

# Getting from Losses to Commitments: The Change Acceptance Cycle

Published 16 October 2009

The purpose of this post is to review *The Change Acceptance Cycle* shown in Figure 1 and to extract from it some pointers for managers caught up in organizational change.

## The Change Acceptance Cycle

Let's start in the upper left, with a common form of change, the introduction of new ways or arrangements at work. This might be a new process, a new system, a new policy, a new organization in the wake of a merger, acquisition or a just plain old reorganization.

It is rarely the case that changes are welcomed with open arms; they are almost always seen by some people as having losses attached. The losses might include a position, a title, a personal sense of comfort, a sense of competency, the disruption of personal and working relationships, a fiefdom, or even employment itself. The negative reactions people have to changes, then, aren't to the changes but to the losses they create.

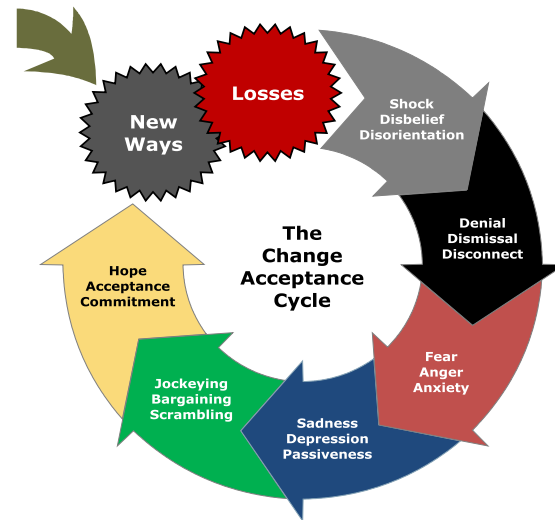


Figure 1 - The Change Acceptance Cycle

The initial reaction of many people is one of shock, disbelief, and even disorientation. Their world has been or is about to be turned upside down and they are discombobulated to use a good old-fashioned word.

From there, people try to quickly restore some semblance of rhyme, reason and order to their world, which for some, has been turned upside down. They do this in various ways; by denying the change will occur or will affect them; by dismissing it as inconsequential or irrelevant; and by simply disconnecting from what is going on around them, hunkering down and pretending it isn't happening.

But reality sets in. Then people have strong emotional reactions. Some get angry, really angry. Some become fearful and are paralyzed by that fear. They don't know what to do and so they do nothing. Others aren't necessarily fearful but they do become anxious about what the future holds and this anxiety saps their energy and dominates their thoughts. They wallow in "what if?"

Another stage of emotional reaction is marked by sadness for the loss of what was; perhaps for friends co-workers who have been moved to other areas; perhaps for a loss of confidence rooted in mastery of the old ways that has been displaced by a lack of familiarity with the new ways; and perhaps for the loss of an

organizational culture that was once highly valued. Sadness is not far from depression and people can and do become depressed. Often they become passive, like victims awaiting their fate.

Some bog down in one or more of these stages but, sooner or later, most begin to look toward the future. They get their heads up and start looking around. They also start jockeying for position in the new order, bargaining for their personal situations and scrambling to find a place for themselves.

As they begin making their way out of this cycle, they begin to accept whatever they've viewed as losses and they begin to accept the new ways, too. They see hope in the future and they begin to commit to the new ways.

Thus it is that people accommodate, adjust to and accept change.

### Some Pointers for Managers

The first thing to know is that change and accompanying losses are inseparable. People see what they see and if they see loss there is a loss involved – at least for them. Moreover, people don't resist change per se; instead, if they resist at all, they resist what they see as loss.

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 your people as individuals; there are no one-size-fits-all approaches to helping people accept change and its associated losses.

Chances are, in addition to helping your people get through this cycle, you have to go through it yourself. Who will help you? How do you get help? Where are you in the cycle and how do you move on? More specifically, what losses do you and others see as attached to the change? Are they real or imagined? Can you compensate for them or are they givens?

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 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 your people are in this cycle. They need to know where you are and where their co-workers are. You need to know where your boss is and your boss needs to know where you and your people are. The diagram gives you a framework for examining, discussing and dealing with the reactions to change and for facilitating the acceptance of change.

A blog post is hardly the place to set forth detailed descriptions for dealing with the many specific techniques for helping people through the cycle of acceptance but it is a perfect place to point you to some very helpful resources. One of the best in this regard is William Bridges's best-selling book, [\*Managing Transitions\*](#) (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).

## About the Author

My name is Fred Nickols. I am a writer, an independent consultant and a former executive. Visual aids of one kind or another have played a central role in my work for many years. My goals in writing for SmartDraw's Working Smarter blog are to: (1) provide you with some first-rate content you can't get anywhere else, (2) illustrate how important good visuals can be in communicating such content and (3) illustrate also the critical role visuals can play in solving the kinds of problems we encounter in the workplace.