Articles

on

Managing Change

from

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES newsletter

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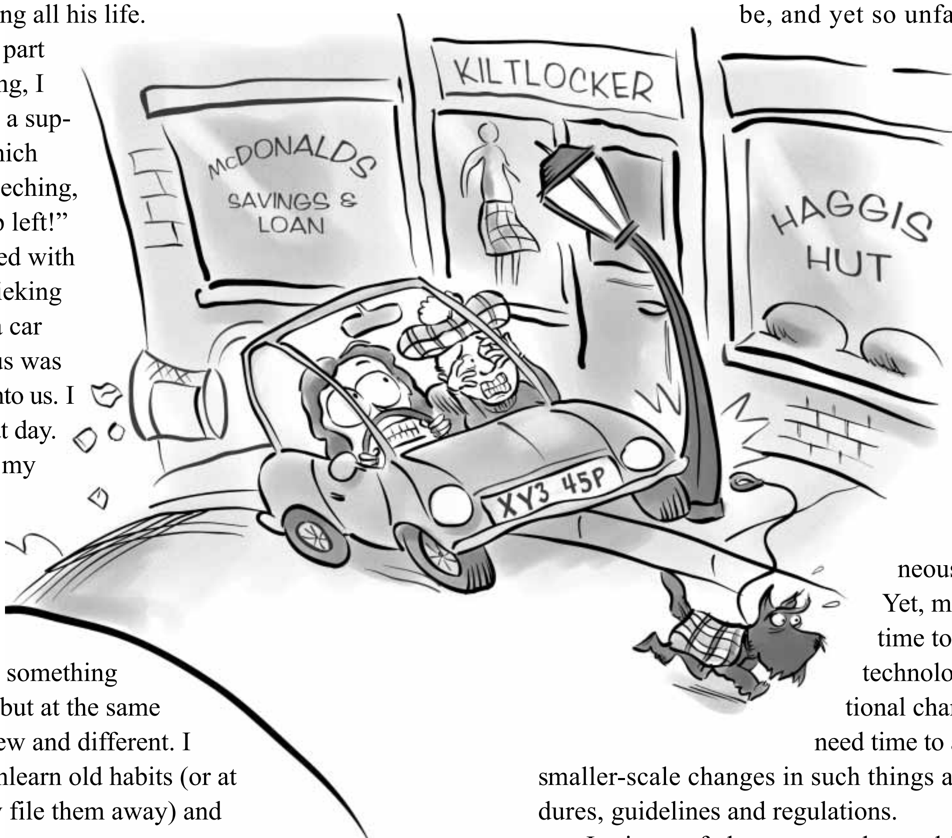
MANAGING CHANGE

That's Right — I Mean Left!

Have you ever driven on the other side of the road? I don't mean like here in Boston, where they do it for sport. I mean in a country where they drive on the opposite side of the road from what you're used to. It's an eye-opening experience when something as familiar as driving suddenly becomes so unfamiliar.

That was my experience on a trip to Scotland with my husband, Mr. Honk-If-You-Want-To-See-Aggressive-Driving. With confidence aforethought, Mr. Honk-If pulled right out into rush-hour traffic, as if he'd been doing alternative-side-of-the-road driving all his life.



For the first part of the day's outing, I opted to serve in a support capacity, which consisted of screeching, "Keep left! Keep left!" This I interspersed with high-decibel shrieking when I thought a car coming toward us was going to smack into us. I shrieked a lot that day.

Then it was my turn to drive. "Just keep left," I told myself a few million times. At first, it was like doing something old and familiar but at the same time strangely new and different. I had to quickly unlearn old habits (or at least temporarily file them away) and substitute new ones.

Driving on the other side of the road proved to be easier than I expected. But not so driving on the other side of the car. When Boston drivers drive on the other side of the road, they stay on the same side of the car while doing it. But in most countries where you drive on the other side of the road (left, in this case), you also switch to the other side of the car (right, right?)

After some initial shrieking — having excelled at it as the passenger, I kept it up as the driver — driving became more intuitive. However, in focusing so intently on the left side of the road, we each veered too far left a few times, thereby grazing an assortment of immovable objects. We spent a goodly portion of the day in traffic circles going round and round, trying to figure out how to exit gracefully (which is to say, unsmashingly). But to our surprise, we found that the toughest driving was not in traffic, where you can simply follow the car in front of you, but when there was no one else around to imitate. Shriek! Screech!

The most striking part of the experience was how tiring it was. We were doing something that was as familiar as could be, and yet so unfamiliar as to require intense concentration until new habits began to form. The experience reminded me how mentally and emotionally demanding it can be to adjust to change.

In the workplace, managers often expect people to instantaneously adopt change. Yet, most people require time to adjust to large-scale technological and organizational change. They may also need time to adjust to seemingly smaller-scale changes in such things as standards, procedures, guidelines and regulations.

In times of change, people need information to help them understand what's different and how they'll benefit, balanced by empathy to help them feel less alone and appreciate how they'll be affected. People need time to part with what was familiar and comfortable and to form new habits. And just as with traffic circles, they may go round and round before the new ways become intuitive.

Astute managers understand this adjustment process, allow for it, and help their employees through it. And they recognize the sounds of change, and respond accordingly. Shriek! Screech!

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The Hurly-Burly Hubbub of Change

When I give presentations on managing change, people are eager to know how to implement change quickly and without all that troublesome turbulence. The bad news: Turbulence is a fundamental component of the change experience; you can't eliminate it. The good news: By understanding of how people experience change, you can reduce the duration and intensity of that turbulence, and thereby implement the change more quickly.

How people experience change

Change upsets the relative stability of whatever came before. When I ask my audiences about changes they've experienced in their companies, they don't lack for examples: Reorgs, more reorgs, and still more reorgs. A new project or a project cancellation. New technology. An abrupt priority change. A new manager, a departing team member, a move to another city (or another building), a merger, successive rounds of layoffs, a promotion. In all these changes, what was familiar vanished, along with the comfort level associated with what was familiar.

Almost any change — or even just a rumor of a coming change — can create some turbulence, a state that may entail commotion, confusion, turmoil, disorder, unrest, instability, hurly-burly, uproar (all synonyms for turbulence) — as well as chaos, insecurity, pandemonium, upheaval, disarray, bedlam, disruption and hubbub (synonyms of the synonyms). Who knew there were so many words that so aptly capture the turbulence triggered by change?

In coping with change, you might feel like you've been whacked in the head, punched in the stomach, or turned topsy turvy. You might become preoccupied, absent-minded, forgetful, distracted or fatigued, and you might experience shock, anxiety, fear, anger or uncertainty. You might feel like you're on a runaway roller coaster *even* when the turbulence is triggered by something positive (win the jackpot in the lottery and you'll see!).

What's perfectly normal?

Here is what's important to understand about this state of turbulence: It's perfectly normal. It's human. It's how people react to major change. Major change is a felt experience, and people are more likely to react emotionally than logically and rationally. As a result, this turbulence (to repeat, this time with emphasis) is **perfectly normal**. Therefore, it's unreasonable to introduce a change and expect everyone to instantly adjust. Some people will, but many won't, and wishing that it were otherwise won't make it so.

Your role, should you decide to accept it

Now here's the key point: If your role entails introducing, managing or influencing change, how you communicate with those affected can significantly increase — or decrease — the duration and intensity of that turbulence.

As I stated in the Managing Change section of my book, *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*, "In times of uncertainty, such as those triggered by technological or organizational change, most people have an intense need to know what is happening and how it will affect them. Yet so often, communication in the form of information, empathy, reassurance and feedback is in short supply."

Therefore, you'll increase the duration and intensity of the turbulence if you:

- Expect or demand an instantaneous adjustment to the change.
- Unreasonably prod people to "get on with it already."
- Withhold information about what's happening and how it will affect people.
- Refuse to accept that adjustment to change may entail a temporary drop in productivity.
- Find fault with people when they make mistakes while adapting to the new way.
- Focus entirely on the technical aspects of the change, ignoring the human aspects.

Conversely, you'll reduce the duration and intensity of the turbulence if you:

- Accept that a certain amount of pushback is inevitable.
- Keep people informed about what's happening, doing your best to stay ahead of the rumor mill.
- Treat the old way with respect, recognizing that it was a place of relative familiarity and comfort.
- Acknowledge the turbulence people are experiencing and listen to and empathize with their concerns.
- Acknowledge progress and even small successes.
- Build trust so that those affected will be open to your ideas and advice once they're in that turbulent state. Trust is a key factor in minimizing the turbulence.

This is not to say you should mollycoddle people and give them all the time in the world to adjust. You still have deadlines to meet and goals to achieve. But by understanding how people experience change, you will more effectively manage the hurly-burly hubbub so as to meet those deadlines and achieve those goals.

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MANAGING CHANGE

A Moving Experience

Empathy can help reduce the duration and intensity of the chaos associated with change. This was the realization of a group whose primary responsibility is literally to help their clients implement change.

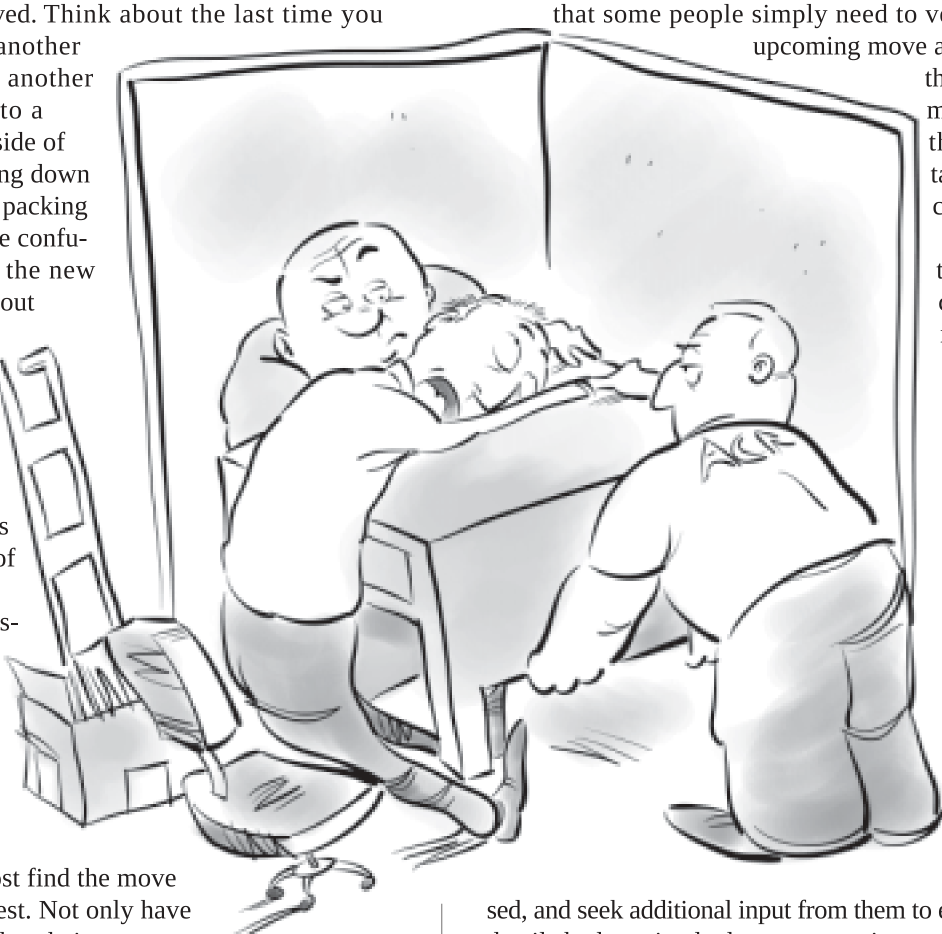
This group's role as a facilities department is to arrange the relocation of their clients — individuals, teams, departments and entire divisions — from one company location to another. This responsibility entails everything from moving an individual who is transferring to another floor to moving an entire building's worth of people to a new out-of-state campus.

It's not hard to imagine what this experience is like for the people being moved. Think about the last time you moved, whether to another state, another home, another job — or even just to a cubicle on the other side of the floor. All the taking down and putting up, all the packing and unpacking, all the confusion, all the things at the new location that turned out to be better than you imagined (yay!) and all the things that turned out to be worse (drat!). For many people, stress is the dominant theme of such an experience.

So it's not surprising that although many people in this company look forward to a change in location because they will acquire improved digs or a shorter commute, most find the move itself unpleasant at best. Not only have they become attached to their current space — people form strong emotional attachments to their home and work space — but in addition, relocations without incident are rare because of the complexity of accommodating employees' workspace needs.

When I presented a change model to this facilities group as part of a class on managing client expectations, our focus was on what they might do to minimize their clients' stress and, not incidentally, their own. One of their decisions was to exhibit more empathy for their clients' situation. They felt they could do this by connecting more frequently and effectively with their clients.

In particular, they agreed to contact people further in advance of a planned move to review important details with them, and then to check in with them periodically as the date of the move approached. They also decided to send out reminders about pertinent particulars that people often forgot in the hubbub, and to give their clients an opportunity to express their concerns about the move. They realized that some people simply need to vent about their upcoming move and that empathetic listening might be one of the most important things they can do.



That's what they'd do for their clients. As to managing their own stress levels, they resolved to refrain from feeling defensive in response to their clients' complaints about being relocated. Instead, they agreed to do their best to listen without judging, acknowledge the anxieties people expressed, and seek additional input from them to ensure all critical details had received adequate attention.

Clearly, expressing empathy during times of change is not about oohing and aahing, nor is it about coddling people or catering to their every whim. It's about communicating with sincere concern, showing evidence of caring, and listening with the intent to really hear. With empathy as a tool for managing change, you too can help people get moving.

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Changing How You Manage Change

When companies undertake a major technological or organizational change, the People in Charge sometimes get so focused on driving the effort forward that they ignore the impact of the change on the people affected by it. Sometimes, they even seem unaware that there *is* an impact. Yet how people are treated during a change effort — and how they are prepared for it and guided through it — can make all the difference in whether the effort ultimately succeeds.

In particular, successfully managing change requires attention to relationship building, information dissemination, and involvement by those affected.

Relationship building

A common approach to implementing large-scale change is to create teams to handle various aspects of the change effort. Often, these teams are cross-functional. And frequently, the members of these teams have never worked together — or have never worked together *successfully*. Nevertheless, once declared a team, they are expected to magically function as a team, moving in unison towards The New Way.

Rarely, though, is the transition from a group of disparate individuals to a smoothly functioning team quick or easy. Creating that well-oiled team takes more than doling out assignments and cranking up some project management software. If the team doesn't take steps to build the foundation for a collaborative, cohesive relationship among team members, it may never reach its full potential.

Building that foundation may include such activities as establishing group norms, formulating ground rules, developing tracking and feedback mechanisms, and taking periodic temperature readings of the group's efforts. Teams can also benefit greatly by identifying differences in communication styles and work preferences.

In the absence of activities like these, conflict is likely, and probably sooner rather than later. And while a small amount of conflict can be energizing, no team benefits from excessive, prolonged or unresolved conflict. Investing in relationship building is invariably less costly than recovering from the divisiveness that may result from its absence.

Information dissemination

In times of uncertainty such as that triggered by major change, people have an intense, though rarely articulated, need for information. They want to know what is happening, and how it will affect them. For example, in several organizations I've visited, employees whose work would be affected by a significant change in computer technology weren't informed about the scope of the effort, the skills they'd still be able to use, the training they'd receive, and the temporary drop in productivity they might experience during the transition. Is it any wonder that anger and frustration became the norm?

Readily available information can help reduce the very human fears about *what it means for me*. Therefore, aim to disseminate information not just about the change itself, but also about its impact on processes, responsibilities, expectations and opportunities. For example, video presentations, written reports, Q&A sessions, demos, and information posted on intranets can help reach different groups of employees. Where feasible, use face-to-face methods of getting the word out; for example, periodic meetings with small groups provide a forum for presenting updates and answering questions.

Often, the evidence that you are *willing* to communicate is as important as the precise information communicated, because it tells those affected that they are an integral part of the process. Most important, it reassures them that they haven't been forgotten.

Involvement by those affected

Buy-in is key to successful change. Unfortunately, some people interpret "generating buy-in" to mean inducing those affected to adopt the change quickly and wholeheartedly, with not a hint of complaint, confusion or concern. Yet, not everyone can so readily come to terms with That Which Is New. The transition from the old to the new takes time — and must be *expected* to take time. Nevertheless, the adjustment can often be accelerated by involving those affected. People are often willing to accept and support a change if they've had a say in the matter.

To achieve buy-in, try to involve those affected as early in the effort as possible. For example, invite personnel to discuss the steps that will help them gain familiarity with the changes. Ask selected employees to help devise ways to ensure that their peers become comfortable with the new procedures and don't fall back on the old ways. Conduct interviews to identify the biggest concerns in each affected group and take some steps to address these concerns. Even small steps will do, because they provide a way of saying "We're listening."

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Coping Factors

People vary in how they cope with change. That seems obvious, but maybe not, given how often I meet decision-makers who assume that everyone experiences change identically.

The senior manager of a large division, for example, enumerated the range of employee reactions he had observed as he implemented a reorganization, and then asked me, "Do people handle change differently?" I was astounded that someone in his position — and someone as astute as he seemed to be — could be so oblivious to such differences. And yet he is hardly alone is his lack of awareness of individual differences. And he is hardly alone in being puzzled by all the reactions he encountered.

If you want to successfully manage change, a starting point is to anticipate these differences and appreciate what accounts for them.

Personality, in particular

Personality is one of the most obvious contributors. We each have a certain level of comfort — or discomfort — with replacing what's familiar, predictable and safe with that which is new, unfamiliar, uncertain, confusing, ambiguous, or potentially risky.

So when a company mandates the use of new tools, introduces a new business model, implements new processes, replaces a manager, or announces an upgrade, people adjust at different rates and display different reactions as they do so. Some people may complain (a little or a lot), some may reflect privately, some may quit, some may wholeheartedly embrace the change, and some may simply go along without a peep. These different reactions are normal responses to change. Note: *normal* responses.

I *like* my cluttered cubicle!

Despite the influence of personality, the reaction to any given change is at least partly situational. Someone who is generally averse to change may eagerly adopt a particular change because it's especially appealing or offers significant benefits. And conversely, someone who generally welcomes change may protest a given change if it poses a real or imagined impediment or threat.

So, for example, how people react to a change in location — whether it's to another city or the other side of the floor — may have more to do with the specifics of the new location than the person's attitude towards change. And even those most open to technological change may bawk at a major upgrade that coincides with their grappling with particularly pressing priorities. Indeed, the timing of a change relative to other changes people are coping with significantly influences how they respond to it.

Been there, done that

Familiarity with the nature of the specific change may also influence the reaction to it. I know people who have been through multiple mergers who now view them as "here we go again" rather than the shockeroo they experienced with the first merger. The experience of going through previous changes has prepared them to better cope with future changes.

And let's not forget the influence of work or life experiences. I once led a meeting of a group that, due to cutbacks, was being pounded by a vast increase in workload. As the meeting veered towards a veritable ventathon, I noticed that one fellow in the group seemed relaxed and unruffled. Afterwards, I privately asked him what accounted for his apparent comfort despite this burgeoning workload. "Oh, this is nothing," he told me. "I've only been here a couple of months. In my last job, our workload was much bigger than it is here. These people don't realize how easy they have it."

These are just a few of the factors that influence how people respond to change. Keeping them in mind will help in managing the transition to the Next New Thing.

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MANAGING CHANGE

Rocking the Boat

Have you ever noticed that people differ in their receptivity to change? Imagine a continuum. At one end are people who require the safety and security of the status quo. These people are risk-averse and allergic to change. They need certainty and predictability; for them, a sure thing is a good thing. If it ain't broke, don't fix it; in fact, stay away from it, so there's no chance it'll break. Any minor, tiny, iota of change is disruptive for these people, if not downright mortifying. They survive by following a fixed routine, a rigid schedule, a repetitive trust-worthy approach to doing things.

At the other end of the continuum are those who thrive on change and who get bored if five seconds pass without something new or different. These people like spontaneity. They enjoy change for the sake of change. If it ain't broke, let's break it, and then break it again, and then break it again, because there are so many fascinating ways to make it work. These people can start out from Point A to go to Point B, but become distracted by the charms of Point C . . . and oh, look, Point Q . . . and what about Point H?. . . and indeed, they'll enjoy the entire alphabet whether or not they ever reach Point B.

Of course, hardly anyone is superglued to one end of the continuum or the other. Most people reside somewhere along it, and it's helpful to consider their receptivity to change when you propose a new idea. For example, at one point early in my career, I was a project manager reporting to a boss named Tony.

Tony was uncomfortable with change. He excelled at latching onto the status quo and holding on tight. His most common response to a proposal was to turn it down. After all, accepting it would have entailed doing *something*. Tony was an easygoing, likable guy, but I couldn't help thinking of him as Mr. Don't-Rock-the-Boat. By contrast, Tony's manager, Rob (alias Mr. Sure-Why-Not), enjoyed considering new possibilities and tackling new approaches.

One day, I had a great idea for a way to improve the efficiency of our financial systems. I knew, though, that Tony would be likely to reject it. This situation posed a challenge, and one that you yourself might face at times: How can you gain the buy-in and support to introduce a change that others might oppose?

Here are some possibilities: Offer your idea and allow the person time to adjust to it. Analyze how your idea can help the person be successful in the eyes of his or her higher-ups, and package your proposal accordingly. Carefully explain the reasoning behind your thinking. Make it a win-win opportunity by explaining what you'd be willing to give or do in return for support for your idea. Treat the person's concerns with respect and empathy, and explain how you are prepared to address those concerns. Be willing to compromise. Don't expect immediate acceptance of your idea. Be persistent without being pushy.

As it turns out, I didn't know about these strategies when I worked for Tony. The only one I knew was: Be creative. So I wrote up my proposal, and left one copy under a pile on Tony's desk and another copy front and center on Rob's desk. Rob read it that same day, loved the idea, and, on the assumption that Tony already supported it, told him to move on it immediately. Tony, meanwhile, hadn't even *seen* the proposal yet! But acting on the go-ahead from his superior, he directed me to get started.

The approach I took back then isn't advice, you understand. It's just an example to illustrate one of the many routes to introducing change.

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Communicating During Times of Change

Managers who are responsible for implementing change often expect those affected by the change to instantaneously accept and support it. In fact, the attitude some managers convey is: "You learned about it yesterday — get used to it already!" Yet adjustment to change takes time — and always will. Coping with the turmoil and uncertainty that change engenders and journeying to a new sense of stability are not overnight processes.

People generally go through an adjustment period with all types of change, whether it's an announcement of a layoff, an unanticipated promotion, an upgrade people have craved (or dreaded), an abrupt shift in priorities, or yet another reorganization (to name just a few). Whether people experience the change as positive or negative, their initial reaction may include confusion, forgetfulness, withdrawal, and a variety of emotions, such as anger, frustration or excitement. As they adjust to the New Way, they may experience a dip in performance and an increase in errors. This unsettled and perhaps unsettling transition period is familiar to people who have excelled at a sport or hobby, and who then endure a temporary period of awkwardness and incompetence as they strive to attain the next level.

The duration of this adjustment period varies from one person to another and one situation to another; however, if you are in charge of implementing the change, the way you communicate can shorten that adjustment period — or prolong it. To expedite the adjustment process, consider explicitly explaining to those affected that you know they need time to adjust. Point out that adapting to something that's new and unexpected can be difficult. Show respect for the reality of what they are experiencing.

The lesson: *If you accept the fact that implementing change takes time, you will save time in implementing change*.

Shut up and adjust, already!

An example of how *not* to communicate during times of change occurred in the context of a service level agreement (SLA) implementation. After extensive negotiation, service provider and customer personnel completed an SLA that both parties were satisfied with. But the service provider manager then made a huge mistake: He told his staff — the people who would have to deliver service that met the terms of the agreement — "It's done, so live with it!"

Most of his staff were unfamiliar with SLAs and knew nothing about how the agreement would affect their service strategies. Fearing the worst, they were thrown into chaos by this sudden announcement. Morale plunged, taking productivity with it.

The manager didn't appreciate that everyone who would be accountable for the success of the agreement needed time to grasp what was in it and to understand how it would affect their workload, their responsibilities, and their relationships. They needed help in understanding what they would now have to do differently. They needed to know how they'd benefit by the agreement. They needed information, education, and the feeling that someone understood what they were going through.

The organizations that are most effective at easing people through the chaos associated with SLA-triggered change recognize the importance of two important communication practices. First, they communicate the terms of the agreement to affected personnel, explaining how these terms came to be, and inviting employees to voice their concerns and questions. Second, before making the agreement operational, they seek feedback from those who will be responsible for its success.

This process of two-way communication — presenting information *to* affected personnel and soliciting information *from* them — helps people adjust to change. It's an especially valuable approach when the change involves a new technology, methodology, tool or process.

This article is adapted from the section on communicating during times of change from my book, **Communication Gaps and How to Close Them**. For the table of contents, an excerpt on change, and an interview about the book, see http://www.nkarten.com/book2.html.

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And for more on this subject . . .

If you have quick questions about managing change, contact me and I'll answer them if I can.

If you'd like me to review your change management process and provide detailed feedback and recommendations, contact me and let's discuss the options.

And for information on my book (also available as an ebook):

Changing How You Manage and Communicate Change

Click here for pricing in US dollars and shipping from the US.

Click here for pricing in euros and pounds and shipping from the UK.

Good luck! ☺

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