

Change happens ... to people!

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Keywords, Organisational change, Personal change, Constructivism, PCT

Change happens!, however, how we actually emotionally deal with that change depends on who initiated the change and what control we believe we have over the events in question. As change always impacts on people regardless of anything else changed, it is always a person who must deal with that change. To effectively help people through any change we must understand what the meaning and impact will be for them.

Any change, no matter how small, has the potential to have a major impact on an individual, their self view and subsequent performance. Sabjanyi (2006: 9) recently said in this journal that “organisational change can only happen if employees shift their behaviour and mindset ... so it is important to bring our attention to the level of the individual when attempting culture change”. He goes on to say that “organisational interventions can only be successful if they can influence individual realities in the direction of the intended outcome” (Sabjanyi, 2006:10)

I believe that this focus must be on how the individual perceives and reacts to that change – how do they see the change, what impact do they think it will have on them and what is their emotional journey? The anticipated outcome of any change may very well result in a conflict between what we’ve done in the past, our values and beliefs and our vision, rightly or wrongly, of the what we think will happen in the future.

However, it must be remembered that an individual operates within a multitude of environments within an organisation (e.g. Figure 1). At the most basic level, there are three such levels – the individual, the natural work team and the organisation. These three levels are also impacted by external customer/supplier interfaces as well as other, internal, natural work teams. All of whom have an agenda, wants and needs of their own.

Only by understanding how people see their own world and the meaning they attribute to events can we effectively interact with them. It has been proposed (Balnaves and Caputi 1993) that, at an organizational level, as well as having our own map of the world (or personal construct system), we also create a shared set of team constructs. These are those unwritten rules, myths and structures that we all abide by within an organization but which are not generally made explicit, especially to those outside. So not only do we have to understand the individual but we also have to understand the organizational drivers within which that individual operates.

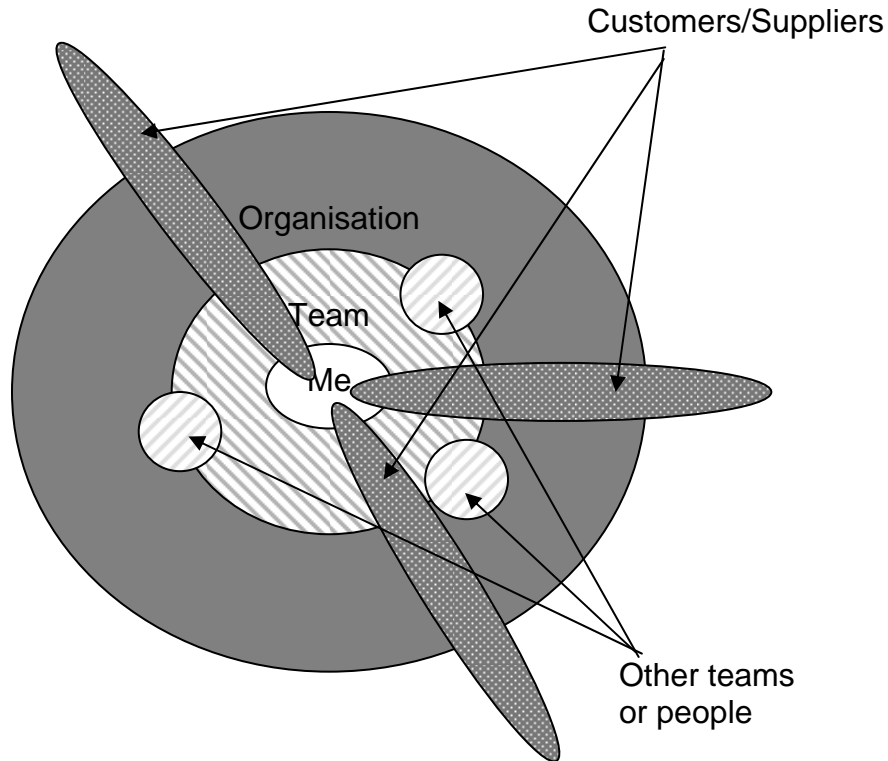


Figure 1 - The Individual within their work space

Therefore any change to the individual and their perception, and resultant actions, will send ripples across many boundaries and set up many change waves within the organisation – like ripples in a pond.

One common metaphor for the organisational transition process is that of bridging the gap between two peaks one representing where we are now and the other the goal. How steep the valley we need to cross is depends on a number of things, e.g. how much support, communication, past experience and influence we feel we have during the journey and our understanding of what we believe the new “peak” represents.

As a person, we all go through a series of set, defined, stages whilst in the process of changing (see fig 2), how quickly we transit across the valley or how deeply we go into the trough of depression and how long we stay there, however, depends on what we bring to the process, and to some extent whether we initiate the change or not.

The stages we go through on our journey are, being emotionally laden, complex and we may spend some time in some of them as we come to terms with the situation and its implications.

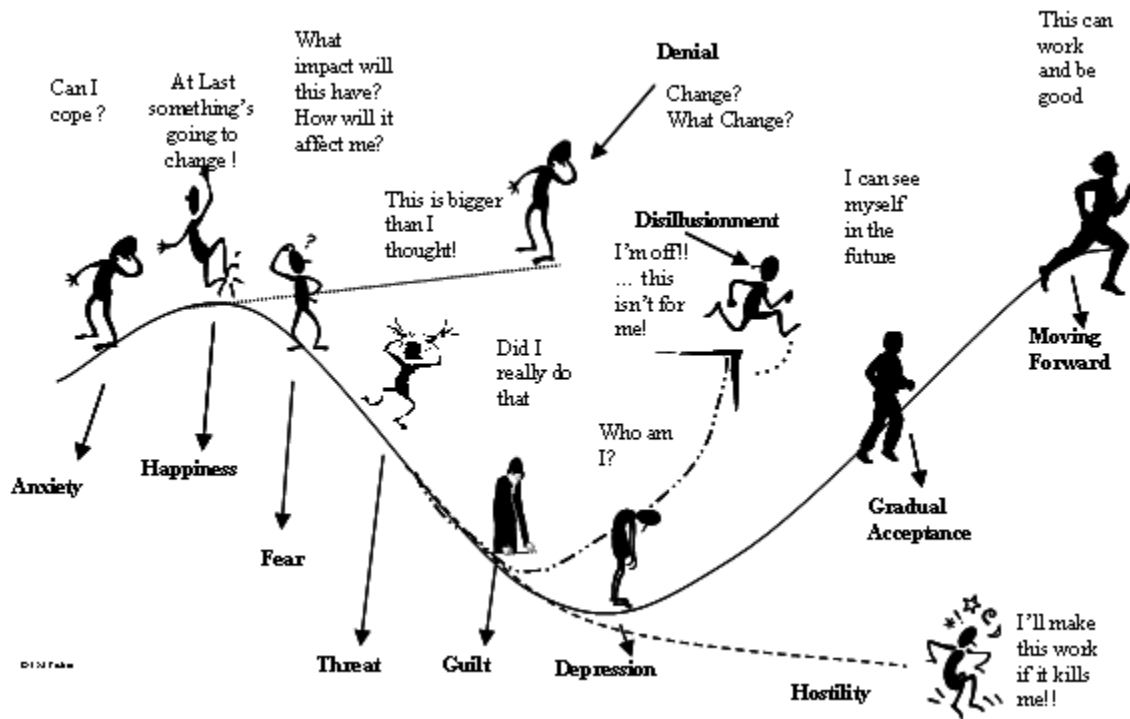


Figure 2 – The Process of Transition

One danger for the individual, team and organisation occurs when an individual persists in operating a set of practices that have been consistently shown to fail (or result in an undesirable consequence) in the past and that do not help extend and elaborate their world-view. Another danger area is that of denial where people maintain operating as they always have denying that there is any change at all. Both of these can have detrimental impact on an organisation trying to change the culture and focus of its people.

The Stages

Anxiety – realising that something is going to change and you don't know what, how or why (yet?). Individuals are unable to adequately picture the future and understand what to do. They do not have enough information to allow them to anticipate how to behave in the future and don't know the questions they should be asking.

Happiness – realising that you're not alone! and that your opinion is, sought, recognised and/or shared by others. At the basic level, there is a feeling of relief that something is going to change and not just continuing as before, especially in if you think that something is wrong at the moment. Whether the past is perceived positively or negatively, there is, possibly, a feeling of excitement at the thought of improvements (and we all think we'll have a significant say in the improvements).

In the phase we generally expect the best and anticipate a bright future, placing our own construct system onto the change and seeing ourselves succeeding. One of the dangers in

this phase is that not enough is done to satisfy everyone. We may believe more should be changed, or think we'll get more from the change than actually turns out to be the case.

The organisation needs to manage this phase carefully to ensure realistic expectations and outcomes are communicated (and recognised/accepted) and perceptions are managed and redefined in the organisations terms without alienating the individual.

Fear - the worry that we'll have to make some small changes in how we behave. People start recognising that they will have to act in a different manner. This will have an impact on both their self-perception and self esteem as well as what others think about them. However, in the main, they see little change in their normal interactions and believe they will be operating in much the same way, merely choosing a more appropriate, but new, action.

Threat – the awareness that we have to do lots of things very differently! Here people see themselves having to make a major lifestyle change, one that will radically alter their future choices and other people's perception of them. They are unsure as to how they will be able to act/react in what is, potentially, a totally new and alien environment – one where the “old rules” no longer apply and there are no “new” ones established as yet.

Guilt – a belief that we've been wrong in how we've done things in the past and we should have known better. If the individual begins self-critically thinking about how they acted/reacted in the past there is a danger that they be overly sensitive and re-interpret the past using current criteria. Recognition of the inappropriateness of their previous actions and the implications for them as people can cause guilt as they realise the impact of their behaviour.

Depression – This phase is characterised by a general lack of motivation to do anything, uncertainty, procrastination and confusion. Individuals are uncertain as to what the future holds for them, how their past skills can now help them, what they should do (especially as everything I've done in the past was wrong!) and an inability to see how they can fit into the future “world”. They see their skills, experience and knowledge as inappropriate and this results in an undermining of their core sense of self; leaving them adrift with no sense of identity and no clear vision of how to operate.

Ironically, if we have initiated the change and we start to encounter difficulties we may then go into the trough of depression as a result of the change not happening, so, it's the lack of change or progress that gives us the problem as we struggle to accept that other people just don't seem to see things the same as us.

Disillusionment – here we recognise that our values, beliefs and goals are incompatible with those of the organisation. The pitfalls associated with this phase are that the employee becomes unmotivated, unfocused and increasingly dissatisfied and gradually withdraws their labour, either mentally (by just “going through the motions”, doing the bare minimum, actively undermining the change by criticising/complaining) or physically by resigning.

This can be seen in the increased amount of complaints about how the organisation is treating people (“they don’t seem to care”, “they’re not interested in me!”, etc. and nostalgic references back to the “old days”).

Hostility – here we insist that the old process still works and will make determined efforts to prove it. The problem here is that people continue to operate in ways that have repeatedly failed or are no longer part of the new world. The new processes are constantly criticised and ignored at best and actively undermined at worst. Support is actively (and aggressively) sought to continue to use the old ways and ignore the new.

Denial – what change – we’re not doing anything different here! Here there is a lack of acceptance of any change and a denial that there will be any impact on the individual. People keep acting as if the change has not happened, using old practices and processes and ignoring evidence or information contrary to their belief systems. This differs from hostility in that here the change is ignored, whereas a hostile approach actively pushes the old ways.

Gradual Acceptance – here we begin to make sense of our environment and of our place within the change. In effect we are beginning to get some validation of our thoughts and actions and can see that where we are going is right. We are at the start of managing our control over the change, make sense of the “what” and “why” and seeing some successes in how we interact – there is “a light at the end of the tunnel!”

This links in with an increasing level of Self-confidence, which in Kellyian terms is defined as an awareness of the goodness of fit of the self in one's core role structure – i.e. we feel good that we are doing the right things in the right way.

Moving Forward - In this stage we are starting to exert more control, make more things happen in a positive sense and are getting our sense of self back. We know who we are again and are starting to feel comfortable that we are acting in line with our convictions, beliefs, etc. and making the right choices.

In this phase we are, again, experimenting within our environment more actively and effectively.

It has also been suggested that there is also actually a final (initial stage?) of *Complacency* (King 2007). Here people have survived the change, rationalised the events, incorporated them into their new construct system and got used to the new reality.

Complacency – this is where we feel that we have, once again, moved into our “comfort zone” and that we will not encounter any event that is either outside our construct system (or world view) or that we can’t incorporate into it with ease. We know the right decisions and can predict future events with a high degree of certainty.

They are subsequently laid back, not really interested in what's going on around them and coasting through the job almost oblivious to what is actually happening around them. They are, again, operating well within their comfort zone and in some respects can't see what all the fuss has been about. Even though the process may have been quite traumatic for them at the time!

So what?

To help people move through the transition effectively we need to understand their perception of the past, present and future and manage their timeline (Fisher, 2005: 257 - 264). What is their past experience of change and how has it impacted on them?, how did they cope then and what can be done to improve it now? Also what will they be losing as part of the change and what will they be gaining? It is important to deal with the past very effectively, recognise the good things and then explain why change must happen.

Figure 3 shows a model of how we approach situations and how we apply meaning to them based on what we think will happen. This is, itself, influenced by two things – what we did in the past in similar situations and what happened as a result of our actions. The result of our past experience then influences our choice of behaviour in the hopes of getting the same (better?) response.

The process in full moves us through having an Experience, Evaluating the consequences of that experience, Integrate our evaluation into our map of the world. Then we Anticipate subsequent outcomes and Plan what to do next time.

If we have limited experience we, potentially, have a limited number of choices we believe are open to us and hence may react less appropriately or positively. If every time we've experienced change it's resulted in pain of some form, then we are going to be cynical, mistrustful and negative.

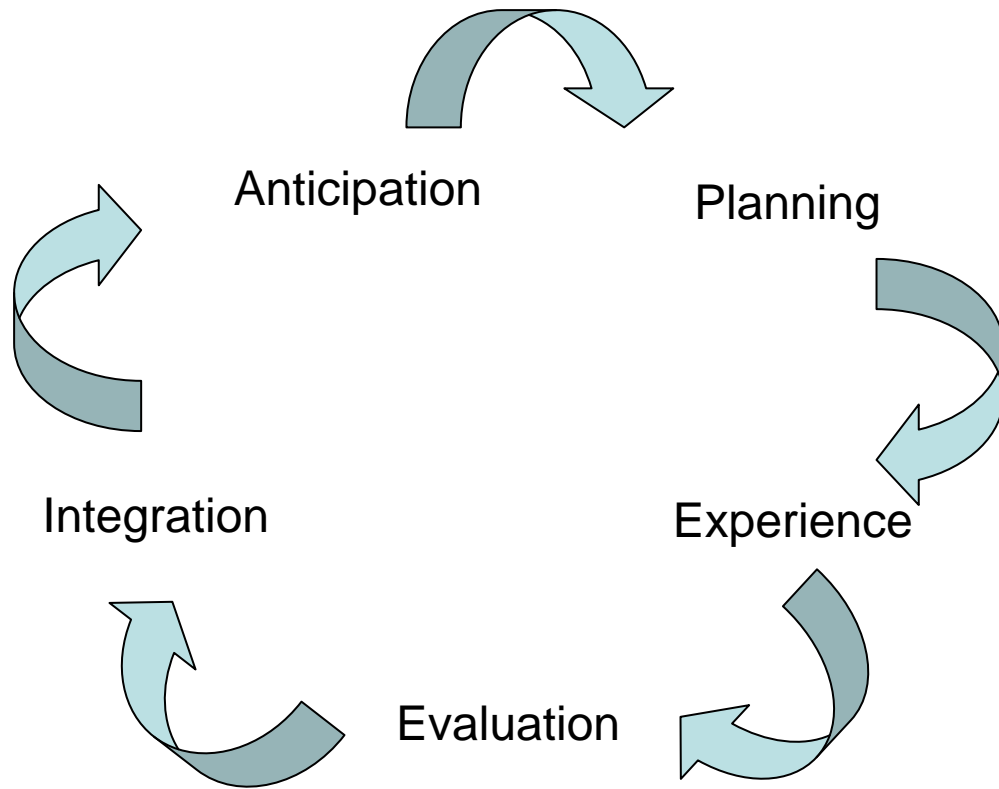


Figure 3 The Experience Cycle

It is important for an individual to understand the impact any change will have on them and their self perception. It is also important for them to be able to work through the implications for themselves and identify their own coping strategies.

By managing the Past – acknowledging what worked and why change is needed, creating a viable Future vision and then giving people a credible route map in the Present to help them start the process, any change programme will have more chance of success.

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Unfortunately this can only happen by communicating and including everyone in the process. Let them ask questions, walk through the process, develop changes/work rounds, understanding, etc. You can use your favourite change model as long as you remember to focus on the individual and their point of view rather than at an organisational level.

As implied in Fig 1, all change happens within an organisational culture or climate and how people react will, in some ways, be influenced by how their peers, line management, customers, suppliers, friends outside and partners/family act. The “grape vine” can also

play an important role in helping people see how others have reacted to the news and will influence their thoughts. We create stories and “myths” about our work and how people behave, so spread a few positive examples as part of your communications.

So, managers must ensure that for any change to be successful they must ensure they do the following :-

- a) Communicate fully the reasons for the change, celebrate those elements of the old system that were working effectively and “close” the past.
- b) Recognise the importance of understanding, and delivering against, the psychological contracts (both implicit and explicit) of all participants and of managing the expectations of employees.
- c) Involve all members of the organisation, allowing them to have their voices heard. Change should not be seen as something forced on people, by either HR or by “management”, individuals must accept and own the change.
- d) Communicate the new vision in an easily understandable way that makes clear what is expected, what the future looks like and what will be required in the future.
- e) Communicate a “route map” or timeline showing what has to happen, by whom and when, allow individuals to compare their own behaviours and actions against the wider organisation.
- f) Be aware of, acknowledge and support people as they go through the various emotions and phases. Celebrate successes as you go along and help people feel involved, valued and in control.

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