

Helping Employees Manage Change

SUMMARY: Any organizational change may have an unsettling impact on employees. For employees that are managing mental health issues, this can make symptoms even worse. You can help through thoughtful planning, effective communication, and engaging employees in exploring how changes can be handled in a psychologically safe way.

Consider the impact of change

Any change in an organization or to an employee's role has the potential to cause stress. The stress can be overwhelming when an employee is also dealing with mental health issues.

In some organizations, constant change is the norm, which could have a negative impact on the psychological health of some employees. Applying a psychological health and safety lens to change management is a worthwhile investment to support employee performance, loyalty, and buy-in for the changes.

While these approaches can benefit any employee, for those who have mental health issues, this can be the difference between an extremely difficult transition and one that involves a manageable level of adjustment.

Strategies to support all employees during change

Set the expectation of ongoing change with all employees. Let them know that continual improvement to the work environment, technology, equipment, processes, or their own skills and abilities should be expected. This should happen at orientation, during training, and as part of regular conversation between management and employees.

Celebrate or recognize the good work that was done under the old system. This step is often missed in change management. In an effort to "sell" the change, employers will sometimes dismiss or minimize any successes of the past. This may leave long-standing employees feeling unappreciated or demoralized. Recognizing how they were able to accomplish so much under the previous system is more likely to leave them open to engaging in change.

For every change, create an honest, positive, accessible and compelling vision of the intended outcome. Help employees see a picture of what the workplace and, if appropriate, the world, will look like when the change is completed. There is a different part of the brain used for words and images. Tapping into the part of the brain that uses images with a compelling vision can increase understanding and acceptance, as well as decrease the apprehension that comes from uncertainty.

Be specific about why and how the change will be implemented. Share as many details as possible about the intended timeline and steps of the change. State known challenges and concerns before the employees do to help show you understand their reality and are working to make it as positive as possible.

Openly discuss potential pros and cons of the proposed changes. When leaders understand the fears or concerns expressed by employees and take steps to address them or make resources available, employees are much more likely to feel heard and part of the change process. If possible, jointly look for solutions with the employees who will be affected. Do not pretend the challenges do not exist or try to minimize them.

Link the change to previous, similar, positive changes. Reminding employees with words like "You have done this before and you have been successful," can help reduce anxiety in times of change.

Break the change up into small, incremental steps. If possible, give time for each step to be completed and adjust as necessary.

Repeat, repeat, repeat. For changes such as new processes, technology, work functions, etc., it can be helpful to allow employees the opportunity to try out the change several times so that it becomes part of the day-to-day routine.

Adapted in part from the work of Dr. Carlos Davidovich (<https://optimumtalent.com/leadership-assessment-development/neuromanagement/>), of Optimum Talent (<https://optimumtalent.com/>).

Accommodation during times of change

For employees who either currently experience mental health challenges or have in the past, you may want to spend some extra time to ensure they have what they need to successfully continue their work throughout the changes that are planned.

Explain clearly what the employee's new or modified responsibilities will be. Ask the employee to share their understanding of your explanation to ensure that it has been communicated effectively.

Listen carefully to the employee's concerns about the change. Provide detailed responses to reassure the employee that you have heard their concerns, even if you are not able to address them completely.

Help the employee manage fear. Understand that some people do not like change, especially when it is not of their choosing. For people who may be experiencing a mental health issue, this can include severe worry or fear about their future. Discuss these fears and offer realistic reassurance to the employee. Consider approaches that could address these fears such as a temporary lowering of expectations or demands, or additional skills training.

Consider modifications to accommodation. Times of change may warrant a review of any existing accommodation plans. If no accommodation plan exists, this may also be the appropriate time to offer accommodation to employees with mental health issues, even if they had previously declined such help. See [Accommodation Strategies \(/Managing-Workplace-Issues/Accommodation-Strategies\)](#), for ideas.

Reinforce what the employee currently does well and has previously accomplished. Emphasize how these strengths will help in the adjustment to the new responsibilities. Let the employee know that they are valued by the organization.

Adjust or set new performance goals once you have addressed the employee's concerns. Ask the employee how they can help meet the goals of the new organizational structure or job requirements. This involvement can help employees feel that they are, to a certain extent, in control of their experience of the changes and their future at work.

Addressing job insecurity

Changes that provoke feelings of insecurity about work can be particularly stressful for employees who have mental health issues. In the following article, experts identified strategies that can be useful:

[Employment insecurity, economic insecurity, layoffs and mental health in the workplace \(/pdf/employment_insecurity.pdf\)](#)

See the article [Labour market changes and job insecurity: a challenge for social welfare and health promotion \(/pdf/WHO_job_insecurity.pdf\)](#) for more information.

Termination

During times of change, there may also be some job losses, possibly due to restructuring, redundancies, or the need for new skills to support an organization's changing vision.

Termination of an employee, co-worker, and potentially a friend is never easy for anyone in the workplace and steps should be taken to protect the psychological safety of the employee, the manager, and co-workers.

Read more in [Psychologically Safer Terminations \(/psychological-health-and-safety/psychologically-safer-terminations\)](#).

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