

Afraid of change?

When things change - especially at work - it can create a tremendous source of stress

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Freelance

Saturday, July 22, 2006

It is constantly with us and yet many of us fear and resist it. Change. Particularly change in the workplace, can be a source of tremendous stress for many workers.

It can be simple: you have to master the use of new software. Or, not so simple: the work you do has been outsourced to China and you're now out of a job.

The way you respond to on-the-job change can say a lot about your personality. And in a perfect world, you'd be exposed to change in small, measured doses. But this is not a perfect world.

"We are in a historical period of massive change," said Fred Rosenzweig, a business consultant and trainer who teaches at the McGill International Executive Institute.

"Historically, human beings have not experienced change at such a rapid pace. We're working at hyper speed. The computer revolution is changing everything."

And the way workers adapt varies, he said.

"What some people see as a benefit can freak out others. I think most people have a natural curiosity about change but at the same time, can be spooked by it. There are people at the low end of tolerance of change and at the other, the swashbucklers, who love it. Change can be viewed as opportunity or threat."

But workers who resist change, Rosenzweig said, exhibit three responses.

"Freeze, flee and fight," he said. "Freeze is the ostrich effect, while the flee response is to run away. If you fight, you try to combat it."

Successful organizations, he added, help their workers embrace change.

"They do this by giving their people mental models, an understanding of where they want to be and how to succeed at it. You need someone at the top of the organization explaining why the company is changing."

One way of accomplishing that, he says, is to consult employees by "engaging them in the response."

Individuals often resist change if it means they must work outside of their comfort zones, said Linda

Constant, a human resources specialist and professional development coach with Optimus Performance.

"If you're used to doing something a certain way, you may fear doing it differently," she said.

"For instance, you have to learn to use new software. And you ask yourself whether you can handle this. Will you be good enough and will the company still want you or will you lose your job?"

The other driver of fear, she added, is the fact that workers often perceive changes as out of their control.

People who adapt best to workplace change are those who imagine it will be positive for them, she said.

Stephen Goldberg, a coach and

facilitator with Montreal-based Optimus Performance, agrees that workers might resist change because it "makes them feel out of control."

"Passive types fear losing what's comfortable and what's familiar to them."

He says when employers impose change on the way their employees work, "they ideally should offer training and engage workers in the way the changes are implemented."

One of the biggest changes workers face is layoffs, he said.

"We have so much dependence financially on our jobs and our self value is tied up in them. When we lose a job, it's like taking away a part of our lives, and that's a tremendous change, which manifests itself differently in different people."

Goldberg says people with passive personalities are more likely to resist change than those with active personalities.

"But organizations need to be careful even when they're bringing changes to active employees," he said.

"Active types enjoy change but they often resent it if it's imposed on them. They may want to initiate it, so management should consider their ideas because they tend to be leader types. Ideally, they get involved in the decision making."

Rosenzweig claims one reason workers resist change is because it's "inconvenient."

"You're forced to learn new things and you're put into a situation in which you have to learn all over again," he said. "Think of the shift we made from typewriters to computers in the workplace. There was a big learning curve and none of us, save for those who are learn-a-holics, enjoyed getting out of their comfort zones because there was a feeling of lack of competence."

But, he added, workers are more likely to buy into change if they are able to choose the amount they're comfortable with.

"Without change, people get bored," he said. "So there has to be a medium between overwhelming change and no change at all, which is boring and stagnant."

The best transitions, he says, occur when workers are shown that there can be successful outcomes.

"They need to be made aware of what they're transitioning to," he said.

That often means thinking in a creative way, said Rosenzveig, who is also the president of the Institute for Thinking Development, which teaches organizations how to stimulate their creativity. He says individuals can increase their tolerance for workplace change by participating in mental exercises that stimulate their creative abilities.

"Being creative means making strange things familiar and familiar things strange," he said. "If you don't do things differently, you can't cope with change. Creative thinking allows us to be flexible."

And flexibility is the key to riding the change wave, he said.

"Try this," Rosenzveig said. "Get into the habit of looking at alternatives. If you have one way of getting to work, imagine two or three alternative ways of getting there. If you communicate in a particular way, think of two or three other ways. It's like imagining life as a buffet instead of a fixed menu."

This extends to imagining you work for different employers, he said.

"We mistakenly think we would not exist if we don't do what we do," Rosenzveig said. "When you realize there are other things you could do, you're in touch with all of your abilities and potentials."

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