

## Imposed change in the workplace

Change is something our minds naturally resist. We prefer things to stay the same because consistency and predictability is safer and better for survival from an evolutionary standpoint. Our primitive selves crave that reliability. When change occurs, we're taken out of our comfort zone and we want to resist it and return to what we know is safe. For those experiencing change in the workplace, which can happen without warning, it brings with it a personal transition that can be a long and potentially difficult process.

To help us identify the difficult process of change, let's look at the Bridges Transition Model, which describes the emotional stages of transition as Ending, Neutral Zone and Beginning.

### Ending

The first stage of change is often denial. This is especially true when the change is one that has been imposed on us and even more so when we perceive it as negative. We work hard to convince ourselves and others that it is unnecessary and harmful. This can produce anger and resentment. And anger and resentment – long term – can cause many negative consequences to our health, including high blood pressure, heart problems, headaches, digestive issues and more. A quote that suitably depicts the impact of resentment on ourselves is: "Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die."

One thing that keeps many people stuck in denial is confusing acceptance of change with agreement. We can accept that a change is happening even though we may strongly disagree

with it. Acceptance shifts us away from resentful feelings toward a more helpful perspective. The misunderstanding between acceptance and agreement keeps many people stuck in the misery of denial while change is moving full steam ahead.

It may require a conscious choice on our part to allow ourselves to accept the change. However, when we do, it frees us up to get on with the work of more objectively looking at how the change will affect us and how we will manage that.

Another hurdle that many people face when encountering a change in the workplace is being forced to look more closely at the relationship. In every relationship – and work is, for all intents and purposes, a relationship or many relationships – there are times when we must deal with an unexpected and unwelcome response from the other person or organization. This can drive us to take a hard and honest look at the relationship, which is something we may often try to avoid as it can be uncomfortable. Feeling trapped in the relationship ("I have no other options" or "I need this job") makes us reluctant to examine it too closely until we're forced to because of change.

It takes courage and self-awareness to honestly determine if this is a change we can accommodate. Accommodating change is also difficult because it typically involves loss. Naming and acknowledging the losses is another important component of working through change. In the workplace, these losses can include:

- **Security:** We no longer feel in control or know what the future holds.
- **Competence:** We no longer feel like we know what to do or how to manage.
- **Relationships:** Contact with familiar people can end. We can lose our sense of belonging to a team, group or an organization.
- **Sense of direction:** We lose an understanding of where we are going and why we are going there.
- **Territory:** There is an uncertain feeling about the area that used to belong to us. Territory includes psychological space as well as physical space and can include a workspace, team or job assignments.

Loss inevitably leads to grief and again, this is an uncomfortable process that we resist. When grieving, we feel vulnerable. Grieving is the process of acknowledging and letting go, and it is very natural when encountering change and transition.

### Neutral Zone

When we have accepted the change and acknowledged and grieved the losses, we can turn our attention to more closely examining the change. We are now in a state that is neither the old nor the new. There is higher anxiety and lower motivation as a lot of energy is focused on coping. This is when you're adjusting your mind, habits and learnings to the change and everything that encompasses. This is the in-between or in-flux time. It can come with confusion and distress but when we lean into this experience, it can be a time for rich self-reflection and establishing new goals or a renewed sense of purpose.

### Beginning

As we work through the neutral zone and take on new relationships and skills, we start to develop a new sense of comfort beginning. Anxiety drops and we can begin to feel like ourselves again.

The Ending phase of the Bridges Transition Model is where individuals have the hardest work to do and can potentially become stuck. Only after we have worked through the difficult and emotional process of accepting, grieving and letting go can we begin to embrace the new reality.

Focusing on the positive of the relationship then becomes an important component. What do we enjoy about our work? How can we see it in a way that allows for an alignment with our values? How does it contribute in a positive way to our lives?

### Counselling support from Manitoba Blue Cross

Manitoba Blue Cross provides an ideal place for individuals to work through the transition process – whether it be in relation to personal or organizational change. Manitoba Blue Cross's counselling services are available to all Manitobans, regardless of whether you have coverage with Manitoba Blue Cross.

**For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880 or toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit [mb.bluecross.ca](http://mb.bluecross.ca). For the Deaf, hard-of-hearing and speech-impaired community, our EA centre can receive VRS calls.**



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