

Leading Yourself Through Change and Transition

By Terry Barton

Noted mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said, “The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order.” And in our progress toward a new direction, that is exactly what we are doing! No matter how positive we may feel about the new direction; in the midst of all this progress, change, and order comes confusion, frustration, uncertainty, and a host of other stress-inducing emotions. It is helpful in times like these to understand what happens when people—and organizations—go through change.

Typically, and especially in organizations, change is a process that occurs over time, and it is that process that causes stress, not the change itself. There are a variety of books, theories, and models about the subject, one of which is Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ *On Death and Dying*, which defines the process of change. Originally developed to help people understand the stages of death and dying, Kubler-Ross’ work has been applied to organizational change as well as other types of personal change. The basis for the application is that during periods of change we experience loss, and much like when we lose a loved one, we go through a grieving process as we say goodbye to what we once knew and embrace a new state of being.

According to Kubler-Ross, when people are experiencing change they go through several natural phases that start with denial and ultimately end in acceptance. In the middle, they experience emotions that can be broadly categorized as resistance and exploration. Let’s look at what happens in each phase.

In the denial phase, people are shocked and surprised, they don’t think the change will actually happen or even impact them. As time progresses and it becomes apparent that the change will impact them, they become resistant. They may become anxious, difficult to work with or “dug-in” to past practices. As people move through resistance, they begin to explore what the future may hold. They become optimistic about the change and begin to think about what new opportunities may arise. Generally, once people have had a chance to explore the new horizon, they move to acceptance, renewing their commitment and feeling energized about their new state of being.

Sounds easy, right? Then why is the process of change so difficult? The answer lies in several key points:

1. **Regardless of the size of the change, people move through all of the phases.** Some move more quickly than others, but everyone moves through them. It is a natural response to the process of change.
2. **Someone can actually be in multiple phases at the same time.** As individual elements of the overall change take place, people often find

themselves in multiple stages—for example, experiencing both anxiety and hope—depending on what is happening around them. That’s okay, because change is a process and we naturally move from one phase to another at different rates.

3. **Moving too quickly, or getting stuck, makes it harder to move to acceptance.** Moving too quickly through stages or getting stuck in one stage for too long may result in not being fully committed to the new state or not getting there at all.

So, what can you do to help yourself move through the phases and ultimately commit to the new state? Try some of the following suggestions:

1. **Figure out which phase (or phases) you are in.** Are you in denial about some elements of the change, resistant to others, yet committed the change overall? Figure out why you are where you are and determine what you need to do to move to the next phase.
2. **Stay informed.** Make use of the information and communication channels available to you.
3. **Reach out.** Talk to your team, your manager, your friends and family. Share your feelings or concerns with them, get their perspective, and use it to broaden yours.
4. **Don’t look for perfect solutions.** There is no one, perfect answer. In times of change we have to accept temporary solutions and ambiguity. If this is difficult for you, try points 1, 2, and 3 above.
5. **Set goals and celebrate.** Set personal goals for yourself, relative to the change, and celebrate when you achieve them. You don’t even have to tell anyone what you’re doing. A goal can be as simple as saying, “I’m going to keep an open mind the next time I’m on a conference call and listen to the other person’s opinion”. Then, when you’ve done it, celebrate. Have a cookie with lunch, get the full-fat latte in the morning, or download a new iTunes. Anything to mark the occasion and keep you focused.

The important thing to remember through it all is that change is a process, it is inevitable, it takes time, and it means different things to different people. Once you’ve identified where you stand, be mindful that others, most likely, are in a completely different place.

If you are interested in learning more about managing change, check out these books:

- William Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 144 pp (Cambridge, MA: [Da Capo Press](#), 2003)
- John Kotter, *Leading Change*, 187 pp (Watertown, MA: [Harvard Business School Press](#), 1996)
- Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, MD, *On Death and Dying*, 288 pp (New York: [Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group](#), 1996 reprint)

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