LEADERSHIP SKILLS SERIES

Managing Yourself Through Change
I was once told by a former police chief that there are two things police officers hate: 1) the way things are and 2) change. If we're honest with ourselves, I would say that would fit most of us to one degree or another. It highlights the fact that many of us yearn for difference circumstances. Yet when our circumstances change, our first reaction is to respond with resistance. We fight against the very thing that is guaranteed (and necessary) in the universe - change.
Loss...and Opportunity

As a general rule, people resist change - even if we don’t like the status quo. Change means adjustment. Change means discomfort. Most importantly, change means loss. Even change that is viewed positively will accompany loss of some sort. Reflect back on any positive change that has occurred in your life - marriage, children, graduation - and think about the losses that came along with these changes. Maybe you lost sleep the first six months of your child’s life. Maybe you lost an element of freedom and independence you were used to having when you got married. Maybe you lost the security of mom and dad when you graduated and had to fend for yourself. The book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, by Daniel Kahneman, talks about how people seem to be hard-wired to be loss averse. In fact, numerous research studies show that people will make decisions that will hurt them in the long-term in order to avoid a short-term loss. Suffice it to say that we don’t like change, and we work hard to avoid it at times. Not everyone struggles with change, however. Some people embrace it, work through the associated losses, and move on to become productive. This is an essential key to leadership in a corporate environment that is changing faster than it ever has.

WISDOM ON CHANGE

• “Your life does not get better by chance; it gets better by change” - Jim Rohn

• “By changing nothing, nothing changes” - Tony Robbins

• “It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory” - W. Edwards Deming

• “Those who expect moments of change to be comfortable and free of conflict have not learned their history” - Joan Wallach Scott

• “After you’ve done a thing the same way for two years, look it over carefully. After five years, look at it with suspicion. After ten years, throw it away and start all over” - Alfred Edward Perlman
In the past decade, the United States has seen The Great Recession, the bursting of the housing bubble, a burgeoning national debt, the Federal government sequestration, and a government shutdown, among others. This combination of events has led to an unprecedented pace of change in the corporate world, one which has focused on finding new and different ways to squeeze out every dollar of efficiency possible, resulting in cutting budgets, reduced staffing, reduction of fringe benefits, salary cuts, and loss of bonuses. It appears that the days of financial corporate largesse are moving behind us, at least for the foreseeable future.

In this ever-changing corporate environment, it is the leaders who embrace and adapt to the change who will thrive and lead their teams to success. Those who batten down the hatches, dig in their heels, and fight the changes that are thrust upon them are likely to be casualties. However, ignoring the impact of change won’t necessarily make you more successful than those who fight it. This book is designed to help you understand the impact that change has on you and how to manage yourself successfully through any change you might face.
The Transition Curve is a useful model to help us understand what happens to us when we are faced with change. We tend to manage ourselves through change in a predictable way, and understanding what happens to us will hopefully help us to equip ourselves to take change in stride, putting us in a position to lead others through change in a way that is both efficient and effective. In today’s corporate environment, this is more important than ever.
Before diving in, let’s set some context. We generally have stable levels of self-confidence, perceived effectiveness, and morale in the workplace and other areas of our lives. These levels can either be high, medium, or low, but they tend not to vary much without outside intervention. However, we can fluctuate greatly in these areas during change. If we see initially see the change positively, then you might get that upward movement on the curve that you see in the upper left quadrant of the graphic to the right. We can often feel good initially about some changes - promotion, for example. This short-term positive view is often preserved initially by a feeling of denial that the change will have an impact on you. Sometimes a feeling of shock numbs people to the reality of the change. However, reality will eventually confront you with the fact that there is virtually no change that is universally positive.

At this point, most people will notice that the line on the left that represents confidence, perceived effectiveness, and morale starts to dip. At this point, people can start to feel markedly less positive about the changes that are going on around them. Some people are able to acclimate themselves to the change quickly (I’ll talk more about this later), but others feel their confidence, perceived effectiveness, and morale continue to drop even further - into the lower left-hand quadrant of the graphic.
Dropping into the lower left-hand quadrant can be accompanied by some strong emotions related to the change, often coming in the form of anger, anxiety, and frustration, among others. It’s not these emotions, per se, that are problematic. Virtually everyone who goes through change will feel a mix of negative emotions. The problem is that these emotions tend to go ‘underground’. In other words, there is a denial on some level of the emotions and/or the impact they are having on them. Anytime you ask someone how they are doing, and they respond with a curt, “fine,” they are providing you with a good example of this. This is a very reactive, fight or flight stance. They don’t want to deal with the emotions surrounding the change. This becomes problematic, in that we start to see compliance, resistance, and sabotage behaviors.

Compliance, in this case, refers to individuals who just nod their heads in meetings and don’t share what they’re thinking. They ‘go along to get along’ and never speak up. They just sit in and stew in their frustrations and don’t work toward resolving any issues they have in the workplace. Resistance needs little explanation. This is the literal or figurative push-back that some individuals resort to with change. They actively resist every move and typically have no issues letting people know how they feel. Lastly, sabotage can be an even more dangerous behavior than resistance. For example, the ‘compliant’ person in meetings who just agrees with what everyone says to get out of the meeting more quickly might go back to the office and start spreading vitriol about the leadership and how incompetent they are, based on the meeting they just attended. Of course, they don’t mention that they never stood up and said anything. This sort of behavior is under the radar for the leaders, who don’t necessarily know it’s happening, but it can have a drastic impact on the saboteur’s direct reports’ morale and productivity. To reiterate, it is natural, to some degree, for people going through change to spend some time in the lower left-hand quadrant. It becomes
an issue when they get stuck there and start to cause damage. I’m sure you’ve seen some people get stuck in the low part of the transition curve. These individuals are typically disengaged, have nothing good to say about the company, and are not particularly productive employees. People can get stuck here, because this can be a place of psychological comfort. It is a very low energy state at work, and is often accompanied with the feeling that the problems are always everyone else’s fault. That can be a difficult place to get out of once you’ve planted yourself firmly there.

Most people, however, will move on to the lower right-hand quadrant. This usually comes about as a result of two things: 1) the individual has become more open about their emotions and the impact they are having and 2) the individual has moved from a past-focused thought pattern (“We never used to do it this way”) to a more future-focused thought pattern (“What do we need to do to move forward?“). This allows you to move on from the problem to the solution. This fundamental change in perspective allows you to start to accept the change and explore new ways of working through the challenges the change presented. This solution-focused approach tends to cause the descending levels of confidence, perceived effectiveness, and morale to reverse course and begin to improve. Once momentum has been gained, people find that they are free to not only accept the change but commit to it and become extremely productive in the very environment that they resisted so much in the beginning.

Although it can be common for people to move through the deep transition curve, it isn’t ideal. The shallow, blue curve to the left represents someone who may struggle with change but does so in an open and honest way, which doesn’t put them in a position where they lose confidence and become ineffective at best and destructive at worst. As a leader, it is essential to avoid spending much time in the deep transition curve.
Impact

As a leader, the ability to recognize the impact that change is having on you and manage that impact as soon as possible is incredibly important. Leaders who don’t regulate themselves through the turmoil that change can bring not only impact their own production levels, but they can negatively impact the performance of their team. There’s nothing more demoralizing to a team than a leader who has given up. A leader who isn’t bought in to current initiatives, actively resists change, and bad-mouths leadership is a cancer that eats away at the morale and efficiency of the organization.

For a moment, think through the impact that a leader has on her team who is stuck at the bottom of the transition curve. Typically, there is a lot of blaming going on - often blaming of senior leadership for all of the ills of the organization. Virtually every problem that comes down the pike is tied to the ‘inept’ leaders, thus removing any responsibility for improvement from this leader and her team. Imagine the destructive environment this leader is creating. There is a constant stream of vitriol that is being fed to those she is leading, and she is no longer giving her team regular feedback on how they can improve - because she sees the senior leadership as the ones who needs to be changing. Productivity and morale decrease, and the outside scrutiny on the team increases. Unfortunately, the increased scrutiny only feeds the leader’s negative view of leadership. The organization is looking to that leader to lead her team out of their slump, but she is in no position to turn her team around.

This example is unfortunately all too common in the face of change. Leaders who don’t manage themselves effectively through change can be extremely costly in terms of dollars, contract success, morale, and employee retention, among other things. On the contrary, a leader who effectively manages herself through change can pull her team through almost any obstacle. Remember, it is unrealistic to expect leaders to not be impacted by change. Rather, the most effective leaders travel along the shallow Transition Curve - recognizing the impact that the change is having on them, effectively managing their emotional state, and presenting themselves in a way that helps their team pull through the change in the most efficient way possible.
CONCLUSION

In this ever changing corporate environment, leaders don’t always get adequate warning before major changes are introduced. This can make it difficult for leaders to be effective when they have very little time to manage themselves through the Transition Curve before they have to help their team start working through the change. Despite the difficulties of short notice change, the best leaders find ways to chart their emotional course on the shallow, blue transition curve, instead of finding themselves stuck in the deep transition curve - often bringing their team along with them.

Finding ways to engage in future-focused problem solving and being honest with yourself and others about how the change is impacting you will aid in speeding up the process of managing change. The best leaders also recognize that they need to keep working at it to ensure they don’t slide back down into the lower left-hand quadrant and become ineffective. Understanding change and the impact it has on you is a powerful step toward becoming an effective leader in your organization and will help you embrace change instead of fighting it.

Percepi - Seeing Leadership Differently

Percepi is a company dedicated to the success of your organization. We use the lens of human behavior to keep the focus on your business.

Contact:

info@percepileader.com

1875 Explorer Street
Reston, VA 20190
571-266-4030
http://www.percepileader.com
IMAGE CREDITS

Cover - © Percepi.

Page 1 - Created by Percepi at Wordle.net.


Page 3 - © Ralph Bijker. http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/.


Pages 5-7 - © Percepi

© 2015 by Percepi

All rights reserved. No part of this ebook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews or scholarly analysis. For information, address Percepi, 1875 Explorer Street, Reston, VA 20190.