

Working through Unexpected Change

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Leaders initiate change. Sometimes it's to overcome some natural or man-made disaster. Sometimes it's the initiation of a new opportunity. Even beneficial change is sometimes uncomfortable for individuals to handle. So, we all need to learn how to work through the discomfort of unexpected changes.

I carry a photocopy of a page from *Managing Change at Work: Leading People through Organizational Transitions*, by Cynthia D. Scott and Dennis T. Jaffe. It's a simple yet powerful description of the emotions people experience as they work their way through unexpected changes.

I have often used this resource to give leaders--and those they influence--some awareness of why they were feeling anxious or lonely. I invite you to use these concepts the next time you find yourself caught up in some unexpected changes (maybe a crisis) that you did not initiate.

Denial. "I can't believe this is happening!" is a common response. There's a tendency to keep doing everything just as it's been done in the past, ignoring all the indications that something is drastically different. You're so comfortable with how things used to be, you just can't seem to accept that so much is now beyond your control.

If the change is a huge shock and the news is bad, numbness seems to protect us from the pain. For a while, we just hope that the news goes away, or that someone will report to us that it was all a cruel joke.

Resistance. The next segment of the change process may be where loneliness and vulnerability seem the greatest. People offer suggestions, and all you can do is shout, "You don't understand!" You may feel panic, anxiety, frustration, depression, or sadness. Maybe you feel guilt or regret that you didn't take some action to prevent this situation.

Everything is so different from what you had been experiencing as "normal." Anger and blaming are commonplace, as the sense of loss feels almost unbearable. It seems life will never be tolerable again!

Exploration. You search for answers, and finally, your mind starts generating possibilities. You hear or read of others who have experienced similar transitions, and hope begins to stir that opportunities will present themselves. Frustrations live, however, nourished by the many false starts and blind alleys you experience trying to move forward!

Still, the potential for moving beyond the anger and anxiety you've been experiencing keeps you generating options. It's wonderful to have everyone thinking with you about possibilities, but what you need is a clear direction for your next steps. Your teammates can't make up their minds about which direction to take. Everyone seems to be pushing his or her preferred answers for what should be done!

Commitment. Finally, some clarity emerges about which options to pursue. Folks begin to agree on how to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each possibility. Very explicit plans surface. A direction is charted and people start moving together toward a new objective.

Cooperation replaces competition, and your colleagues start creating a new vision of "normal." The pain is fading, as new optimism replaces the darkness that seemed to pervade everything not very long ago. As you advance through this progression, setbacks may instantly derail you back into an earlier stage. Unfortunately, you can move backward in this model instantaneously, yet it sometimes seems to take forever to move forward.

Still, move forward you will, and soon you will look back on your struggles and wonder why it ever seemed so difficult. You now have the experience required to be a future resource to individuals struggling to find their way through a similar change event.

During your life, you'll have many unexpected changes thrown at you. Each time, you'll have to slowly work your way through these same emotions. As a leader, memorize these four stages, so you can serve your people, guiding them with assurance through what they are experiencing.