

## **Dealing with Unexpected Change**

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What do you do when you have planned for six months for a huge event, and something unexpectedly derails your arrangements? We all have to deal with occasional unexpected disruptions in life.

Let me provide an example. Almost two years ago, our daughter and son-in-law agreed that the four of us would take their son to visit a national park each summer. We started planning our current trip to the coast of Maine about nine months ago.

Here I sit, less than a mile outside Acadia National Park. How could we have ever projected that Congress would shut down the Federal government, including the national parks?

All the hikes that we had planned to enjoy begin somewhere along the circuitous 27-mile Loop Road. Currently, locked steel gates block every entrance to the Loop Road.

We arrived on Sunday evening, so we stopped at the Visitor's Center on Monday. We talked with the employees, but of course, they could not predict what would happen if Congress failed to act.

By Monday midnight, the Feds had officially furloughed all non-essential government employees, including those who work at the national parks. By Tuesday morning, all we found were locked gates.

How have we handled the situation? We've done what you would likely do. We've consulted maps and considered options for how we might access the parts of the park that are near commercial roads. And, fortunately, we've done quite well. We've enjoyed challenging and beautiful hikes every day!

However, the story of our flexibility is not sufficient for an article on leadership. Allow me to refer to a "change" model that I've used since the 1984 publication of Cynthia Scott's and Dennis Jaffe's book entitled *Managing Organizational Change: A Practical Guide for Managers*. They revised the book in 2004 and retitled it *Managing Change at Work: Leading People through Organizational Transitions*.

Scott and Jaffe suggest you think of the change process as "descending into a valley and then climbing back out." (The model seems relevant to a hiking vacation!) They represent the time before the change as a horizontal line, with a large "U" dipping below the line when the external intervention begins. The model ends in a continuation of the horizontal line after the encumbrance has been addressed.

They divide the U into four sections, two descending into the valley and two reestablishing some sense of normalcy. In our dealing with the closed national park, we've experienced all four.

**Denial.** In this phase, people long for the way things used to be. Oh, yes, on Monday, we felt certain that Congress would come to some compromise. We held out hope that they would certainly pass an exemption for the national parks. We've checked the news daily since then.

In your situation, you might hear statements such as "You've got to be kidding me!" or "Oh, there's no way that could be happening!" It's not unusual, especially in today's age where the feelings of entitlement are strong, to hear an angry, "They can't do that; I've got my rights!"

**Resistance.** The anger and sense of oppression is likely to expand during this phase. I confess that I've had thoughts of crashing my rented sport utility vehicle through those locked gates! We've talked with hikers who have volunteered, "Well, at least there's no one out here being paid to arrest us for trespassing on government property!"

The biggest frustration is that there's no way to register our complaint. The employees aren't around, and they of course have concerns of their own--no income! We've considered a phone call to our Representative and Senators, but clearly that will do nothing but consume our valuable vacation time.

**Exploration.** We've used our evenings to study the maps and written descriptions to consider possible alternative hikes. With months of planning thrown out the window, we've had to be creative, read about more possibilities, and be honest about our preferences. It's been an interesting exercise in option generation. We've had to examine our individual and collective criteria of hiking "desirability."

Many organizations find that a similar burst of creativity occurs at this stage. Ideas that had never been considered now are exposed. There's a renewed sense of optimism that "We can make it through this!"

**Commitment.** Somehow, we've filled our days with very enjoyable hikes. Once we're on the mountain, no one even thinks about the inconvenience. Our three year-old grandson, if he remembers anything from this trip, will remember climbing in and out of his specially designed backpack, looking ahead for the cairns and blue blazes, and riding on the back of his "Pops."

Though the world can seem bleak during the denial and resistance phases of change, the ultimate effect often is a very different--and likely considerably better--process for accomplishing the desired outcome. It's hard to remember this in the early stages of some unexpected disruption. As leader of your team, however, it's up to you to step back from the inconveniences and remember this model.

On my website is an "Article Archives" page. Access that page and scroll down to an article entitled "Vision vs. Current Reality." It's your job to anchor your team members in the vision of a desirable outcome. Then establish an environment where their collective creativity generates a strategy to achieve it. In the process, you'll likely also generate a vivid memory of how the team was able to overcome difficult circumstances. That landmark memory will serve your team well into the future!

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Dennis Hooper is an Executive Coach in Atlanta, helping organizations build future leaders, improve processes, and establish healthy cultures. To access his leadership articles, log onto his website at [www.buildingfutureleaders.com](http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com). You may contact Dennis at [dhooper2@juno.com](mailto:dhooper2@juno.com) or 404-575-3050.