



Overcoming People's Fear of Change"

INTRODUCTION

Implementing change in an organization, any organization, is a challenge. Challenge must be taken here to be an understatement. It's an undertaking that fails more than it succeeds. The difficulty comes from two areas. The attempt to design a process that is better than the existing process, and the attempt to get people to accept and embrace the new process. Anybody who has attempted to implement significant change will tell you the latter, getting people to change, is the more difficult of the two.

Conventional wisdom says people fear change. That is not true. Most people like variety in their lives. They wear different clothes every day. They buy new clothes even though the old ones still fit. Lots of folks rearrange their furniture just to introduce a little variety in their lives. Many people like to go to new places on vacation. One time it's north to colder climates, next it's south to some place warm. We like to go places that are different from where we live everyday. If we live in the city, we may be likely to vacation in the country. If we live in the country, we want to see the big city. Change in everyday life is considered good. Why, then, do we believe that change in our work is bad?

It's because many of us fear the unknown. We are afraid that the proposed change may involve loss. We may lose power, prestige, or position. We may fear loss of our ability to perform our assigned tasks. We may fear losing our place in the group, as an accepted member of the community of our fellows. When we perceive this potential loss, maybe even loss of our job itself, we feel threatened. It is this threatening change that we fear.

Test this idea in yourself. If you thought that your company or customers were going to change in such a way that everything you learned in school or through experience was no longer of any use, how would you feel? Everything you've done in the past is of no value to you now. THEY are giving you one week to learn the new way of doing things or else. Would you feel good about the change? Would you help implement that change? Or would you do everything in your power to slow the implementation down? Now, how would you feel if your company or customers were changing in a way that guaranteed you a promotion, a raise, a bigger office and more time off? Would you now help to implement that change? If you're like me and most other folks, in the first case you'd be afraid. Afraid for your job, afraid for your lifestyle the job affords you, afraid for your sense of accomplishment and you sure as heck wouldn't help implement the change. In the second case you would feel completely the opposite.

When we feel threatened, we resist change. We fight it as if our very life depended on stopping it. Change resisted is change delayed. Change delayed may be change denied. While most changes we attempt to implement in the work place do not have the clear, obvious consequences laid out in the above example, people will make up their minds about the change as if it were that straightforward. In the absence of clear evidence of positive personal benefit, most people will assume negative consequences. That is why so many people resist all change in their jobs. To be successful in implementing change we must understand that resistance and know how to overcome it. It's as simple and as vastly complicated as that.

So, how do we overcome people's resistance to change? Three steps: Understand the nature of that fear; identify the specific reaction to the fear; apply the tool that corresponds to that reaction.



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UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF FEAR

The first step we already covered briefly. People do not fear all change. We fear change that we, rightly or wrongly, perceive threatens us. We fear change when we believe it threatens our sense of belonging, our sense of our ability to participate and contribute, our feeling that we have some control over our lives. Caldwell Williams of Management by Inclusion, MBI, calls the overall feeling we're describing as "Inclusion". He says that Inclusion is a basic need of every human being. It is our need to feel that we belong to a group; that our abilities and perceptions are taken seriously and are not discounted; that we have some control over our environment. We fear change when our sense of inclusion is threatened.

Let's look at the example of implementing a new computer system, say a new ERP system. Implementing a new ERP system will change everything; how our work is performed and how we interact with others inside and outside our department. It may require new skills. It may make some of our existing skills obsolete. Given that, it would not be unlikely that we may fear the change. We may fear that we will suffer a loss of power or control when the new system is implemented. We may fear that our hard earned experience and knowledge will be obsolete. We may worry that we won't be able to learn or use the new system or that we won't be able to keep up with the already overwhelming workload. We may even fear that all of the above may cause the loss of our job which leads to losing our home and that may lead to the loss of our family. Sound extreme? Yes, it's meant to, but some people may take it that far in their minds.

We react in one of two ways when we feel a change threatens us. The first position reaction to threatening change is fight or flight. The second is surrender. The first position reaction is overt and visible. People who fight resist at every opportunity. They disrupt meetings. They are vocally negative to every idea. They may do whatever is opposite to the direction of the change. They give you all kinds of reasons why IT won't work. People who resist through flight may just not show up. They miss meetings and appointments. They find all kinds of excuses why something else is more important. If they do show up, they are late. When they're there, they are distracted. They may not pay attention, drifting to thoughts of their own or doing other work when they should be focusing on the issues at hand.

People who use the second position, surrender, become the pitiful victim. They talk about what others are doing to them, how forces beyond their control are pulling the strings and affecting their lives. They blame, point fingers, and do nothing proactive.

We inhibit the ability of the change to go forward when we adapt either of the first two positions. Whether we are resisting or surrendering, we are not contributing. Our ability to learn is greatly reduced or is nonexistent, and we are certainly not developing creative solutions to the issues arising around the implementation of the new methods. When resisting or surrendering, we take no responsibility for producing positive results. The implementation of the change will be delayed and maybe destroyed if even one key person takes either of the first two positions.



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REACTIONS TO CHANGE

When we understand where fear of change comes from and how it manifests itself, we are ready for the second step in overcoming resistance. In the second step we learn to identify specific behaviors that are the reactions to pending change. There is a range of reactions to change. These vary from specific styles of resisting to outright embracing of change. Understanding these behaviors is critical so we can progress to the third and crucial step where we address the behavior using specific tools.

Reactions to change can be broken down into six specific behaviors.

1. Hidden Agenda
2. Adversary
3. Uncertainty
4. Emergent
5. Normal
6. Abundance/Empowerment

These reactions represent a continuum of behavior. We tend to start at the low end and, with help and guidance, work our way to the higher level reactions. Each of the reactions has typical behaviors that we can observe. Our job, as the person reacting to the change or as the change agent, is to observe the behavior, classify the reaction and apply the corresponding tool that helps us or others move up the scale. The first reaction is to develop a hidden agenda. The person with a hidden agenda has a plan or idea that they aren't revealing. They may want to stop the project all together or protect some sacred cow.

Whatever is hidden, they work behind the scenes to impede progress. Look for someone who's attitude is sullen, suspicious, or apathetic. Typically someone with a hidden agenda would conspire with like minded others to bring about the results they desire. If they were in a position of power, they might threaten others to get them to go along with their ideas.

The second reaction to threatening change is to become an adversary. Someone who has chosen this reaction will attack at every opportunity. Nothing is right. Nothing will work. Every new idea is impossible. This is a step up from hidden agenda because they are at least out in the open. These people are easy to spot. They act arrogant, hostile, defiant or contemptuous.

When we get past being an adversary, we become uncertain. We are sure we are right and that we know what we're talking about when we are working our hidden agenda or when we are openly hostile. We become uncertain of what is true when we are willing to admit that there might be a better way. This is a positive first step. If we admit we don't know then we are open to other ways. But we also can't get stuck in uncertainty. We must move past this stage if we are going to be positive contributors. People who are uncertain are indecisive and act evasive. You can't get an answer from them. They tend to deflect questions and avoid making decisions. They infringe on others, asking for help or constantly questioning. Uncertain people are slowing down the implementation of the change by not fully contributing to its forward progress.

If we can move past uncertainty we get to Emergent. Here the possibilities are starting to become clear to us. New ideas and thoughts are drifting to the surface. We aren't clear yet so when we are in the emergent stage we may appear cautious or distant as we explore new ground. We require time to think about things before offering an opinion. This is a great improvement if we started in hidden agenda or adversary but we can move further along the continuum and become more positive and productive.



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Normal is the reaction of someone fully engaged in helping implement the change. In this stage we appear cheerful and admiring of others who support the desired ends. We are clear on what needs to be done and how to get there. We are productive. We may even take a role in facilitating the change when we have evolved to Normal.

Abundance/Empowerment is the highest stage in our reaction to change. We welcome change and are enthusiastic about it because we see the opportunities change brings. We reach out to others and help them make the transition. When we feel abundant we share what we know and what we learn. Feeling empowered ourselves, we seek to empower others.

It can be a long journey from having a hidden agenda to feeling abundant and empowered. We need to take it one step at a time. If we are trying to make the journey ourselves, we would do well to seek guidance and support from others. If we are trying to help others evolve we need to know what to do to overcome the obstacles that keep people locked in the lower ends of the scale. The following tools are designed to be applied to the specific reactions. Remember the first step is to identify the reaction, then select and apply the corresponding tool.

APPLYING THE TOOLS

Tool #1 The Third Position Reaction

We have said that when confronted with threatening change people may react in one of two ways, fight/flight or surrender. To overcome those reactions, we need to help people discover The Third Position. The Third Position reaction to change is to come face to face with the change and what we view as the threat. We need to examine and understand our own reaction. When we understand the threat, we need to learn to see the opportunity that the change brings. That sounds hard. It is, but if we understand that change is a chance to expand our horizons, to improve and grow as individuals, then we see that it is in our self-interest to do the hard work.

Expand and grow in what direction is a frequent question at this point. How do I as the individual attempting to move myself to The Third Position know what to do? How do I as someone trying to help others know what areas to help them with? The very reaction to the threat contains the answer to those questions. The discomfort reveals the transformation issue. What is it that you're afraid of shows what you must overcome. What people see as the threat is what you must help them see the benefit of. The earlier statement is worth repeating, "The discomfort reveals the transformation issue."

Seeking The Third Position reaction to threatening change is the first tool used in overcoming fear of change. The Third Position involves three steps.

Step 1: Come face to face with the threat, understand the reaction and the fear.

Step 2: Seek to find the opportunity in the change, focus on the opportunities and not the threat.

Step 3: Do what must be done to take advantage of the opportunity. Step three is deceptively simple. Do what must be done. "BUT I'M SCARED!" So, do it anyway. Feel the fear and do it anyway. Acknowledge that you're afraid and act in spite of your fear. The fear won't go away but you can move on in the face of it.



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Good basic change management practices can help people reach The Third Position. If we want to help people see the opportunity in the change we have to explain why we're changing, what we're changing to and what the change process will be like.

A good technique to help people appreciate why we're changing is to raise the level of discontent with the current methods or processes. Raising the level of discontent will help people want to change because you get them to agree the current method isn't perfect. You can start raising the level of discount by clearly documenting the current process. A picture is still worth a lot of words, so a process map is a great tool here. Call a meeting of key players from all the areas affected by the proposed change. Make sure you include all the people you expect to fight the change. It is also critical that this group is cross-functional, representing all areas, especially those that are known to have issues with each other. Use this group to create a map of the current process. At each step along the way write down on a flip chart disagreements about how the current process works. These are the people who live this process everyday. They can remember everything that ever went wrong. They know every time another department didn't do their job and it affected them. Take advantage of this knowledge and experience. After the initial draft of the process map is completed go back through and ask the group what kinds of problems, reworks, delays or complaints they have experienced for each activity in the process. Write these down on a flip chart also. When a page is filled, stick it on the wall and start a new one. Do not just turn it over on the easel. The problems must be visible. Using this technique you can easily fill a conference room with flip chart pages.

When you're all done, ask everybody to sit back and look around. All the problems are visible for them to see. The sheer volume of them will create some level of understanding why you're changing. They will probably agree that something must be done.

Now, if it is known, you can identify the new process, tool or technique that you're changing to. Explain, in as much detail as possible, what the changed state is going to look like. Use specific examples, screen prints, reports or other appropriate visuals that help create a clear, tangible picture. Highlight how it's going to solve most of the problems they have identified. Pick some of major issues off the list they've created. Show specifically how that problem is going to be resolved. If the new process isn't known, you can start to design it to solve the problems. It is critical that people understand what their world is going to look like when the transition is complete. The more they have a clear vision of the proposed end state the less fear they will have.

The next step in good change management is to let people know what to expect during the transition. How will we be making the change over? Who will be involved? How long will it take? How much will it cost, if that's appropriate to share? Let everybody know what the steps are for getting us from the current state to the proposed state. Be clear about roles and expectations. Identify what they can expect to come up as issues during the transition. We all want projects to come in on time, on budget and with perfect results. Haven't seen one of any consequence yet that did all that. So admit up front where the risks are. Use benchmarking to identify these risks. Surprise is the surest way of making people nervous. Strive to eliminate all surprises by sharing as much data as you can up front. If you've done this, when the issues do arise they will not cause the same degree of consternation they would have if they were surprises. So far in talking about applying tools we've identified and explained the Third Position reaction to change and showed how good basic change management can be used to help people get to The Third Position. But what if after doing all that we find there are still people stuck in some of the lower level reactions to change? Fire 'em! OK, maybe not. There are a series of tools we can use on ourselves or on others to move people up the reaction scale.



Tool #2 The Million Dollar Idea

Hidden Agenda may be the most frequent reaction of people confronted with threatening change. We have an idea we're not sharing when we are in the Hidden Agenda stage. It could be an idea to make something happen or to prevent something from happening. We need a tool to help reveal this agenda and these ideas. The tool used to uncover hidden agendas is called the Million Dollar Idea. The Million Dollar Idea can be used by the person with the hidden agenda who is looking for some way to reveal it or by someone who is trying to discover the hidden agenda of another. Let's use the example where I believe you have a hidden agenda. I came to this conclusion by observing the way you react when we are working on implementing some big change. The Million Dollar Idea would work like this.

Step 1: I get clear about what I need from you. I think through my needs, and why I need these things. I form a clear, mental picture of what I want and what it is worth to me. I plan out what I'm going to say to you so that when we talk I'm clear and concise.

Step 2: In a completely non-threatening manner and place, I tell you what I need. I reveal my agenda to you. I take the first step. I show you an example of how agendas may be revealed. This sets up the opportunity for you to reveal your agenda to me. People are always more comfortable being the second one to open themselves up. I go first showing you that I'm being honest and open.

Step 3: I ask you what you need or want to fulfill my need or support my idea. I listen very carefully, without interrupting, to your response. I use active listening, repeating back to you what you said you need or want. When you say I need 'X', I say, "So to support my idea you need 'X'. Is that right? Is there anything else?" I listen again repeating the cycle until you have stated everything you need or want. When you say there is nothing else, I repeat back one more time the complete list. "If I provide all of this then you will help me with what I need from you?"

Step 4: If it is in my power to do everything you asked for and I judge that it is worth it to me, I agree to provide what you need. If I must go get permission or the support of others then I tell you that's what I'm going to do and promise to get back to you by a certain time or date. Either way, your list of needs and wants were your hidden agenda. I now know what the issues are.

There are many variations of what to do given the response of the other person in this scenario. Given the limited length of this paper, I can't cover them all. What's important are the first three steps. Whether you are trying to reveal another person's hidden agenda or trying to reveal your own needs and wants, these steps are the same. It is in the handling of the response where the variation comes in.

Tool #3 Beach Ball Communication

The most visible technique of resisting change is to become the adversary. We all have seen countless examples of people in this stage of resistance. The adversary seeks to destroy the perceived threat because of his or her own fear of loss. The adversary may appear to be on the offensive but is really defending the status quo. Effective communication is impossible. The adversary isn't listening. They are formulating



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rebuttals as you speak. Conflict exists because there is a position and an opposite position. Resolution can occur when the parties see a possibility that includes both positions.

Visualize two people facing each other with a multicolored beach ball between them. They are arguing about the color of the ball. One person can only see the red and white colors on the ball. The person sitting opposite can only see the blue and yellow colors.

They are both arguing that they know what is right. It's plain to see if you just look at the facts. From their perspective, from where they sit, they are right and the other is wrong. Using this analogy, we use the tool called Beach Ball Communication to overcome adversarial resistance to threatening change. We use Beach Ball Communication to remove the threat by communicating in a way that includes all positions.

Step 1: Move off your position. Try to see things the way the other person sees them. Using the beach ball analogy, get up and move around to their side of the beach ball to see what they see. You may learn a lot.

Step 2: Help them feel that you understand their position. You can do this by duplicating what you hear from them. Repeat what they say with the same emotion they feel. This is not agreeing or giving in. It is re-creating their position so you understand it and so they know you understand it. Many times a good part of the problem is that the other person does not feel anybody is listening to or cares about his or her issues. Many times we dismiss our adversary without really understanding them.

Step 3: Repeat the process of receiving, duplicating and feeding back what they are saying until they acknowledge they have been heard. Half the battle is over at this point. They agree that you understand them. By listening and duplicating their position you have gained new information that may change your own view. You still know the beach ball is blue and green on your side, but you now see the red and white on their side of the ball as well.

Step 4: Invite them to come around to see the view from your side of the beach ball. Present your position along with the insights you got from hearing theirs. The former adversary will be much more willing to listen and understand having felt heard and understood.

Tool #4 Goaltending

The indecisive person is unwilling to take responsibility for results. This person is usually afraid of failure and the disapproval that will accompany that failure. They don't act unless specifically directed to do so. They won't make any decisions unless they can blame the results on someone else. They lack a clear focus or purpose. To move past the indecisive stage, we have to get clear about what needs to be done and how to do that. Goaltending is the tool to accomplish that end. Like all the other tools in our tool box, Goaltending can be self applied or applied by a mentor / supporter.

Step 1: Look at the current situation. See what needs to be done. Commit to accomplishing a goal. This goal should be one that is a stretch, but not so difficult as to appear impossible. The goal should be in the area of discomfort, for that's where the transformation must take place.



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Step 2: Visualize that goal accomplished. Create a clear picture of what it will look like when it's complete. You may want to physically create this picture so it's more tangible. Imagine what it will feel like when the goal is reached. See the picture and feel the emotion of the goal completed.

Step 3: Now look backwards from the completion and see the steps it took to get there. Write these down. Looking backwards is the key. Looking forward we tend to see obstacles. Looking backwards from imagined completion we see the step immediately preceding success. Looking back from there we see the step that led to that. And so on backwards until we see the first step that must be started.

Step 4: Turn this list of steps into a plan. Each action that must be taken is given a date we plan to accomplish it. Work this plan. "The universe rewards action," says Jack Canfield. It is through the work that we will accomplish the goal.

When the indecisive person sees that they can produce results in the area that they were threatened by, they feel less threatened. Each new accomplishment lessens the threat until they are confident and move out of the indecisive stage.

Tool #5 The Road Map To Achievement

We have dealt with hidden agenda, adversary and indecisive reactions to threatening change. We can now talk about what to do for people who evolved past those stages and are emerging into the productive, proactive supporters of the change. We use a tool called the Road Map To Achievement to help these people move up to Normal and beyond. The Road Map To Achievement builds on what we did with Goaltending. We now give people a way to duplicate the positive results they achieved. When they know they can be successful accomplishing what needs to be done in any given situation, their fear of change vanishes.

Step 1: Build trust of self. Identify and acknowledge your strengths. Take an inventory of what you have to offer the world. Write them down so you have a permanent record of what you do well. Make a list of everything you have accomplished in your life. These are great documents to have around. Every time you get scared, you whip them out, read all the good things you are and have done. It's like a shot in the arm.

Step 2: Focus on your purpose. Companies typically have a vision and mission statement and maybe a list of corporate values. People should too. Create a personal mission statement. List the things that you value: self, family, religion, health, honesty, etc. These lists help you focus on what's important to you. They act as the stars that you navigate by.

Step 3: Emergence of ideas. Look around. What needs to be done? Caldwell Williams says, "Everything that needs to be done is either labor, love or praise." What labor, love or praise is needed in your world? With your mission and values to guide you, take initiative to discover what is needed. With your inventory of what you have to offer, discover your ability to provide.



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Step 4: Commit to goals. Pick something worthy from the list of things that you discovered need doing. Put together a plan to accomplish that goal. Use the Goaltending technique of seeing the steps backwards from completion. Write down the steps and give them a due date.

Step 5: Affirm and visualize your success. Create a word level and picture level affirmation. The word level affirmation is a statement you write describing the completion of your goal. For example, "I feel great because I have reached my sales quota every quarter in 1998." The picture level is a visual image of the goal accomplished.

Step 6: Take action. Execute your plan; get things done. Remember, "The universe rewards action," not good intentions.

Step 7: Respond to feedback. Remember when you were a kid playing the game where somebody was trying to find something with their eyes closed and you told them they were getting hotter or colder? You will receive the same kind of feedback as you move toward your goal. Be open to it. Look for it. Respond to the feedback you receive.

Step 8: Persevere. Stick with your plan. Make modifications based on the feedback but keep moving forward. Never give up.

Step 9: Acknowledge the results. Tell the truth about the outcomes. Did you do what you set out to do or did something change along the way? Thank your sources. Who helped? Thank them and praise them. Treat yourself. Have a little celebration. Your subconscious will remember the fun of the celebration and help you get there again next time.

The Road Map To Achievement helps people succeed. When they succeed, they gain confidence. With confidence, fear shrinks. When fear shrinks, resistance is replaced with cooperation.

Overcoming resistance to change is a lot of work. Whether we're overcoming our own fear or helping others overcome theirs, we must go through the three steps: Understand the nature of fear; identify the specific reaction to that fear; apply the tool that corresponds to the reaction.

The work is worth it. People who evolve to the Normal stage or beyond to Abundant are more productive. They learn new ideas and concepts more easily. They are proactive in contributing to the implementation. We can assure success in implementing change if we can get everybody to move up the change reaction scale.