

Managing Workplace Change



Successful organizations including education institutions must constantly change to keep their competitive edge and the ability to remain nimble in an ever changing world. New technologies, new processes, new personnel, new products, and new strategies are constantly being introduced. These changes may be essential, but they're not always easy to deal with.

Organizational changes can be difficult for employees at every level. Concerns about job security, being transferred to less desirable positions, reporting to new managers, needing to learn new technologies, or having increased workloads and responsibilities can trigger many reactions, including anxiety, panic, depression, and anger. These reactions are normal and part of how we adapt to change.

Understanding the process

Change is not always bad. In fact, change can present opportunities that are beneficial to us. So why do so many of us focus on the negative? Because we're dealing with loss — the loss of co-workers, the loss of our old routines, the loss of stability, and the loss of control.

In 1969, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross introduced pioneering concepts about the grieving process that involved five stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Her theories are now applied to other issues involving trauma and/or loss, including those associated with organizational change.

During times of significant workplace change it's perfectly normal to feel the following:

- **Denial:** Our first reaction is one of shock and denial. "I don't believe this!" "No way...this can't be happening!"
- **Anger:** "Why me? It's not fair!" or "It's all because of ... They're to blame!" Reality is setting in and we're reacting to the loss of the status quo and our fear of the unknown. We can be angry at ourselves, with others, and those who are close to us.

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- **Bargaining:** “I’ll do anything to stay where I am for a few more years.” “If my job stays the same I’ll never complain about anything again.” Anger is getting us nowhere and we’re looking at ways to postpone what may be inevitable. We’re trying to control a situation that is, essentially, out of our control.
- **Depression:** “All the years I’ve devoted to this job were for nothing. Why bother even trying anymore?” “I’m upset because I’m going to miss my old team so much.” During this stage we’re beginning to understand the certainty of the situation. We’re moving into acceptance by beginning to mourn the loss of the old way of life.
- **Acceptance:** “It’s going to be alright.” “You never know, this may be good for my career.” We’re ready for what lies ahead.

It’s important to note that no one moves through these stages in a neat, linear manner. We occupy different stages at different times and can even move back to stages we have been in before. But, eventually, we’re ready to move forward in our new reality.

Coping with workplace change

Here are some tips to help you navigate the road ahead:

- **Don’t take things too personally.** Most organizational change is due to factors beyond your control. Keep the lines of communication open with your manager regarding your job performance and professional development.
- **Stay positive.** You can’t control the situation, but you can control your response to the situation. Having, and displaying, a positive attitude will help you get through challenging times.

- **Take care of yourself.** You’re better able to deal with stressful situations when you’re eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, and limiting your alcohol consumption. Don’t let stress overwhelm you. Stay focused on your physical health.
- **Make time for fun.** Your emotional health is important. Spend time with family, get out with friends, and incorporate plenty of fun activities into your schedule.
- **Find safe and healthy ways to vent your frustrations.** Try not to express your anger with co-workers, your manager, or through social media. Talk with friends and family instead.
- **Continue doing what you do best.** The change process can be all-consuming for everyone and it’s easy to lose sight of immediate tasks and priorities. It’s important to keep focused on the core functions of the business. Finally, remember that nothing stays the same

Circumstances could change again soon, making you wish you had not wasted energy getting upset about the original change. If you’re able to maintain a good attitude and strong performance, you’ll keep your options open. You might even find unanticipated benefits!

