

Some Hard Truths About a Changing Workplace



Prepared for the Managers of Air Ontario
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Hard Truths About Change

The Reality of Change in the Workplace

“Progress might have been all right once,
but it has gone on too long”

Ogden Nash’s words capture the reaction many of us have when we face too much change. Whether we are for change or against it, there is no doubt that it will be with us for the rest of our lives. The changes undergone by many workplaces are too numerous to mention. Look at the typical bank branch and how it does its business now, compared to just 10 years ago, and you will understand how profound corporate change can be. Technological innovation, globalization of business, the information revolution, are all factors that are currently driving change. How air transportation is delivered and controlled in the late nineties is very different to the sixties and seventies.

Your workplace is about to undergo a transformation from many, to one regional airline. In this new environment, changes will continue as the system is rationalized and re-configured because of the demands of corporate philosophy, economics and technological change.

Changes to routines, relocation of staff, new rules about procedures, hours and conditions of work, and the acquisition of new technology, are all part of the rapid series of changes that are currently engulfing the world of aviation.

Recent events have demonstrated the difficulties people, in changing systems, face when coping and accommodating to change.

Whenever change sweeps through a workforce, a number of predictable reactions take place. These can be summarized as follows:

1. The experience of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Uncertainty because in a changing corporation, communication gets tangled up, decision making is stifled, risk taking leadership falls away. The right hand of the company appears not to know what the left hand is doing. Decisions are made, announced, and then promptly changed.

If you are the kind of person who likes predictability, structure and order, this climate can be very unsettling and uncomfortable.

2. Increased mistrust.

Rapidly changing organizations usually experience a drop in trust. Employees experiencing change expect even more surprises and bad news. This leads to the next reaction which is:

3. Self preservation.

When change happens, people’s sense of safety diminishes and a self protective strategy kicks in. Individuals take steps to protect themselves. They start looking out for “Number 1” when they realize that no one else may be looking out for them. Some will become aggressive, angry at their employer as well as their association representatives. Some will become insurgent, looking for ways to take power or exercise influence in the system. Others take a different tack. They lie low to wait for the dust to settle. They try to avoid the impact of changes by keeping their head down. Still others simply want to survive and they do so by pleasing and not offending, by becoming “Yes” men or women.



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Change always brings losses as well as gains. The staff person who has raised a family and made a home, and who is asked to transfer to another location in order to keep his/her job, will likely experience great stress. Such a relocation is considered to be the second most stressful event a family can experience, just after the death of a child.

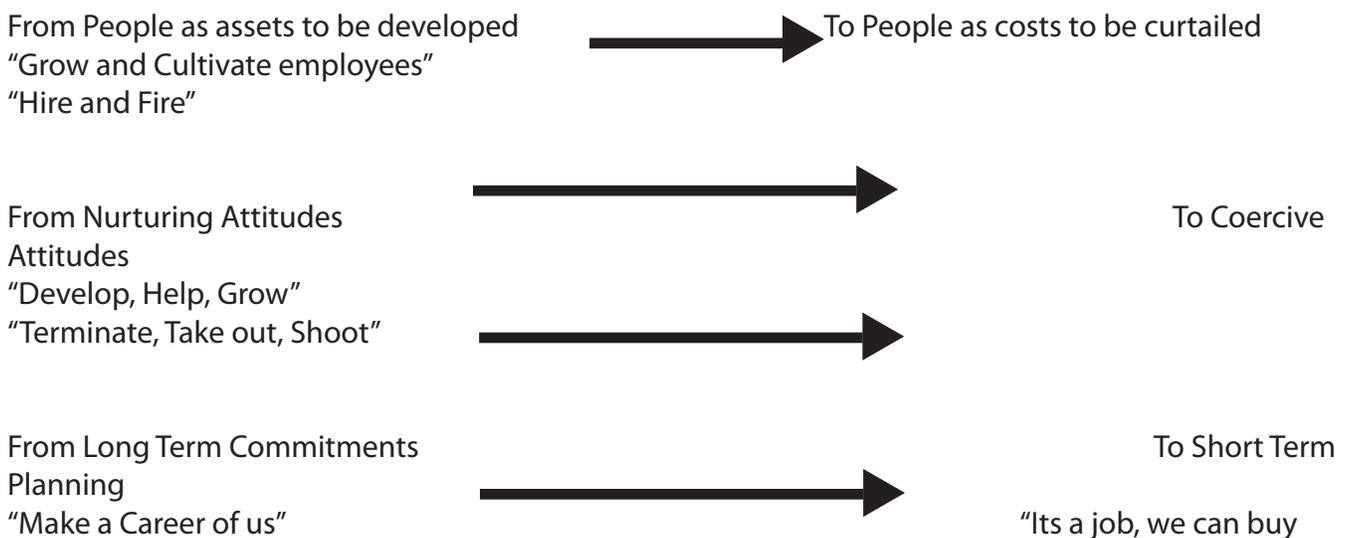
As we know, when losses are sufficiently profound they can accumulate to the point that the individual may well experience a form of acute stress.

This may happen in three ways: the gradual accumulation of small losses can bring about acute stress reaction; a single, threatening, large loss may have the same effect, and the process by which change is introduced by the company, and the climate which results can produce the same reaction.

Finally, a changing organization is often a very confusing and seemingly inept organization. A number of problems are generated by organizations struggling with change and transformation. Among these are: tangled communication, inability to get decisions, productivity problems, increased power struggles and fragmentation, low morale and commitment.

In most corporate organizations employees perceive a major shift in the employment contract. The old values about the human resource have been replaced by a new ethic which reflects the impacts of the competitive environments generated by global competition. The following illustrates some of these changes in philosophy.

How Employees See Organizations are Changing



Hard Truths About Change

Some Dynamics of a Changing Organization

When organizations undergo change they generate a psychological reaction among their members, No matter how they may try, top management cannot prevent this reaction. Change unsettles routines, protocols, established behaviours and people's sense of predictability and comfort.

Corporations in change usually experience predictable and unavoidable problems. They feel less competent than the old way of doing things and sometimes less humane. Nearly always there are questions about management's decisions and second guessing about what should have been done or what needs to be done next. The more uncertain people feel, the more information they crave. But no matter how much talking is done, suggestions made or positive propaganda produced, the reality is that change is painful. Among the predictable problems generated in a changing organization are:

Communication Failures

Information flow in a changing organization is one of the first things to be disrupted. Often the changes disrupt established lines of communication. Trust level will drop as an organization changes and people begin to engage in self protective, withholding behaviours. They may keep information to themselves, be less disclosing, more careful about what they say.

Rumours which often swirl when organizations change, distort communication and feed false information into the system. Gossip, exaggeration, wishful thinking and distortion of the truth scramble people's reality.

Productivity Decline

When information channels don't work, productivity is disrupted. If people are anxious, unsure feeling unsafe, they become preoccupied and lose focus or concentration while at work. Employees waste great quantity of time and energy speculating, guessing and worrying about how the organizations being led. Communication tangles lead to inability to get decisions made. When they are made, people tend to be careful about implementing them, choosing instead to play it safe.

Loss of Identification with the Corporation

When people are looking out for themselves there is not much commitment to their work place. Teamwork declines as people become distracted by change and do not work well together. Groups or departments may become protective of their territory and work to protect that at the expense of the larger hospital. Often the plan is not clear because managers are struggling to create a new reality as they go. They do not always have answers or direction to guide the company, having to deal with emerging realities as they emerge.



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Power Struggles

As change emerges, power changes hands. Manager's authority may be strengthened or diminished. Old established ways of getting things accomplished in the organization may no longer work. When this happens, people jockey for power. Some will lose, others will win. Alliances will be formed and dissolved. Projects will begin and be cancelled. Sometimes sabotage will take place in subtle or obvious ways. People will expend their energy on corporate politics and power games.

Low Morale, Work Commitment

All the above leads to frustration and anxiety. People become demoralized as they see the old ways being swept aside. Frustration turns to apathy as employees throw their hands up and quit trying

Often they feel they have tried hard to respond well to the change, doing a good job and responding to new requests for harder work. But the circumstances become confused, the rewards are not there and the recognition never seems to come. People feel disenfranchised and not sure of where the organization is going or who is driving it. They feel organization expectations keep changing and that undermines commitment.

Bailing out

Eventually some employees get fed up or burned out and leave the organization. Those who have worked for many years may feel trapped and fearful that they will be let go. Younger employees may make a decision that this is not the environment where they want to spend their careers.

Others begin to look around for alternative employment and can spend weeks or months going through the motions of their job because they have already "checked out" psychologically.

The following are some Survival Instructions for all employees of rapidly changing organizations.



Hard Truths About Change

When confronted by change, be prepared to Flex rather than Brace

Change often requires new ways of doing things, new equipment, new people, new policies. You can Brace, becoming brittle and inflexible or you can Flex, learning how to bend to the new realities and not be broken in the process. Be sure of one thing; in this new environment change will always be with you.

Control Your Attitude

You can choose how you will respond to Change. You can be resistant and resentful or you can decide to learn, 'on the fly', and make the best of it. Do not give the company power over your attitude. In the end, your attitude affects stress levels: adopt one that will preserve rather than corrode your health. You can carry resentment to the grave or you can get over it. Which is better for you?

Move away from Corporate Co-dependence

You are not a victim and this job is not your life. You always have choices and options if you can be creative enough to imagine them and brave enough to choose them. Create a parachute for yourself so that you never go to work thinking you have to, but thinking you choose to. If you have no choices you will feel the stress. Assume the corporation is not going to look after you or your career. Do that for yourself.

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff. It's all Small Stuff

Expect screw-ups, uncertainty and ambiguity in a rapidly changing environment. Companies that are changing won't be clear and structured. Learn to create your own clarity. Be willing to 'wing it'. If you fail, fail fast, fix it and learn from it. There will be many frustrations in a changing organization. Learn how to rise above them.

Be a Fixer not a Blamer

Change always brings problems. Build a name for yourself as a problem solver. Assume that the problem is not always with Them, sometimes its with You. Complaining is not a constructive art. So get off the Oprah show and become a solution finder.

Guard your Morale

Be careful what you use as evidence to evaluate how much the organization cares about people. High stress and pressure may provide the best proof that management's heart is in the right place. In a highly competitive, global market, trying to keep you comfortable could be the most cold-blooded management move of all.



Hard Truths About Change

For Managers - A Checklist for Managing in a Turbulent Environment

- Become flexible and adaptable enough to embrace change and roll with whatever comes.
- Be proactive, retain your power and make what decisions have to be made.
- Model the attitude you want those for whom you are accountable to have.
- Be precise, focused, directive. Concentrate on short range tasks
- Time management is not as important as priority management.
- Use Pareto's Principle; 80% of your time to do the essential 20% of your work.
- Don't just add work on to your people, change work for your people - be creative.
- Lower anticipatory anxiety by defining the changing future as clearly as you can for your people.
- Let them debrief - get the feelings out into the open, let them normalize their experience by talking about it (They will anyway!)
- Encourage creative synergy, risk taking, new ways, new ideas - be the cheer leader.
- Clearly define the tasks, roles and responsibilities and then let them go to it - trust and delegate
- The number one antidote to work stress is a climate of supportive relationships. If you are a stress carrier, a mean SOB, a tough cowperson - resign, the organization can't afford you.
- Micro manage daily - know what is going on so you can intervene early when the wheels fall off.
- Allow space and time for grief work - everyone needs to work through their emotional responses.
- If they are stuck with work, help them out; if they are confused, clarify; if they are down, bring them up.
- Reward and learn through recognition of small successes, every day.

