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Change is a Human Process

Change is one of the most challenging processes that leaders and managers are required to implement. Change requires clear vision, a sense of purpose, and careful planning which are implemented through effective communication. At times, change simply requires accepting our situation and spontaneously embracing a new reality. For example, during the last few months of 2008, many people saw a devaluation of their investments. At the onset of this difficult period, few of us wanted to hear that it was an opportunity to purchase new investments cheaply! However, it is in fact what many investors are doing now.

Despite the fact that change is an inevitable and normal process, it seems that today as managers and leaders we are faced with a level of change that is significantly challenging. Many individuals, families, businesses and organizations are facing the demands of change. For some, it is a means of survival; old structures, ways of thinking and behaving are not relevant for today's business climate – so groups need to opt to either change or become irrelevant. For others, businesses and organizations are changing around them, resulting in the personal impact felt in the need to find new employment or communities and even re-evaluate what is important in life.

So how do we lead or manage change within our organizations? We are familiar with the work of William Bridges who uses an 'endings – neutral zone – new beginnings' framework to describe the process of change. Understanding a framework like this is important to managers and leaders. However, it is also very important to understand how people respond to change. Chris Musselwhite (www.discoverylearning.com) has developed a framework for understanding a continuum of responses to change based on the individual's preference for change. He describes this continuum as **Conservers** – **Pragmatists** – **Originators** and defines them as:

Conservers are people who view change primarily as a danger. In times of change, they appear deliberate, disciplined and focused. They are good at defining and clarifying current reality and prefer a well-defined

structure. To create improvements, conservers prefer to make gradual changes and work within existing systems.

Originators like to challenge current structures and systems. They enjoy taking risks and tend to focus on new possibilities, vision and direction. They are action-minded but may not be effective implementers.

Pragmatists tend to focus on getting the job done. They often see merit in the perspectives of both conservers and originators, and are motivated to find solutions.

Musselwhite challenges managers and leaders to learn the change preference of those on their team. When we know the preferences of our team, and the team is aware of the preferences of each of its members, we have an opportunity to create synergies to successfully move through the change process.

As leaders, we are also responsible to support our individual employees through change. To do so it is important to know our employees, and specifically how each one **responds** to change. Kerry Bunker, in *Responses to Change: Helping People Manage Transition*, indicates that individuals can respond in one of four ways and this requires a unique kind of support to successfully transition:

Denial and/or "action frenzy" are the initial responses of people who are **entrenched**. They tend to focus on riding out the change, but feel anxious and angry. They blame the organization for messing up what was working. The entrenched avoid taking risks but will continue to work hard.

To get through a tough transition, the entrenched need carefully paced learning activities, a safe place to test the new things they are learning, job opportunities that are developmental, and encouragement along with their feedback. Guide, push, but don't throw them into too-big roles too soon.

The first signs that someone is **overwhelmed** are withdrawal and immobilization. People in this group often report feeling depressed and powerless. Because they are spending most of their energy trying not to think too much about what is happening, they have sincere

difficulty learning what is needed to survive in the new environment. Their negative mindset can become infectious and inhibit the learning of others.

The overwhelmed need to be developed in place, rather than rushing them toward empowerment or a major job change. They need support from superiors and peers who can, in effect, calm the waters.

False bravado is the initial reaction of **the poser**. People in this group express a high level of confidence about handling any change they encounter and are always eager to move on. "Unfortunately, their competence and self-awareness fail to keep pace with their bravado and self-promotion," says Bunker. "They jockey for positions of influence and recognition, but do not learn well and may lead the organization in the wrong direction."

Posers, who overestimate strengths and underestimate weaknesses, need regular, objective and accurate feedback, and they need to focus on development rather than taking action. Be careful not to rely on posers for key roles or to overload teams with posers.

Learners feel challenged and stretched, but in control of their destinies. In most organizations, these individuals tend to be at the center of the action as change unfolds. They look for opportunities in ambiguous and difficult situations and bounce back in the face of adversity. They seek to fill in gaps in their own development and need high-impact developmental assignments. They should also be rewarded and supported for being key players in the transition process.

If there is a risk associated with learners, it is the potential for burnout. Leadership may place excessive demands on them. Be sure to provide some relief from the expectation that they fill so many critical roles.

So where does this leave us as managers and leaders? There are several crucial tasks in times of change:

- Know our own preferences and responses to change. As leaders, we need self-knowledge and awareness of our own biases and put them aside in order to focus on our organization, team and employees.
- Know our employees and help them to know themselves. Prepare the entire team to manage the change process.
- Develop a plan that allows openness to the unexpected, communicate the plan, talk about the facts, listen to the anxieties and focus on the needs of the present.
- Lead with courage and conviction that something new can be created, that your businesses or organizations can respond to a new reality, enter new markets, and become focused on what is essential to growth.

Above all, throughout the change process consciously act to prevent your organization from being another example of 'it was not the change that bothered me but it was how it was done'. Do this by being attentive to your people, knowing yourself and focusing on effective communication, the strengths of your team and a common purpose.

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**WHOEVER SAID CHANGE IS
INEVITABLE OBVIOUSLY NEVER
USED A VENDING MACHINE**