>• Over focus on the little things.</td>
<td>o Don’t see silence as a sign that everything is OK.</td>
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<td>• Wait-and-see attitude – don’t take initiative.</td>
<td>o Don’t disappear after the change announcements. Be visible and talk to your employees to see how they are doing.</td>
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<td>• Lack of curiosity about the changes.</td>
<td><strong>Manage the ambiguity</strong></td>
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<td>• Blaming upper management.</td>
<td>• Don’t adopt a business-as-usual approach or get defensive.</td>
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<td><strong>Stage 2, Minimizing the Impact</strong></td>
<td>• Employees may work extra hours to try to keep things the same.</td>
<td>• Don’t force employees to work through their feelings.</td>
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<td>• Rumor mills become active.</td>
<td>• Understand the dynamics of change and its impact on you and others.</td>
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<td>• Employees may refuse to get along or actively defy supervisor’s efforts to move the change forward.</td>
<td>• Set short-term priorities.</td>
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<td>• Employees can get stuck in this phase if they don’t acknowledge their reactions or if they are expected to quickly accept the changes.</td>
<td>• Practice patience.</td>
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<td>• Show empathy for all employees; don’t speak negatively about people who have left organization.</td>
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<td>• Actively listen to employee concerns by setting up one-on-one or group meetings.</td>
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<td>• Focus discussion on the future or what lies ahead, not on what has just happened.</td>
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<td>• Give time to let things sink in and work through their feelings.</td>
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<td>• Expect emotional comments.</td>
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<td>• Address feelings and emotions.</td>
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| **Stage 3, The Pit** | • Symptoms include frustration, anger, fear, feeling overwhelmed or depressed.  
• Productivity dips or work will be re-done.  
• Employees stick to old ways of doing things, despite requirements or directions to switch to new.  
• Employees focus on what I can’t / shouldn’t do instead of solutions.  
• Employees will say “I told you this was going to happen” or “this decision is unfair.”  
• Negative attitude – more complaining, sarcasm.  
• Employees join forces to complain. | • Empathize and reflect the feelings you hear – don’t try to talk people out of their feelings.  
• Allow employees to express feelings in a safe environment. Create support networks.  
• Be open-minded about reactions.  
• Manage conflict.  
• Value differences.  
• If implementing new structures or processes, slowly phase out old language or acronyms. For example, “Our old team name was XXXXX. Let’s start using our new name on XXX (date).”  
• Have a plan for addressing unresolved issues or questions. Don’t “guess.”  
• Don’t give pep talks that ignore important issues.  
• Don’t load people up with work to keep their minds off of changes.  
• Partner resisters with more accepting peers.  
• Encourage a realistic look at the future. Suggest that employees to write lists of what they are losing and gaining in the change.  
• Make time for ending rituals. |
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| **Stage 4, Letting Go of the Past** | • Breakthroughs and “ah ha’s” occur.  
• It may feel like a time of chaos.  
• Rules change.  
• Fear that something will fall through the cracks.  
• Nervous energy – which can feed the feeling of chaos.  
• Difficulty staying focused.  
• Minimal references to the old way. | • Articulate the Vision  
• Create temporary structures.  
• Encourage risk-taking.  
• Allocate resources.  
• Openly discuss possibilities that can result from changes.  
• When talking about work or structural changes, brainstorm pros/cons with focus on the pros.  
• Focus on important work priorities to help narrow the many options and choices.  
• Follow up on current projects but renegotiate outcomes based on the change.  
• Avoid doing the first thing that comes to mind.  
• Provide needed training so team members feel they are supported.  
• Provide time and opportunity to practice new skills/develop expertise that is needed as result of change.  
• Set short-term goals so employees can see success.  
• Develop best practices.  
• Clarify goals, objectives, and roles as information becomes available.  
• Break actions into smaller chunks – set milestones and deadlines. |
| • Employees move into this phase when they acknowledge their feelings and accept that change has happened or isn’t going away, even if they don’t personally welcome it.  
• Employees decide to try to make the best of it, learn new skills, and seek new ideas.  
• They may experience chaos, be stimulated by discovery, and be overwhelmed by challenges brought on by change all at the same time.  
• Exploration signals a shift from seeing change as loss to seeing it as an opportunity. | • Sign of exploration include willingness to take risks and try new ideas.  
• Desire to solve problems.  
• The leader is often “tested” with questions such as “Can we make an exception to the new policy?” | • Generate commitment  
• Create clear measures of effectiveness.  
• Give positive feedback, small rewards.  
• Set realistic expectations.  
• Build teams.  
• Create rites of passage.  
• Encourage employees to think and act creatively.  
• Brainstorming with employees on ways to address changes. Get them involved in solutions.  
• Involve employees in adjusting work priorities. |
| **Stage 5, Testing the Limits** | • Signs of exploration include willingness to take risks and try new ideas.  
• Desire to solve problems.  
• The leader is often “tested” with questions such as “Can we make an exception to the new policy?” | • Articulate the Vision  
• Create temporary structures.  
• Encourage risk-taking.  
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| • This is a time of questioning and new ideas to see if the change is real.  
• Employees will be more open to trying things in new ways.  
• Employees ask “Why don’t we try this…” | • Generate commitment  
• Create clear measures of effectiveness.  
• Give positive feedback, small rewards.  
• Set realistic expectations.  
• Build teams.  
• Create rites of passage.  
• Encourage employees to think and act creatively.  
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| **Stage 6, Searching for Meaning** | - Staff begin to recognize they've been through a process.  
- Employees begin to analyze what they've learned and how things have changed. | **Communicate values of the “new” culture**  
- Clarify norms. Rewrite ground rules, team charters as needed.  
- Clarify roles and responsibilities.  
- Be open to receiving feedback on how things are going.  
- Have in-depth conversations or brainstorming to get the team thinking about the future.  
- Conduct team building activities to continue positive momentum. |
| **Stage 7, Integrating** | - Signs of employee commitment include being happier, having higher morale, and a more positive attitude in general.  
- Greater sense of teamwork.  
- Willingness to share ideas.  
- References to the old structure or processes are gone.  
- Employees have new skills and are up to speed on the technical side of the change.  
- Because of mastery of new skills, processes and acceptance of new employees are less stressed.  
- Greater self-confidence. | **Revise and realign strategies, structures and systems**  
- Set policy.  
- Implement new systems.  
- Focus on vision and objectives; firm up strategic plans and set long term goals.  
- Create a mission statement so the “redefined” team is clear on its purpose.  
- Establish recognition and rewards. Match them to the scope of the change and speed of adjustment.  
- CELEBRATE – take a break from work and do something fun.  
- Review what has been learned to see if there are further lessons to be drawn. |

Adapted from Spencer, Sabina and Adams, John (2002), *Life Changes: A Guide to the Seven Stages of Personal Growth*
## Using the SCARF Model to Understand Reactions to Change

When people begin to think about the impact of change on them, these are the concerns that are most commonly triggered. Knowing which of these can most impact you makes it possible to take action to lessen the impact of the trigger.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>How to Impact</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Status</strong></td>
<td>Pecking order and a sense of seniority; the perception of potential, or real, reduction in status can generate a strong threat response; being left out of an activity</td>
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<td><strong>Certainty</strong></td>
<td>The brain relies on memory and predictability; the act of creating certainty is rewarding; going back to a well-known place feels good.</td>
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<td><strong>Autonomy</strong></td>
<td>Perceptions of control over your environment and the freedom to make choice; control over who you get to work with or how you get to do your work</td>
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<td><strong>Relatedness</strong></td>
<td>Sense of belonging to a social group or team</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fairness</strong></td>
<td>Feeling free from bias, dishonesty, and injustice or lack of favoritism toward one group or another</td>
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Building Resilience during Change

What Is Resilience?

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences.

Leaders can encourage behaviors to build resilience in themselves and in others. It’s important for leaders to recognize that they need to take care of and build their own resilience in times of change.

Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. People commonly demonstrate resilience. Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves looking at thoughts, behaviors, and actions.

10 ways to build resilience

1. **Make connections.** Good relationships with close family members, friends, or others are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience. Some people find that being active in civic groups, faith-based organizations, or other local groups provides social support and can help with reclaiming hope. Assisting others in their time of need also can benefit the helper.

2. **Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems.** You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events. Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations.

3. **Accept that change is a part of living.** Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter.

4. **Move toward your goals.** Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly - even if it seems like a small accomplishment - that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable, ask yourself, "What’s one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"

5. **Take decisive actions.** Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions, rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses and wishing they would just go away.

6. **Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of personal strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality, and heightened appreciation for life.
7. **Nurture a positive view of yourself.** Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.

8. **Keep things in perspective.** Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Avoid blowing the event out of proportion.

9. **Maintain a hopeful outlook.** An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.

10. **Take care of you.** Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. Taking care of you helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.

Additional way of strengthening resilience may be helpful. For example, some people write about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to trauma or other stressful events in their life. Meditation and spiritual practices help some people build connections and restore hope. **The key is to identify ways that are likely to work well for you as part of your own personal strategy for fostering resilience.**

Adapted from "The Road to Resilience," American Psychological Assoc.