Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

MANAGING CHANGE

Change is a common aspect of life in many organisations today. Behind this simple statement lie countless individual stories of worry and fear, confusion and anger, excitement and possibility, and growth and development. In this chapter I would like to describe a number of models that help to make sense of change, share some personal views based on my own experiences of organisational changes that have affected me in my career, and invite you to consider how you yourself handle change.

The change curve

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was a Swiss psychiatrist who worked with terminally ill cancer patients. In her book *On Death and Dying* she introduced the notion of five stages of grief:

- Denial – *This isn't happening to me.*
- Anger – *Who's to blame for this? Why me?*
- Bargaining – *If I can live till my daughter's wedding ….*
- Depression – *I am too sad to do anything.*
- Acceptance – *I'm at peace with what is coming.*

Figure 12.1   The Kubler-Ross grief curve
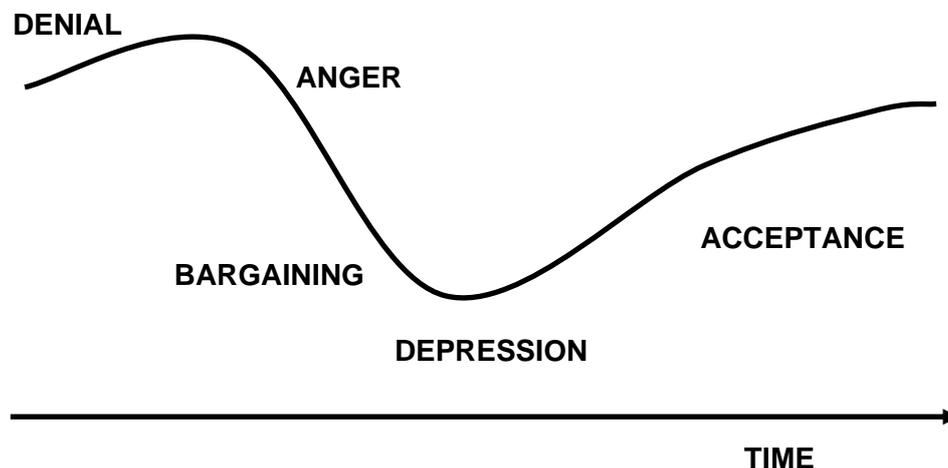
Note that there is no single or simple path through these five stages. The different stages can be experienced many times, they may come in a different order, and sometimes several of the stages are experienced at the same time.

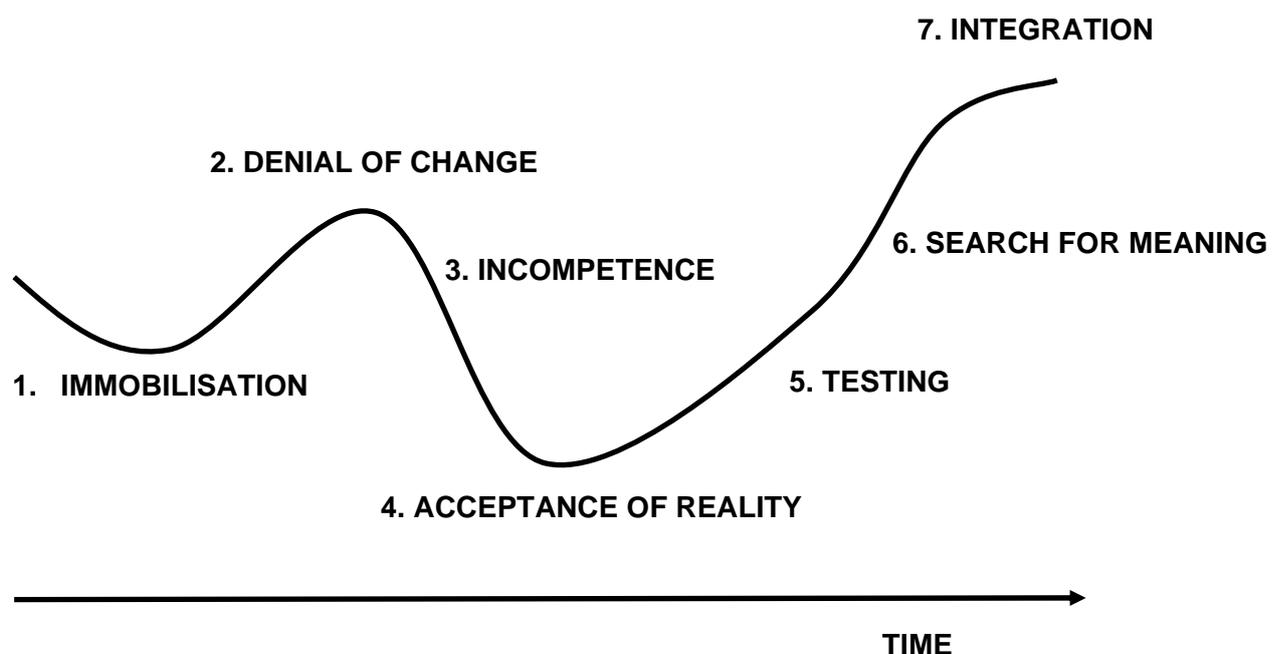# Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

Her theory, which applies to the phases of grief a dying person goes through, has often been misunderstood and applied to family or friends grieving the death of another person. Kubler-Ross's original model has been modified many times, and numerous versions of the change curve have been produced.

In an article called *Beyond the Peter Principle—Managing Successful Transitions* Ralph Lewis and Chris Parker describe a transition curve which includes seven stages experienced by someone who has been promoted. This can serve as a model to help make sense of other experiences of change or loss. Note that some changes are positive and some are negative. Moreover, some changes are planned and some are unplanned. For example, getting married is usually a planned and positive experience, whereas the sudden death of a relative or friend is an unplanned and negative experience.

Lewis and Parker's seven stages are:

1) Immobilisation or shock - a sense of being overwhelmed
2) Denial of change – minimising or trivialising the change
3) Incompetence and depression – with flat performance, frustration, difficulty in coping
4) Accepting reality – letting go of the past and accepting the situation
5) Testing - trying new approaches and behaviours
6) Search for meaning, internalisation – a reflective period with an attempt to understand all that has happened
7) Integration – incorporating new meanings into new and enhanced behaviours

Figure 12.2   Lewis and Parker's transition curve

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Lewis and Parker note that not everyone will follow this general curve and that different people will experience unique progressions and regressions depending on their circumstances. However, people often find it reassuring to know that going through a range of thoughts and emotions when coping with change – even a planned or desired change – is a common experience. It also helps to know that the process takes time, and that slipping back along the curve is normal too.

Change and transition

In his book *Managing transitions: making the most of change* William Bridges draws a distinction between change and transition. He suggests that change is a shift in the externals of a situation – a new site or boss or structure, for instance. Transition, on the other hand, is psychological. It is the "process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about." He argues that it is vital that you understand and take account of transition if you want to implement change successfully.

Transition is the mental and emotional transformation that people go through as they relinquish old arrangements and embrace new ones. Bridges writes that It is "a gradual psychological process through which individuals and groups reorient themselves so they can function and find meaning in a changed situation."
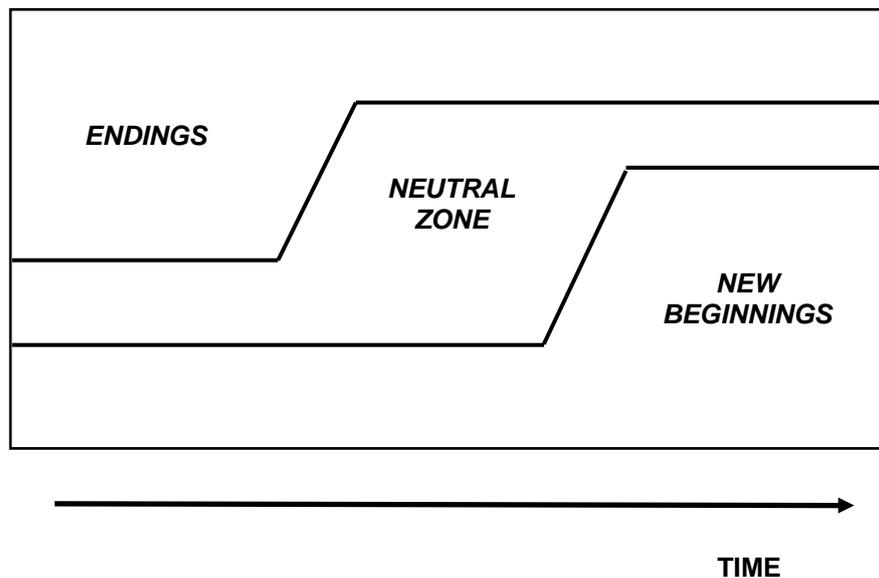
He argues that transition consists of three phases – the ending, the neutral zone and the beginning. Paradoxically, change starts with ending and finishes with beginning.

1) In the **ending** phase, each individual involved is trying to understand what has ended and to face up to the nature of their loss. They are likely to be afraid of the unknown. It is important to appreciate that this will result in resistance. Some people may become stuck in this phase. Bridges advises that you will save yourself a lot of trouble if you remember that the "first task of transition management is to convince people to leave home."

2) In the **neutral** zone, the old way has ended but the new way is not established. This phase is characterised by uncertainty, disorientation, confusion and discomfort. However, Bridges suggests that in this phase there may be tremendous opportunity to create new ways of thinking and working.

3) In the **beginning** phase, certainty returns. People discover new energy, new purpose and new identity. The new way of working feels comfortable, and may even seem like the only possible way.

Note that these three stages may not be sharply delineated, and different people will move forward at different paces.

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Figure 12.3   Bridges' transition curve

John Kotter's model for leading change

In his book *Leading Change* John Kotter sets out the following eight step model which offers a framework for someone wishing to lead a major organisational change:

1) Establish a sense of urgency – identify external opportunities and threats that will motivate people to action

2) Form a powerful guiding coalition – assemble a group with enough power to lead the change effort

3) Create a vision – develop a vision and strategy to direct the change effort

4) Communicate the vision – obtain the buy-in of as many people as possible through simple and frequent communication

5) Empower others to act on the vision – remove obstacles to change, such as unhelpful systems or structures

6) Plan for and create quick wins – set some manageable aims that are easy to achieve and visibly improve performance

7) Consolidate improvements and produce more change – keep up the momentum of change with new projects

8) Institutionalise new approaches – embed the changes in new behaviours and culture across the organisation

Kotter emphasises that these phases in total take a considerable amount of time, and that skipping some of the steps never produces a satisfying result. He also points out that, as always, actions speak far louder than words.

Change and the middle manager

The Kotter model is aimed at the leader who is initiating the change. If you are a manager within an organisation, there may be times when you yourself decide to introduce a change within your department, and the steps in Kotter's framework offer a framework to guide the various actions you need to carry out.

However, it is more likely that you will be in the position where the decision to change has been taken at some level above you in the hierarchy and your role is to implement the change within your area of the organisation. You yourself may also be personally impacted by the change, with all the concerns that this raises. And you may have some scope to shape the detail of how the change initiative is translated into a new organisational structure below you. Hence, you may be at one and the same time:

- an implementer of someone else's change ideas
- a shaper of change
- a potential casualty of change

Being in the middle during a change exercise is often uncomfortable. A common experience is that the people below you think that you know what is happening and are keeping things from them, while you yourself are as much in the dark as they are. And there may also be times when you do have confidential information which you need to keep to yourself until a later date. It can be a very difficult place.

I worked in British Gas in the 1990's while the company went through a series of major organisational restructures as it adjusted to the consequences of being set up by the government in 1986 as a privatised monopoly. I recall one middle manager, a veteran of several restructures - saying to me: *I can manage change – it's uncertainty I can't manage*. I think this frustration reflects the experience of many managers caught up in the middle of organisational restructures.

Creating a new structure

In this section I'd like briefly to consider the situation where you are faced with the challenge of restructuring your department. Let's suppose that the situation is such that you don't necessarily have to shed jobs, but rather you have to refocus the department to reflect shifts within the business or in the external environment. Things are necessarily somewhat different when the reorganisation has to yield significant savings of money and reductions in jobs in the organisation.

The textbook guidance would be to choose the structure you need and then to populate the roles in this structure through some combination of matching people to jobs and interviewing to fill posts. This makes logical sense – decide upon the roles that you need and then appoint people to these roles.

An alternative approach is to think first about the people in your department and then to build the structure around them. Early in my career I observed this taking place

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among the sales managers of the ICI division where I worked. At the time it struck me as favouritism. With the benefit of much more experience of organisational life, I now think there was a lot of merit in the approach. If people know that they will definitely have a place in the new structure, they are saved considerable worry and can get on with things. The reduction in personal and collective stress and uncertainty seems to me to have considerable benefits.

Moreover, it is often the case that a new organisational structure is simply different from, rather than better than, the old one. I recall a colleague from my time in the gas pipeline company, Transco – where there seemed to be a major organisational change every eighteen months or so – saying wisely: *With the right people, you'll make any structure work; with the wrong people it doesn't matter what structure you have.* I think many organisational changes take up vast amounts of time, emotion and money without yielding significant benefits – other than to the external management consultants who were paid handsomely to redesign the organisation! The example of the National Health Service comes to mind to illustrate the point.

Individual responses to change

In his book *Diffusion of Innovations* Everett Rogers described how different people respond to new ideas and technologies. As you read the descriptions which follow you might like to consider how you yourself adopted appliances such as personal computers or mobile phones. Rogers suggests that there are five types of people:

- Innovators – risk takers who are the first to adopt new ideas
- Early Adopters – willing to try out new ideas but in a more considered or careful way
- Early Majority – thoughtful people who accept change more quickly than the average
- Late Majority – sceptics who only change when everyone else has
- Laggards – traditional people who much prefer the 'old ways'

In a similar way people will respond at different rates to organisational change. An individual's willingness to embrace change will also be affected by their past experiences of change, the extent to which they have voluntarily chosen the change, and their degree of involvement in introducing the change.

In his classic work on motivation, described in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*, Abraham Maslow described a hierarchy of needs. Figure 12.4 shows a pyramid describing five levels of needs. (Incidentally, Maslow himself never represented his hierarchy as a pyramid, though many later writers have.) When physiological or safety needs at the lower levels are unmet, then the individual will focus their efforts on satisfying these needs. Only when their lower levels of need are satisfied will a person seek to satisfy their higher needs for belonging, esteem and self actualisation. The five levels in Maslow's hierarchy of needs are:
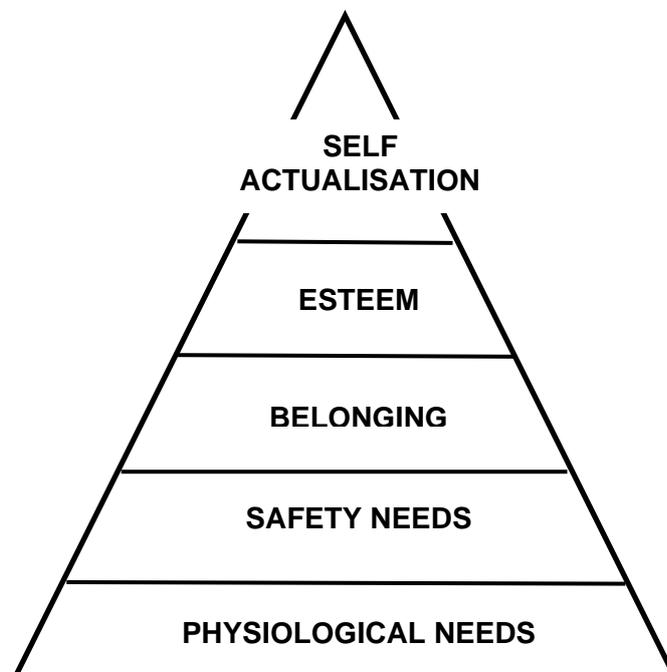
- Self actualisation – personal growth and fulfilment
- Esteem – achievement, status, respect of others, self esteem
- Belonging – love, friendship, family
- Safety needs – health, security, employment, etc.

- Physiological needs – air, food and water, shelter, sleep, etc.

At times of organisational change, when someone's job and livelihood are at risk, they may slip down the hierarchy of needs and be concerned about putting food on the table and paying the mortgage. If they are confident that these needs will be met, then they turn to questions such as job satisfaction and career fulfilment.

**Figure 12.4   Maslow's hierarchy of needs**

SELF ACTUALISATION

ESTEEM

BELONGING

SAFETY NEEDS

PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS

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Four options for change

In this short section I'd like to offer a model which summarises four generic options that are open to someone when they find themself in a situation that is unsatisfactory.

Figure 12.5   Four options for change

Change the situation

Put up with the situation

Change yourself

Leave
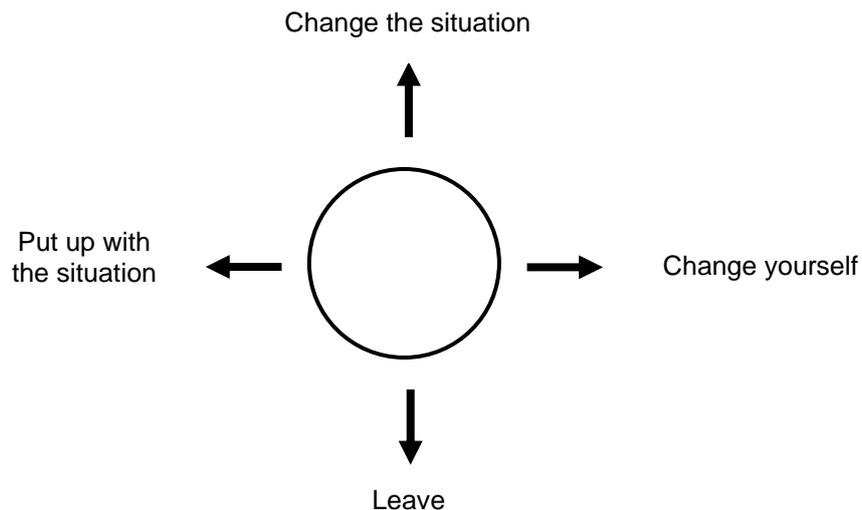
Let us illustrate the four options with the example of someone who isn't satisfied with the role they find themself in following an organisational restructure. Suppose that they think the job they have been given isn't stretching enough and are concerned that their development and career prospects will be harmed.

- One option is to leave – in this case, find another job within or outside the organisation.

- Another option is to change the situation – for example, they might take on extra responsibilities in addition to their current role.

- A third option is to put up with the situation – stay in the job and continue to feel dissatisfied.

- The final option is to change themself – for example, rather than becoming frustrated and upset, they tell themself that this is a temporary situation where they will do as good a job as they can while also looking for the next step in their career, which may help to dispel their feelings of dissatisfaction.

Note that changing yourself is different from merely putting up with the situation since your thoughts, feelings and behaviour are different in the two cases.

Self assessment

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At the University of Warwick we use a 360 degree feedback instrument which we devised to help academics, administrators and commercial managers to develop their leadership style. One of the dimensions of the model is *Managing change*. Table 12.1 shows the eight behavioural statements which make up this dimension. You might like to consider how well you manage change by assessing yourself against these statements. You could also ask others who know you well to rate you.

Note that the term *unit* should be interpreted appropriately as the team, department, function or group which you manage.

To assess your change management skills, indicate your agreement or disagreement with each of the statements, using this five-point scale:

1) *Strongly disagree*
2) *Disagree*
3) *Neither agree nor disagree*
4) *Agree*
5) *Strongly agree*

Table 12.1   Managing change - self assessment

Readily takes on new challenges, and tackles them with great energy and enthusiasm	
Responds positively and flexibly when asked to change	
Proactively introduces changes that significantly improve the performance and reputation of their unit	
Implements changes in a planned and coordinated way	
Acts speedily and decisively when planning and implementing change	
Treats people as adults and communicates clearly and honestly with them when introducing changes	
Listens to the genuine concerns of other people and takes account of their concerns when managing change	
Shows courage and tenacity to overcome obstacles and criticism when introducing change	

Reflecting on your own ratings and perhaps the ratings of others, you might then like to consider what you need to do differently to manage change more effectively.

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Personal reflections on managing change

I'd like to end this chapter by offering a few suggestions based on my own experience as a member of staff caught up in the restructuring of several industrial corporations and on listening to coaching clients as they thought through how they were implementing organisational change.

- The most important question in change is: *What does it mean for me?* When I am satisfied with the answer to this question, then I am able to think about what it means for others and for the organisation.

- Treat people as adults. If my job is going to disappear, I want to know as early as possible so that I can take action to secure my future, pay my mortgage and look after my family.

- Communicate, communicate, communicate. And if you literally have nothing new to tell people. communicate this too.

- Act speedily. In the words of Macbeth:

    If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
    It were done quickly:

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