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Change: Loss, Opportunity, and Resilience

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Change is everywhere today. Major change is occurring in almost every aspect of people's personal and work lives. That change is not just technological either. Change has affected how people interact with each other. It has affected the policies and regulations that guide their work. Many industries, including agriculture, have experienced structural changes that are now impacting how business is done. There are many value and ethical questions that these changes are creating. In the midst of all this change, many people are asking themselves, "What are we to do?" They often feel overwhelmed because they feel like what they always depended upon to be true, no longer is.

Reactive Versus Proactive Response to Change

When major change occurs, everyone has similar types of feelings. Fear, anxiety and loss of control are often experienced. However, what differs is how people react to that change. One can react in a reactive or proactive manner.

Being reactive means people let change happen and then they respond or adapt to it (Figure 1). They see change as loss or a threat in this situation. Being proactive (Figure 2) means people plan for change and are open to new or multiple ways of doing things. They see change as an opportunity in this instance. Or, they are at least open to reframing how they view the change.

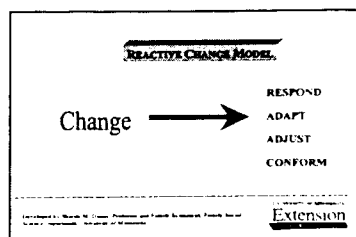


Figure 1

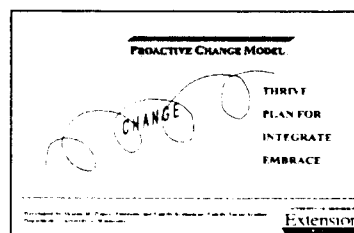


Figure 2

In the long term, how one interacts with change is the difference between surviving and thriving in one's personal life, family life, or one's work or business life. How a person views a change influences how that person will communicate, make decisions, and solve problems around that change.

Reactive or proactive responses to change are really not two separate responses to change but rather two ends of a continuum (Figure 3). People can have an overall orientation toward change that means that a person most often responds in a certain way. But, it is also true that depending upon the intensity of meaning of a specific change, a person could react differently than usual. For instance, a person may usually respond to change in a fairly positive and proactive way. But,

that same person could have a huge sense of loss if they lost a job or business that they felt frames who they are.

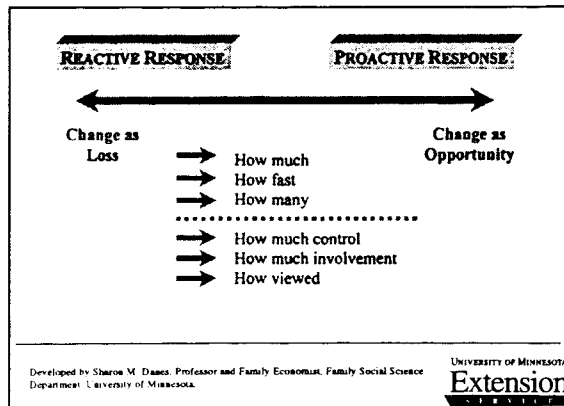


Figure 3

Factors Affecting People’s Response to Change

Whether one views particular change as a loss or an opportunity depends on a number of factors. Some of those factors are external to a person and others depend on how the change is perceived. When there are many changes happening at once or the changes are coming at a very fast pace or there are a number of major changes occurring simultaneously, there is a greater chance that a person will experience that change as a loss. The effect is additive. If any combination of these factors occur at the same time, it is more likely that a person will experience the change as loss.

How you personally view a specific change has a great impact on how you will respond to the change. The greater the meaning a person places upon a change, the greater will be the sense of loss. Two people can experience the same set of circumstances, but view them differently.

Let’s say that there are two dairy farmers who get hurt and can no longer milk. Both have a son or daughter interested in continuing in the business. Both view their injury and its impact on their business as a loss. Both deny the impact of their injury at first because they are fearful about what it means and confused about how to proceed. Then both become angry and irritable about their situation. These are normal stages of grief over things that we perceive as losses. Both experience the “blues” after awhile, but here is where they begin to differ.

One of the farmers views the injury as a loss of a way of life, becomes quite depressed, and can’t seem to move on. The other feels pretty low for awhile but gets some help to talk about and find meaning in the situation. He begins to explore options and to see the situation as an opportunity to get his child more involved in the business at an earlier stage in life. He also begins to concentrate on diversifying the operation by creating a value-added product in which he can be involved despite his injury.

How you view a change influences how you communicate, make decisions, and solve problems as you deal with change. It also determines how quickly you progress through a normal series of adjustments like those just described.

How much control you have had over the change can affect how you respond to it. Whether a person has had involvement in making the change also contributes to how the change is experienced. A very crucial factor in how you interact with a change is how you view the change. The more you value what is changing, the greater the sense of loss you will experience.

Decision Making When Change is Viewed as Loss

When people view a change as loss, they go through a grieving process. There are several stages people go through in such a case (Figure 4). Decision making abilities are affected differently at the various stages.

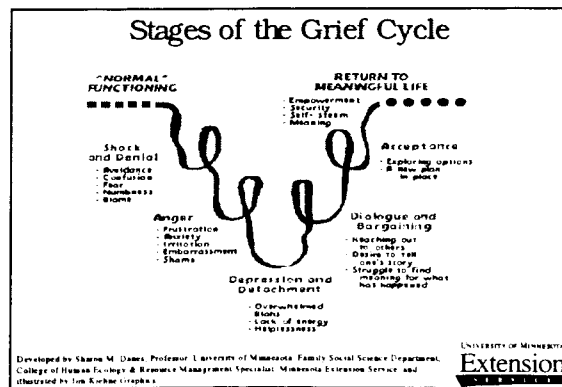


Figure 4

The first stage is shock and denial. Fear, confusion, and a general numbness characterize this stage. People often blame others in this stage for what is occurring. A need for decision-making is often not recognized at this stage because people are denying that there has been a change.

Anxiety, irritation, frustration and shame characterize the next stage of the grief and loss cycle, usually identified as the anger stage. Decision-making is very difficult for people in this stage because their energies are so involved in the emotions of the situation.

The next stage (depression or detachment) is an overwhelming sense of the "blues" and a general lack of energy. This stage is often accompanied by a feeling of helplessness. People in this stage have difficulty finding the energy to make decisions on their own. They often need the help of others to do so. If a person becomes clinically depressed, he/she will need help from a professional to move out of this stage.

People don't go through these stages of grief in a neat step-by-step fashion. They may flip back into an earlier stage. How quickly one goes through the grief and loss cycle depends on the intensity of meaning that a person has placed on the change.

People become more open to alternatives when they enter the dialogue and bargaining stage. They have a desire to tell their story because they are struggling to find meaning for what has

happened. As they enter the acceptance stage, they become more open to exploring options and developing a new plan of action.

Entering the acceptance stage doesn't mean that people like the change but they have begun to incorporate it into their lives. At the end of this last stage, people are again empowered to make decisions because they have meaning in their life again. However, things are not exactly the same as prior to the time of the change.

Change as Opportunity

Even when people have decided to make a change and have been involved in making the decision and consider it a good or positive change, there is an adjustment process and often resistance to that change (Figure 5). Figure 5 indicates the phases people experience on dimensions of pessimism over time. People can tolerate just a certain level of pessimism and it varies across people.

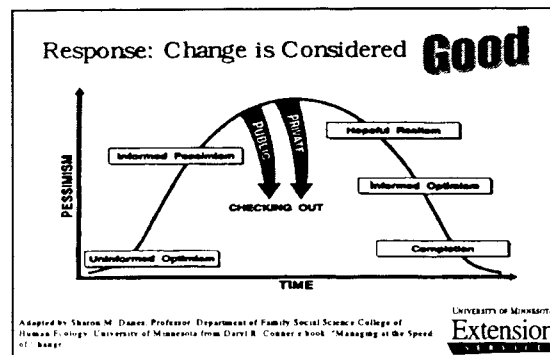


Figure 5

When people plan a change in their personal or work lives, they do some investigation into the alternatives. Despite this information seeking, they still enter a change process with "uninformed optimism". This stage means that they don't know exactly how it will affect their lives, even though they think they do.

As people put the change in place, they move to "informed pessimism". In this phase, they actually experience how the change will affect them and the consequences it will have on them. They begin to experience the actual costs of making the change. Then they begin to doubt the change decision and question whether this change is what they actually want to do.

At that point, a "checking out" period may occur and is a normal occurrence in the process. This period is a time to acknowledge the issues and questions that surround the change. The "checking out" can occur either privately or publicly. The latter is less hazardous because issues are discussed in the open and the problem solving process can proceed. In private checking out, people do not share with others their doubts and fears but may act them out, confusing others involved in making the change.

If a discussion of doubts and actual impacts of the change occurs, needed adjustments can be made. Then, the group moves to the hopeful realism phase. There may still be doubts at this

stage, but the group has reaffirmed that “just maybe” this change will work for them. The checking out phase doesn’t need to occur. If it never takes place or is done publicly and problems are managed, the concerns of informed pessimism begin to subside.

As the change becomes more integrated, the group moves on to the “informed optimism” stage where more confidence is experienced about the successful incorporation of the change. The completion stage is characterized by an understanding that costs surrounding the change are worth while and a commitment is made to that change.

Characteristics of Change

Some things occur regularly around change. One is that there will be pressure to keep things the way they are. When people make a change, whether in their personal or work life, others will question and sometimes challenge that change. This behavior is normal and it should be expected. People naturally feel more comfortable when things remain the same.

Those who really want change are often impatient for it to begin and continue. Remember, though, that planned change based on a goal is usually lasting change. Reduce the risks involved in major change by taking time to consult professionals for information, to determine the financial costs and benefits of alternatives, and to discuss alternatives with others whose time and money will be affected. Others will resist change less if they have participated in the change decision.

Disagreement and conflict are a normal part of change. Care needs to be taken though that the communication around the disagreements is handled in a respectful manner. That disagreement needs to remain focused on the issue and not become a personal attack. Disagreement can create growth if handled constructively; prolonged, unresolved conflict can be energy-draining and destructive.

Change is often a process of three steps forward and one backward. Writing down agreed-upon decisions or working with concrete written costs can reduce misunderstandings, if working with financial decisions or alternatives involving money.

Maintaining Resilience

To effectively manage change in one’s personal life, one’s business, family, or organization, a person needs to embrace change as an opportunity to be taken advantage of rather than viewing change only as a danger to be avoided. At the very least, it is critical to develop five characteristics that enhance one’s resilience (keep your energy level up) while facing the many changes that need to be faced every day. These five characteristics include being:

- Positive
- Focused
- Flexible
- Organized
- Proactive

Positive people develop the ability to view life as challenging, dynamic, and filled with opportunities. They appreciate the dangers and threats in change, but are not overwhelmed by them. They “compartmentalize” the stress caused by disruptions to prevent it from affecting other areas of their lives.

Focused people determine where they are headed and stick to that goal so that barriers along the way do not become insurmountable. Blocks or obstacles are given the appropriate attention.

Being **flexible** means being open to different options when faced with uncertainty. Flexible people recognize their personal strengths and weaknesses and know when to accept internal or external limits.

Organized people develop structured approaches to managing ambiguity. They set priorities, but when necessary, renegotiate them during change. They recognize when to ask others for help.

The last characteristic of resilient people is being **proactive**. Proactive people work with change rather than defend against it. They draw important lessons from change – related experiences to apply to similar situations. They also use resources to creatively reframe a changing situation.

Planning for Change

For businesses to thrive in a world of change, they must include several essential considerations in their business planning.

Accept ambiguity. A certain amount of ambiguity is an essential part of the planning process. There are a few black and white situations or right or wrong answers. There are many ways to do business.

What is right for your family business may not be right for the business down the road. It depends on your goals, vision, and financial circumstances; on how your operation fits into the surrounding economy and affects the surrounding environment; and on the impact of the global market on the local and state economy.

As an example, two similar dairy families chose different routes for their businesses. For both, the dairy animals, a comfortable level of living, and time with family were important. One couple chose to build a milking parlor and develop a partnership with a son and daughter-in-law. The other chose to sell their herd to a larger farm and work for that farm. Both maintained the connection with the animals, are living comfortably, and have more time with their families.

Share information. Both families in the example made a decision and carried it out over several years. They had multiple discussions with all affected members of the family business. One couple joined a discussion group of farmers who had made similar changes. The focus was on maintaining the viability of their businesses by sharing information and experiences.

Make full use of the many people around you. In the example, both families consulted several professionals for information and help in analyzing alternatives and making decisions. Even

though there was disagreement and conflict while the plan was being worked out, there was time and energy for alternatives to be considered, space for emotions to surface and sometimes ease, and opportunity for compromises on all sides. In each case, the family used the strengths of all members, both male and female, in problem solving.

Have a vision. Both families had a vision of what they wanted for the future. That vision served as an invisible force that enabled family members to in on instance remodel their business, and in the other to design a new kind of life without direct ownership of the animals.

In summary, coping with change means learning not only about technology, but also about people. Businesses that will thrive in the future are those that plan proactively around change by being open to new and/or multiple ways of doing things.

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