

STYLES & STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH CHANGE

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Technical systems change overnight. A wire connected, a button pushed, and presto: old to new in a matter of hours! Human beings, however, require time to adjust to change, to reorient themselves mentally and psychologically. For many employees, change represents a transitional period marked by mental strain and emotional upheaval. If this is happening to you, take heart; work place transition, by definition, begins in confusion and ends in direction. Be patient with the process.

Coping with change is often compared to the grieving process. Loss of old ways of doing things can mean temporary loss of job security, skill mastery, personal comfort, and organizational predictability. One day you feel like crying; the next day you are angry at the world; the next you wonder why others are making such a big deal out of nothing; the next you want to run away. Remember that these are all reactions to the loss you are experiencing, not necessarily to the change itself. Loss requires mourning, and mourning requires time if acceptance and healing are to occur.

Letting go of the old and familiar is rather like parting with a favorite pair of jeans—you know, the ones that feel more like a friend than an article of clothing. Eventually, new jeans become old jeans. Just wear them and wash them and wear them and wash them again. Dealing with work place transition is much the same: letting go of the past requires living and working in the present, doing your best, and believing that, eventually, new systems and new ideas will become familiar and comfortable. More important than how fast you learn is that you allow yourself a time of readjustment.

Sometimes work place change produces exaggerated reactions on the part of employees. Some of us “catastrophize” the situation (This is awful! I can’t do this!”); some become more perfectionist than ever (“I can not make a mistake!”); others give in to fear and become victims of the change (“That computer is ruining my life!”); many tackle the situation unrealistically, refusing to allow negative thinking in themselves or others (“This new system is the greatest thing since sliced bread! Aren’t we all ever so lucky?”); a few vow to “get even” with management after the dust settles (“They are going to be sorry!”); a handful will simply disengage from the change process by losing previous interest and initiative (“This is just a job to me now.”); and there will always be those who become so disoriented that they nearly have an identity crisis (“Where do I fit in? What am I suppose to be doing?”). You may observe some of these reactions in your colleagues and some in yourself, but be certain of one thing: this too will pass. Eventually, most of you will move beyond frustration and loss to a new level of comfort and acceptance. If you are doing well, at least for the moment, offer something positive to someone who is struggling: a non-judgmental ear, a kind word, understanding, useful information, encouragement.

Workplace transition is the road from the old to the new, and you will probably travel it several times during the course of your career. When you do, remember to take along your sense of humor and a huge dose of commitment to self care. Because all change is stressful, even positive change, don't take on added responsibilities ("Will you be our Den Mother?") until the transition is complete. Make the time to pamper yourself as much as possible; allow yourself to be imperfect and make mistakes; celebrate your successes along the way. Remember, only a part of your life is changing, not the whole of your life. Last, but not least, take comfort and pride in knowing that you will reach the end of the transition having learned new skills and having made a contribution to the overall change process. Think of that the next time your supervisor says, "Today I am announcing a change in our department..."