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While negative change is often unpredictable, people's reactions to it tend to follow a classic model.

FROM: JUL-AUG 2005 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

As we all know, the pace of change in our world is increasing exponentially. What can you do to help yourself and your people successfully deal with change? Start by understanding how individuals respond to change, especially changes they perceive to be negative. There is a classic model that asserts people go through four phases when faced with a negative change:

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Acceptance
4. Search for solutions

Consider this example: Raj is the accounting manager for a small manufacturing firm. While looking at the financial reports for the last accounting month, he is bothered by the profit numbers because they are about 10 per cent lower than he expected. Turning to the detailed reports, he quickly locates the mistake — a significant month-end expense accrual has been recorded twice. "I don't believe it!" he shouts, knocking over his chair as he jumps up.

Raj has just entered the denial phase, which quickly shifts to anger. He rages to himself, "This is simply not possible. I asked Annette to double-check the journal entries last night before she closed the month's books. She assured me that she would. Why can't my staff get anything right?"

Fortunately for Annette, Raj is the only one in the department at this early hour of the morning.

Twenty minutes and two cups of coffee later, Raj has calmed down enough to deal with the problem. When he says to himself, "How are we going to fix this mistake?" he has moved into the acceptance phase. When he begins to evaluate several options, including re-closing the books, entering a post-closing entry, or issuing an internal memo to management, he is actively searching for solutions.

There are two key points to remember with respect to this model. One is that every person must go through all four phases. Some people spend more time in the early steps and thus take longer to make it to the final phase, but everyone must go through each step in order to get to the solutions phase. As a leader, your role is not to eliminate the denial and anger steps; rather, it is to assist your people in moving through the phases.

Begin by recognizing that the more time people have to absorb the reality of change, the more likely they are to have moved through at least some of the denial and anger. Share information as soon as possible, since incomplete information with a caveat saying it is partial is better than no information at all. Besides, if you

provide nothing, the rumour mill kicks in and people make up information anyway.

Respect people's need to deny, and rage about, the change. Remember, these are two reactions to negative change. People need to vent. Make it safe for them to do so without repercussions. Acknowledge their anger and frustration. Validating statements such as, "I can see that this whole process is frustrating for you," or "This situation has clearly upset you," provide acknowledgement without agreement or disagreement. Let them know that you are going through the same phases and that it is okay to have some negative feelings. Above all, do not take other people's anger personally.

Recognize that people will re-cycle through the phases. It is very common for people to reach acceptance and to begin searching for solutions when some trigger event — such as something another person says or does — sends them back into denial and anger again. This is normal, so take it in stride.

Once people have made their way through some of the denial and anger and are beginning to reach acceptance, schedule a meeting to brainstorm the next steps. This is an essential part of the search for solutions phase. People need to feel that they are contributing to the final outcome. It gives back a feeling of control and significantly reduces the "victim" mentality. It is worthwhile to bring in a professional facilitator for this meeting to help people focus on the search for solutions, and put them back on track when they begin to slide into denial and anger again.

Finally, don't forget that people take different amounts of time in each phase. On one hand, you'll have the individual who'll almost instantaneously roll up her sleeves and say, "All right. Let's go." But on the other hand, you'll have the person who seems to love to wallow in his misery. Tap into the first person's energy and use her as an ambassador to create momentum; let her take something specifically related to the change and investigate, organize, or implement it. Invest more time in the second person, acknowledging his specific concerns and sharing your insights from when you made your way through the four phases.

Change is rarely easy and nowadays its pace is so rapid that it feels like the next wave of change is upon you before you have even had a chance to stand up from the last one. Nevertheless, negative change is a reality. An awareness of the model and suggestions outlined above may ease the process.

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