



## Managing people through change

### 5 essential skills for helping people deal with change successfully

Change is natural and necessary for organisational survival, but is one of the most upsetting and stressful experiences for staff. During periods of significant change, people experience extremely high levels of uncertainty, anxiety, negativity and stress. Their behaviour can seem unpredictable and irrational, and their morale, motivation and productivity is affected.

When implementing change, organisations often focus on the systems, processes and outcomes, but fail to understand or take account of the emotional impact it will have on their staff. If employees are equipped both emotionally and physically to deal with change effectively, the damage to the individual, the team and the company is reduced significantly. When people are supported and prepared properly, they are more resilient, adaptable, and able to handle change positively.

As a manager, you play an essential role in ensuring that people feel listened to, valued and invested in so that they feel more positive about the changes, feel more empowered, and are more motivated and productive. This helps to make sure that stress, sickness, and absence levels are reduced, and performance and service delivery levels are maintained, despite the upheaval and worries which change creates. Here are our 5 top tips for effectively managing people through change.

## 1. Manage your own emotions

Before even thinking about other people's emotions, you need to be aware of your own emotions. How do you feel about the changes? Are you feeling positive about them or do you have concerns? You may be stressed and scared yourself about the changes, or may find yourself a target for blame and criticism from others, making you angry or upset.

As a manager it is essential to be able to understand and manage your own emotions, so that they don't have a negative impact on others around you. Read our leaflet "**6 ways to deal successfully with change at work**" at [www.salt-box.co.uk/free-resources](http://www.salt-box.co.uk/free-resources) for more information on this.

Managing your own emotions doesn't mean denying your feelings or putting on a false front – it's about behaving in a way that means your feelings don't cause damage to others. You express your emotions through your tone of voice, language, body language, and behaviour, and how you manage these determines how they affect others. Be aware of how you come across, and look at

what needs to change. People will need to feel that they can trust and rely on you as a steady rock during the change process, and you need to manage your thoughts, feelings and behaviour so that you are calm, collected, and objective.

## 2. Understand People

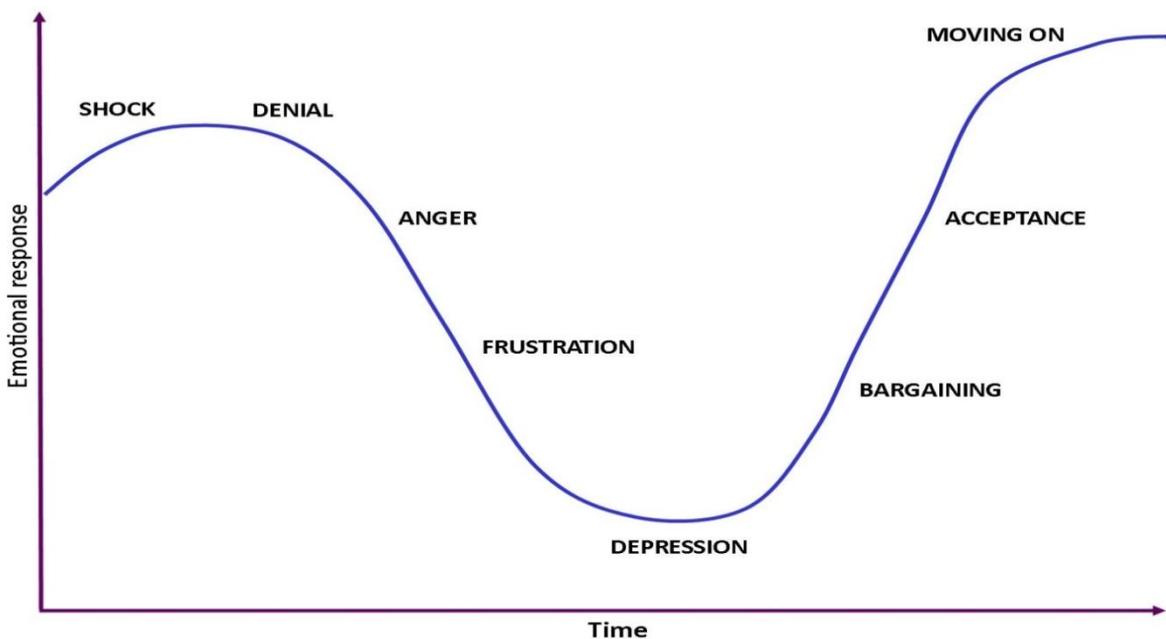
Make sure you understand and acknowledge people's emotions. Really listen to people and take time to understand their specific fears: What are they concerned about? How strongly do they feel about it? Do they perceive it as a good or a bad thing?

Don't judge people by your own reactions to the change – everyone is different and things which you don't consider stressful or worrying may be really frightening for others. Empathise with people and really try to understand their feelings and perspective.

You can help people to articulate the reasons for their concerns or fears by asking open questions, accepting that this is how they feel and it is very real for them, and making sure you don't criticise or disagree with them.

## 3. Give people what they need at different stages

People go through a similar emotional path when dealing with significant change as they do when they experience a bereavement. For more information about the stages, read our leaflet **"6 ways to deal successfully with change at work"** at [www.salt-box.co.uk/free-resources](http://www.salt-box.co.uk/free-resources)



Your staff will need different things from you, depending on which stage of the curve they are at. Here are some basic points:

### **SHOCK**

Listen to people, understand their sense of loss, and give them space to come to terms with the situation. Encourage them to ask questions when they are ready, and give them the information they need to make sense of it all.

Help deal with people's confusion by providing as much information as possible, focus on short-term objectives and goals, and provide reassurance. Take as much time as is needed to address issues and concerns (both with individuals and the bigger group) about the changes.

It is also good at this stage to introduce people to the change curve and help them to develop strategies for dealing with each of the stages they may experience (use our leaflet "**6 ways to deal successfully with change at work**" at [www.salt-box.co.uk/free-resources](http://www.salt-box.co.uk/free-resources) to help you with this.)

### **DENIAL**

When people are in denial, don't expect sudden leaps into acceptance. Give them sufficient time to face up to the change and its repercussions. It may be helpful to explain, carefully and sensitively, the risks of remaining in denial – to the individual, the team and the company.

### **ANGER**

Some of people's anger and frustration may be directed at you, or at your colleagues, which may make it upsetting and unpleasant for you. Don't take their comments personally, or become defensive or angry yourself. It's essential to put your own feelings of hurt or anger aside and keep the communication channels wide open. Be honest, and stay calm. Don't make promises that can't be kept, and don't try to whitewash the truth.

Try putting yourself in the shoes of those who are angry. You can empathise with people's feelings of anger, but this doesn't mean you have to let people get away with bad behaviour ie *"It's okay to be angry, but it's not okay to shout at others"*. Remember that if when people feel listened to, respected and understood their anger will weaken, reduce and eventually probably disappear.

### **FRUSTRATION**

People will need your help to fully comprehend the meaning of the change for them and how much input they will have in the change process. You can really influence the way people see the future, and you need to act as a beacon, helping to guide and navigate people safely through the changes and into the future.

Make sure people have plenty of avenues for issues, feelings and concerns to be vented. Keep giving them information about the details as required and updating them about progress. It's essential to involve people as much as possible so that they feel they have some control over the change, helping to reduce their frustration and resistance.

Make sure people also understand what is not changing. This gives them one less thing to stress about, and it also gives them an anchor, something to hold on to in the face of uncertainty and change.

## DEPRESSION AND DETACHMENT

During this stage people may feel sad, helpless and disengaged. You need to encourage people to talk about their feelings, identify sources of support, and help them to find ways to manage their feelings and thinking patterns. If necessary, you should help people access professional help.

Encourage people to lead a healthy lifestyle (healthy eating, regular exercise, plenty of sleep etc), as this helps to reduce depression. As a manager, you can make a big difference by giving people time and space to take proper breaks, and maintain a healthy work-life balance. You can also advise people on stress reduction resources such as meditation, relaxation tapes, breathing techniques etc.

## BARGAINING

At this stage, people may put you under a lot of pressure to negotiate different approaches to the changes. They may want to make bargains with you, or expect you to represent them when bargaining with more senior managers. You need to be very clear and honest about the limitations of your own role and influence. You also need to be able to stand firm on what can and can't be changed and communicate this clearly to people.

## ACCEPTANCE

As people begin to accept the changes, it's important for you to recognise and reward them for the progress they have made, provide positive feedback, and give people something to feel proud of and positive about for the future.

# 4. Communicate, communicate, communicate

You have an essential role in helping people to understand. They want to know what the change will be and when it will happen, but they also want to know why. Why is it happening now? Why can't things stay like they have always been? Why is it happening to me?

Early on, you need to define the change for staff in as much detail and as early as you can. Keep providing updates as things develop and become more clear and tell people clearly what is going on.

Rumours and innuendo can proliferate and are extremely harmful, so it is essential to make sure you are proactive in seeking or clarifying information for yourself so that you can correct misleading information and address rumours.

# 5. Look after yourself

Change is stressful for everyone, including managers. You bear a huge responsibility to help implement the changes at a time when you may be struggling to accept them yourself. You may feel torn between supporting your staff and implementing instructions from above, may have anger and criticism directed at you, and may be experiencing high levels of stress.

In light of this, it's essential that you look after yourself - to be mentally strong and emotionally resilient, we need to be physically healthy. Healthy eating, drinking plenty of water, reducing alcohol and caffeine intake, taking regular exercise and using simple relaxation techniques can all make a big difference. (download our free "De-Stress at your Desk" resource from [www.salt-box.co.uk/freeresources](http://www.salt-box.co.uk/freeresources) )

You also need to make sure you get the support you need (from your own line manager, from colleagues, friends and family).

## .... and finally

Don't waste time and energy wishing people were more predictable/rational/positive. Instead, focus on opening and maintaining clear channels of communication with your staff, so that they understand what is coming and what it means to them. They will appreciate you for it and will be more productive both before and after the change.

**We hope you've found these ideas helpful. To find out more about how we can help your organisation to manage change, visit [www.salt-box.co.uk](http://www.salt-box.co.uk) or email us at [info@salt-box.co.uk](mailto:info@salt-box.co.uk) or call 01749 687357**