

Managing yourself and others through times of dramatic change **Bruce Roselle PhD, LP**

Change happens so rapidly in today's business environment that the only thing we can know with certainty is that *change will occur*. Sometimes it happens so continuously or subtly that we do not even notice it. Other times, it seems to come at us in a head-on collision. In either situation, leaders need to concentrate on helping everyone on the team successfully navigate the change. As changes occur organizationally, individuals must move through a series of internal "re-framings" or transitions.

Each stage of transition brings with it distinct emotions and behaviors. Effective leaders provide the tools and perspective their team members need throughout the change process. The good news is that, while changes seem to come in infinite varieties, transitions typically occur in four predictable phases, and each phase has a specific strategy by which you can successfully manage others through it.

Stage 1: Hanging on. In this phase, we have not yet let go of the old way. We find ourselves in a bit of denial, as we do not admit that things have changed or we cling to the hope that they will quickly change back. Some actively grieve the loss of the old way. Either way, we continue to wrap our hands and minds around the way it was and we make it impossible to move on. We experience a degree of fear, confusion and upset as we try to accept the change—especially if it has been imposed with little warning from others or input from us.

The strategy here is to communicate as completely as possible what has changed and why. It must be clear that the old way is gone, and we will not return to the former way of doing things. Leaders must communicate clearly the reasons for change, the intended goals and objectives, timelines, and structure. They must share information often and fully, even when there is little to say.

Stage 2: Letting go. In this phase, we begin to loosen our physical, mental, and emotional fingers as we let the recognition sink in that things have indeed changed. We are not still holding on to the past, but we have not yet loosened our grip enough to grasp anything new for the future. This is a period of great distress and angst as we try to imagine a future without the security of the past, but are still very uncertain and worried about the future. There are obvious conflicts, distrust of decision-makers, sadness for the perceived loss, and lack of motivation.

The strategy here is to recognize the level of fear, sometimes irrational, people experience as a consequence of leaving the old, familiar way behind. The new way is untried and uncertain. Leaders must validate people's fears and help give them a sense of control. Sharing stories of "early adaptors" helps others begin to let go. They must avoid labeling people as resisters, but instead encourage the behaviors they want to increase.

Communicating clearly and fully, listening deeply, and tolerating upset behaviors and resistance in others are key skills at this stage. It is also important to encourage people actively, help resolve conflicts patiently, and create a safe environment in which people can work through their upset.

Stage 3: Reaching out. In this phase, we begin to exercise our creative problem solving and stretch beyond our former comfort level in order to think through or try out new scenarios. While there is still a great deal of anxiety and discomfort about letting go of the former way of doing things, we begin to see some positives and possibilities in the new way. We have mostly let go of the hope that things will go back to the way they were, and have come to accept the change. We begin to generate some hopeful possible scenarios for the future.

The strategy here is to help people envision how they, personally, can be successful in the new way. This is often a time of great creativity as people deal with paradoxes (like more work and fewer resources), struggle to solve new problems, and begin to see how they could be successful in the future. Leaders must figure out ways to integrate the diverse ideas, insights, needs and initiatives of team members. They must release more of their need to control, and encourage new thinking on the part of others. Leaders must tolerate missteps, celebrate small victories, and encourage problem solving in others.

Stage 4: Taking hold. In this final phase, we have completely let go of the past and for the first time fully embrace the new present. We now take hold of the new way, the new relationship, and begin to see ourselves comfortably placed in this new situation. We even generate some excitement about this new step, and the old way becomes a more distant memory. People begin to feel more confident of the new direction and exhibit greater energy and optimism.

The strategy here is to reassure those who have taken hold of the new way that they will be successful, perhaps beyond what they experienced in the old way. Leaders must continue to tell success stories and reinforce people for making the transition. Recognition, appreciation, and encouragement are very important at this stage.

As you manage others through these four stages of change, it is also important to manage your own attitude about the situation. It is difficult in changing times for most people to maintain a positive, optimistic attitude. The most important thing a leader can do in the midst of difficult changes is to live with an *attitude of abundance* based on a persistent belief in these six vital truths:

1. *Know the purpose in what you propose to do*

Perspective on our own lives provides us with two critical elements in separating the signal from the noise. The first element is *purpose*, the sense of mission or calling that determines the priority of relationships, situations, and opportunities. The second is *context*, the ability to look at relationships, situations, and opportunities with a frame of reference that determines the criticality of each. Both context and purpose are central to perspective, and perspective is foundational to leadership.

Within this way of determining purpose, many individuals include the following:

- Self—to support myself independently, be all that I can be
- Family—to be the best provider for my family, to serve them
- Principles/values—to live by truth, justice, and brotherly love

2. Focus on the beauty that remains

To focus on the beauty that remains is to notice the ways in which your cup in life is at least half-full. The key here is to develop a thankful attitude for the people, situations, and things in your life that remain, despite the changes you have gone through.

3. Find hope in the thought that things will get better

This does not mean that you sit back and let someone else meet your needs, but rather that you actively engage in work and life activities, expecting the best results. From this truth springs the faith that things will work out, negative phases will pass, situations will develop positively, and problems will resolve in a win-win manner.

People with optimistic attitudes are aware of the potential downsides and problems, but choose instead to focus on the potential, the upside, and the positives. Victor Frankl once wrote, “The last of human freedoms is the freedom to choose our own attitudes.” An optimistic attitude is a conscious choice you can make, and it has a tremendous impact on how wholeheartedly you live your life.

4. Think less about yourself and more about others

The more selfless your perspective, the more effectively you will function in your work and life. Just as thinking about how good you look and sound distracts you from making a point most effectively, focusing on your own needs when working with and relating to others drains your patience, gentleness, kindness, and compassion. Focus more on the people around you and how you can help.

5. Jog yourself physically, psychologically, spiritually

It is critical to rest and refresh yourself physically, psychologically, and spiritually throughout changing situations. You need adequate sleep, regular exercise, healthy diet, spiritual focus, and a mental break from work and the press of responsibilities. To refresh in these ways daily and weekly is more powerful than several vacations, and it is critical to maintaining the energy you need.

6. Accept what you cannot change, change what you can

Central here is the belief that there are limits to what you can control, and that it is important to focus most energy on those things you can change. This belief in limits allows you to let go and trust in some situations, and to courageously fight in others. It allows you to forgive others for ways in which you have been hurt in the past, and to let go of frustrations from unmet goals.

Developing this type of wholehearted attitude in the face of change takes time and effort. The beauty in this effort is that the attitude tends to build upon itself. That is, taking action based on any of these vital truths helps you grow more wholehearted in the other beliefs. Further, the more wholehearted your approach with others, the more you create a space for them in which they can accept these vital truths and shift their own attitudes toward greater wholeheartedness. The more their attitudes begin to shift, the easier it is for the whole team to successfully navigate changing times.

*The strategies in this paper were gleaned from Bruce Roselle’s book [Vital Truths](#)