Knowledge Worker
Helping People Get through What They are Going Through
(November 2012)

From Losses to Commitments

As performance improvement professionals, introducing changes to processes, workflows, jobs and tasks is an essential part of what we do, whether as external consultants or internal professionals on staff. As performance improvement professionals, we have to be aware of how people respond to changes – especially changes they consider to be significant – and we have to help the people affected by the changes we introduce get through what they are going through.

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Figure 1 - The Change Acceptance Cycle

There is a cycle of acceptance that marks many if not most successful changes (see Figure 1). At the risk of elucidating the obvious, unsuccessful changes are not marked by acceptance of those changes. Let's follow the flow of the cycle beginning with what is most often the trigger event: the introduction of new ways of doing things.

Depending on the nature and magnitude of the impact of these new ways of doing things, the reactions can range from a shrug of the shoulders to outright shock, disbelief and even disorientation. In other words, the impact of introducing new ways of doing things can range from non-existent or negligible through modest to significant. Equally, important, the impact will vary from person to person. One might see the impact of a given change as negligible and another might see it as having monumental, negative consequences.

Depending on the individual's reactions and take on things, the initial stage can be followed by denial, dismissal or some kind of disconnect. Some people are so overwhelmed that they retreat into a form of denial, unwilling or unable to deal with the situation. Others who are not so affected will simply dismiss the situation as little more than a nuisance (and some will dismiss it out of denial). Still others who see a significant loss attached to the new ways will do like the fabled ostrich and disconnect, sticking their heads in the sand so to speak. (Actually, ostriches don't do that but that's a story for another time.)

Once the reality of the changes settles in, the emotional levels rise. These, too, will vary with the individual and the significance attached to the changes. Some will experience mild anxiety. Some will become fearful and some of these will be so fearful that they are in effect paralyzed, unable to act in customary ways. Others will become angry, with their anger ranging from being mildly upset to being on the verge of

breaking into a rage. The intensity of these emotions will vary with the degree of loss envisioned and each individual's assessment of the changes themselves.

As these emotional states stabilize, the intensity levels go down and people sink into states of sadness, depression and passivity. Attitudes range from futility to resignation to the inevitable. Again, who experiences what and with what degree of intensity and duration is an individual matter. There is no lock-step, standardized process through which all people proceed at the same pace.

At some point, people begin trying to figure out how to accommodate, cope with and even capitalize on the changes being made. They can be observed jockeying for position, bargaining and scrambling to carve out a niche for themselves. This is the earliest signal of acceptance; namely, its inevitability and the futility of fighting or opposing it.

Eventually, people begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel. They see where and how they do or can fit in and that the losses aren't as terrible as initially imagined. They develop hope for the future. The end stage of the acceptance cycle is marked not just by hope and acceptance but also by a commitment to the new ways of doing things that were introduced at the outset. This stage is the end of what can be a long and arduous journey for some and little more than a quick trip to others.

What Can We Do? What Should We Do?

The essence of what we can and should do is help people get through what they're going through.

The first thing to know is that change and the perception of accompanying losses are inseparable. People see what they see and if they see loss there is a loss involved – at least for them. Moreover, it is useful to keep in mind that people don't resist change per se; instead, if they resist at all, they resist what they see as loss. In this same vein, it is also important to recognize that the effects can in fact be disastrous for some people, as in the case of those who lose their jobs.

Not all is doom and gloom. Not everyone has a negative reaction to change and the intensity of the reactions people have varies with the change, the person and the perceived loss.

People go through this cycle in very different ways. Some scoot right through it; some plod along one stage at a time; some bog down in one or more stages; some seem to make their way through and out of it but then something knocks them right back into it; and some people seem to move back and forth between one stage and another. The point is that you have to deal with people as individuals; there are no one-size-fits-all approaches to helping people accept change and its associated losses.

People can and often do help each other. Co-workers can be just as effective as bosses in helping each other make their way through the change acceptance cycle.

So what can you do? Well, for one thing, you can talk about it – with your people, with your peers and with your boss. You and others, especially managers, can use the cycle diagram in Figure 1 to focus the discussion and to examine the current state of affairs. You need to know where people are in this cycle. They need to know where their bosses are and where their co-workers are. The diagram gives you and

those affected a framework for examining, discussing and dealing with the reactions to change and for facilitating the acceptance of change.

A brief piece like this is hardly the place to set forth detailed descriptions for dealing with the many specific techniques for helping people work their way through the cycle of acceptance but it is a perfect place to point you to a very helpful resource. It is William Bridges' best-selling book, *Managing Transitions* (2nd Edition).

NOTE:

The Change Acceptance Cycle presented in this post is one of the many tools for knowledge workers that can be found on Fred Nickols' web site in a section titled "The Knowledge Worker's Tool Room."

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of Distance Consulting LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Worker's Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available here.