

Managing Change and Transitions
THE HUMAN SIDE OF CHANGE
by Kathy Burford
PART II

The change resulting from a re-assignment of a job position can sometimes be described as similar to having lost one's best friend. Often overlooked is the importance and meaning that people place on their work.

As one person commented some time ago, "when I got the news that I would be doing something different next year, it was like tearing my heart out ... I was devastated." Others who have experienced change in their work have shared that their feelings were ones of shock, disbelief, sadness, numbness, and a high degree of stress.

Change is in the air and we can expect more changes to occur over the next few years. If you are a teacher or a school administrator affected by the recent changes and restructuring in our education system, you may be asking yourself what a person can do to cope successfully with the changes that are occurring and what you can do to minimize the impact of these changes. First of all, it might be helpful to understand some of the current knowledge about change and then to provide some suggestions about what one can do to meet the challenge of maintaining a sense of balance and wellbeing during what can sometimes prove to be a difficult time.

Some of the basic assumptions about change are:

- Change is a normal part of life, but any change, large or small, is often stressful.
- Most change is outside of our control but we can control our reaction to it.
- Change comes in stages and the transition stage is the most difficult.
- The uncertainty experienced during the transition stage, which begins with leaving the "old" behind and ends with a "new" beginning, is a highly stressful time.
- An unacknowledged component of change can include a feeling of loss and grief which is similar to a person's reaction to the death of a friend or a loved one.
- A wide range of emotions not only affects those who are laid off, reassigned, or displaced, but can also affect those who remain after the change event.
- Change can be viewed as a challenge to let go of the old, to reassess outmoded thinking or beliefs, and to start new beginnings.
- Change can be stimulating and can be a catalyst to focus on strengths, successes, and creativity.

Schools and school boards can take steps to minimize the effects of change on the staff. Individuals can also use effective strategies to help themselves cope with this stressful period in their lives.

J. Shep Jeffreys (Ed.D), in his recent book *Coping with Workplace Change: Dealing with Loss and Grief*, makes some interesting points. In his work with organizations that have gone through changes, he has found that, "many managers are afraid that talking with employees about restructuring will only make things worse but, in fact, the opposite is true; not talking about it forces employees to bury their feelings, or express them through cynicism or hostility." He stresses the importance of acknowledging the feelings of loss and grief which are a normal reaction. He also suggests that it is important for the organization to listen and to listen more. People need to be encouraged to talk about what they are feeling and to be listened to without being judged or given advice about how to fix the problem. This, he says, is an important part of the healing process.

Schools and school boards being re-structured can help their employees cope with change and transition by keeping the channels of communication open. Jeffreys advises organizations to "communicate openly about what is happening, to recognize that people affected will be experiencing feelings of sadness and grief, and to offer support during the transitional period."

Jeffreys cites other helpful strategies that organizations can use to lessen the pain, such as holding regular meetings to provide staff with up-to-date information about forthcoming changes, providing opportunities for people to share their feelings about the changes through individual counselling, support groups, or workshops, using ending rituals to mourn what is lost and to honour and celebrate the successes of what once was (e.g., tree planting, plaque, memorial book or

photo album).

Individuals can cope more effectively by:

Talking and sharing with others

The expression of feelings is a necessary part of being human and is healthy but burying emotions and denying their existence is not a healthy strategy in the long run. Share your feelings with those you trust and feel comfortable around. Sharing with others who are going through similar changes can also be useful since others can share how they are coping and dealing with the change event. Other people can often be good sounding boards and can validate what you are feeling, and also put you on a positive track if your thinking is centering on self-blame and self-doubt.

Taking care of yourself

When experiencing high levels of stress related to change, it is easy to forget some simple but effective practices that help maintain your health and wellbeing. If you ignore your physical and emotional needs, burnout may result. Eat well-balanced meals and get regular exercise, adequate rest and relaxation.

Maintaining contacts with others

Build a support system into your life whereby you spend time with others who make you feel good about yourself. Plan time with others who value you, and listen to what these people say about you. Try to avoid spending time with people who make you feel worse about yourself.

Becoming a friend to yourself and being a good self-nurturer

Make time in your busy schedule to develop habits that support you. A good habit to start and one in a step in the right direction is to have even a few minutes planned just for you in each and every day.

Acknowledging your emotions

Acknowledge to yourself that your emotions are legitimate and not to be feared or buried. Seek an ear from trusted friends, family or colleagues, or a professional who will help you put your emotions in perspective and seek solutions that make sense to you.

Keeping fit and healthy

Regular exercise through walks, runs, or structured activities can help counteract the effects of stress. If you haven't exercised in a long time, seek advice from your physician on the type and level of exercise that would be safe for you to start. Have you had your blood pressure checked lately? A regular health check-up could pinpoint health issues that need your attention.

Slowing down

If you are feeling swamped with work, this is time to develop a good time management program which helps list and plan those activities that need your attention now and leaves those that are less important to be addressed at a later date. We can sometimes be our own worst enemy by unrealistically setting expectations that cannot be met even if we had powers beyond what is humanly possible.

Developing new activities and interests.

Because the needs of the workplace are constantly changing at such a rapid pace, jobs will change too. We can no longer expect that what we do today will remain the same or be carved in stone. New knowledge, experiences, or skills might open doors for us in the future.

Developing a passion for life and what you do.

Our passions are those aspects of life which motivate us to try new things, and increase our skills and experiences. How will we ever know what we are capable of if we don't take risks and develop ourselves?

Briefly, to summarize the key points of this article:

- 1) Acknowledge the effects of change and understand that it is a process which has aspects related to loss and grief.
- 2) In anticipation of changes, have support systems in place and people in whom you can confide.
- 3) Communicate within organizations and with other supportive individuals.
- 4) Take care of yourself physically and emotionally.
- 5) Slow down and utilize effective time management.

If needing assistance, keep in mind that you have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) in place that can provide help, information, referrals to professionals, and support. Contact Kathy Burford (Ext. 242) or Claudette Coombs (Ext. 260), EAP Coordinators who are available to take your call.