

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

The Hurly-Burly Hubbub of Change

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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.

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.

Change upsets the relative stability of whatever came before. When I ask my audiences about changes they've experienced at work, they don't lack for examples: Reorganizations, cancellation of a project, new technology, an abrupt priority change, a new manager, a departing team member, a move to another city (or another building), 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 change — can create 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 important to understand about this turbulence is that it's perfectly normal. It's how people react to major change. And it takes time to play out. Major change is a felt experience, and people are more likely to react emotionally than logically and rationally. Therefore, it's



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unreasonable to introduce a change and expect everyone to instantly adjust, and wishing that it were otherwise won't make it so.

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

For example, 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.

But happily, you'll be able to minimize the duration and intensity of the turbulence if you:

- Accept that a certain amount of pushback is inevitable, and allow for it.
- Keep people informed about what's happening.
- Treat the old way with respect, recognizing that it was a place of relative comfort.
- Acknowledge the turbulence people are experiencing 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.

This is not to say you should mollycoddle people and give them all the time in the world to adjust. After all, you still have deadlines to meet and goals to achieve. But by understanding how people experience change, you find it much easier to manage the hurly-burly hubbub. ☺

This article is adapted from my new book,

**Changing How You Manage and Communicate Change:
Focusing on the Human Side of Change:
www.nkarten.com/changebook**

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