

Stress and Organizational Change

by Nancy Post, Ph.D.

Change stimulates questions in the minds of people who work in organizations. The questions generally fall in to two categories: acceptable and censored.

Acceptable questions are generally those that pertain to the organization's tasks. "What, exactly will happen?", we ask our leaders. "What do you expect us to do?" "What is the timeline for the change?" "Who will be in charge?" "What are our responsibilities now compared to what they will become once the change is underway?"

The censored questions are usually those that relate to our feelings about the change, not the change itself. "Will I still have a job?" "Will I lose my department, my colleagues, relationships with people I trust?" "Will I have to work with people I don't respect or worse, for a boss who is incompetent?" "Will they relocate me?" "How will I tell my spouse, my partner, my children if the change in my job makes life difficult for them?" "How can I protect myself and my family?"

The more encompassing the change, the more people tend to be threatened. This is why organization-wide change is generally more difficult to manage than changes in a division or a department. The amount of impact is exponentially rather than geometrically greater.

When people feel threatened, they tend to either isolate themselves and swallow their feelings or depend on other, more social coping strategies to deal with the stress. Most employees of rapidly changing organizations use both introverted and extroverted strategies to deal with change. A certain amount of fear and anxiety gets buried while the rest shows itself in a flurry of activity and contact with others at work.

I have worked in some organizations, sales organizations for example, where naturally extroverted salespeople fill the office with endless rumors, some based in fact and some the result of obsessions, after the major change has been announced. These organizations lose countless hours of productive work time because employees need to spend at least a part of each workday with one another as they deal with their anxiety.

I have worked in other, more individualistic or introverted organizations, whose highly technical or specialized workers bury themselves in their work in times of change. Usually peaceful hallways and lunchrooms now cast a deadly pall. The intensified silence screams out that people are afraid.

Regardless of the choice of coping strategy, each person in these organizations is navigating his or herself through the process of change. Energy is being used to cope at the same time that energy is being used to continue with the job. That's why people tend to feel more tired at the end of the day.

Censorship and Energy

In general, the amount of unnecessarily lost energy is directly proportional to the organization's level of censorship. If individual concerns and organizationally specific plans cannot be openly described and discussed, fear and anxiety can consume human resources. Productivity rapidly drops at exactly the time that the organization needs more from its people.

The unhappy paradox is that more energy is needed when less is available. This occurs unless leaders predict that the change will require management and make themselves available to respond to the concerns of people in organizations.

If you are in a leadership position, you must stop and ask yourself, "What does this change mean to me? How do I feel about it? What are the positives and negatives to me? And what are the potential positives or negatives to those who work for me?" Unless you can identify both the pluses and minuses, you are probably kidding yourself, or denying the real impact of the change. Certainly, by the time you speak to your staff, you must paint the change as largely positive in order to motivate your people. But you must at least be willing to admit that there are difficulties so you can find empathy for the people who find change difficult.

Leading change requires an odd mix of empathy, enthusiasm and realism. Unless you actually feel these emotions, they won't be available to your employees when they need them from you. You will also need them to help you to manage yourself through times of change.

If you can allow yourself to feel the complex set of emotions that go along with dealing with change, you will likely lose less energy. So, whether you are leading change or implementing it, a useful skill to develop is to become aware of your feelings.

Stuffing your feelings often leads to symptoms like insomnia, overeating, headaches, muscle tension, lowered immunity and, in more extreme cases can lead to ulcers, heart attacks, alcoholism and drug abuse. The effects of occupational stress can do more than lower productivity; they can diminish your health.

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A 1995 study published by the European Union reported the existence of a direct correlation between the degree of dissatisfaction felt at the workplace and the prevalence of infectious diseases. In short, the study found that organizational stress can weaken the immune system.* The World Labor report produced by the International Labour Office in Geneva, Switzerland reported two nation-wide studies of stress among teachers.** A 1983 test among Japanese teachers indicated that about 40% suffered from such health problems as frequent headaches, depression and constant feelings of anxiety. A 1990 survey of teachers in the United Kingdom reported that more than 20% of teachers were suffering from levels of anxiety, depression and stress equivalent to, or above, those of mental health outpatients. The main causes of dissatisfaction were the same in both cultures: heavy workload and low pay - along with lack of opportunity and long hours of work.

Change is inevitable in most organizations. In short, if you can't eliminate stress, you can learn to manage it effectively. This starts by acknowledging that change requires energy and by keeping human energy mobile. The creation of an open dialogue about your feelings about the change helps keep you from getting stuck and losing energy.

In the next article, we will also address physical ways in which you can actually learn to build your reserves of energy so that change will not deplete you..

**World Labour Report, International Labour Organization, 1993 pp.70

*Janus, no.22.IV. 1995