Factsheet

Common Reactions to Change

Remember that everyone is different and therefore will experience change and the change process differently. There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ to the process and different people may move through each stage at a different pace. The key is to be aware of where people may be and help them through that stage with clear information, consultation and support.

Figure 1: Stages of reactions to change



STAGE: DENIAL

The stage of denial can be prolonged if employees are not encouraged to register their reaction, or if management acts like employees should just move directly into the new ways. Denial is harmful because it impedes the natural progression of healing from loss (i.e. the old way of doing things) to moving forward … Because people are often blind to problems during the denial phase, a manager can mistakenly think that he or she has jumped directly to the final phase of commitment.

| **What you see** | **What you should do** |
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| WithdrawalNo noticeable reaction – “business as usual”Focus on the pastApathy/numbness – the announcement of change doesn’t seem to sink inEvidence of activity, but not much gets doneProvide individuals with facts and information about the change | Reinforce that the change definitely will happenExplain what to expect and suggest actions they can take to adjust to the changeGive them time to let things sink inArrange a planning session to talk things over |

STAGE: RESISTANCE

Resistance is not only a predictable part of change it is probably the most difficult phase to deal with. People resist for good reasons, even though we would rather they didn’t. These reasons include: their security is threatened, the change threatens their sense of competence, they fear they will fail at new tasks, they are comfortable with the status-quo and they have vested interests in the existing systems.

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| **What you see** | **What you should do** |
| Pre-occupation, wondering where they stand/how they will be affectedAnger, blame, anxiety, complaintsStubbornness, negativityApathy, sick leave, withdrawalSignificantly lowered productivityListen and acknowledge feelings | Encourage supportDon’t try to talk people out of their feelings or tell them to change or pull togetherRespond to concerns as effectively as possibleFacilitated “dealing with change” sessions can provide a forum for expression of feelings which is helpful in moving through this stageMake effective use of organisational “rituals” ie parties, barbecues, luncheons. |

STAGE: EXPLORATION

During the Exploration phase, energy is released, as people focus their attention on the future and towards the external environment once again. Another word for this phase is “chaos”. During exploration people tend to draw on their internal creative energy to figure out ways to capitalise on the future.

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| **What you see** | **What you should do** |
| ConfusionChaos and energyNew ideas, but lack of focus | Focus on prioritiesProvided needed trainingSet short term goalsConduct brainstorming and planning sessions |

STAGE: COMMITMENT

During this phase employees are ready to focus on the plan. They are willing to recreate their mission and build action plans to make it work. They are prepared to learn new ways to work together, and have re-negotiated roles and expectations. This is a phase where they are willing to solidly identify with a set of goals and be clear about how to reach them

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| **What you see** | **What you should do** |
| Improved co-operationBetter focusWorking together with a plan | Set medium and long term goals and objectivesConcentrate on team buildingAcknowledge good efforts by both individuals and teams |