



October 2008 Stress and the City – how to cope

Managing change and developing resilience through better communication.

Although there is lots of doom and gloom about the economy it can also provide the opportunity to look at how you and your colleagues are coping with negative thinking and stress related to the pressures of work.

If it's not possible to respond to 'stressful' situations by jetting off on holiday (as your airline has just liquidated itself) or downshifting (as your house has been on the market for what seems like forever) then how do you respond?

Building resilience

Psychologists call the ability to thrive amid what some call stress, the quality of 'resilience'. Resilience is largely a matter of self belief. People who are survivors can look at a bad situation, and or even a negative experience, and see how it can lead to growth.

These survivors tend to think they have some control over external circumstances. Over-confident people are best at this (maybe deluded, but happy?) They can create a positive outlook even when they find themselves in situations of extreme stress.

Changing your beliefs is not easy but knowing that stress is simply a result of how you are thinking about life is a good start. It can be achieved with the help of techniques such as those used in Neuro Linguistic Programming. NLP practitioners believe that we make up our own reality via our thoughts each day – so rather than 'make up' a negative day for yourself they suggest you create a fantastic day for yourself by changing your thought patterns.

An example of this can be seen with the impact of the credit crunch on our business – we have focused on our business in a positive way and it has increased! When companies are undergoing change they often find they need specialist communication help.

We have found an upturn in business in the last year from people needing help in communicating with their people to help to:

1. understand a new company direction or new ways of working
2. Cope with changes resulting from redundancy or outsourcing
3. build the confidence and resilience of people to cope with tough times
4. create higher performing teams that can take on and outstrip the competition
5. improve the personal communication skills of managers and leaders

When emotions run high

We know that people have emotional reactions to change and that we can't control these reactions. However, one way communication can help is by controlling *how long* it takes people to move through the change.

People move through a natural cycle known as the 'change curve' when undergoing significant change, good or bad. Even couples in a new marriage can undergo these emotions in this change curve.

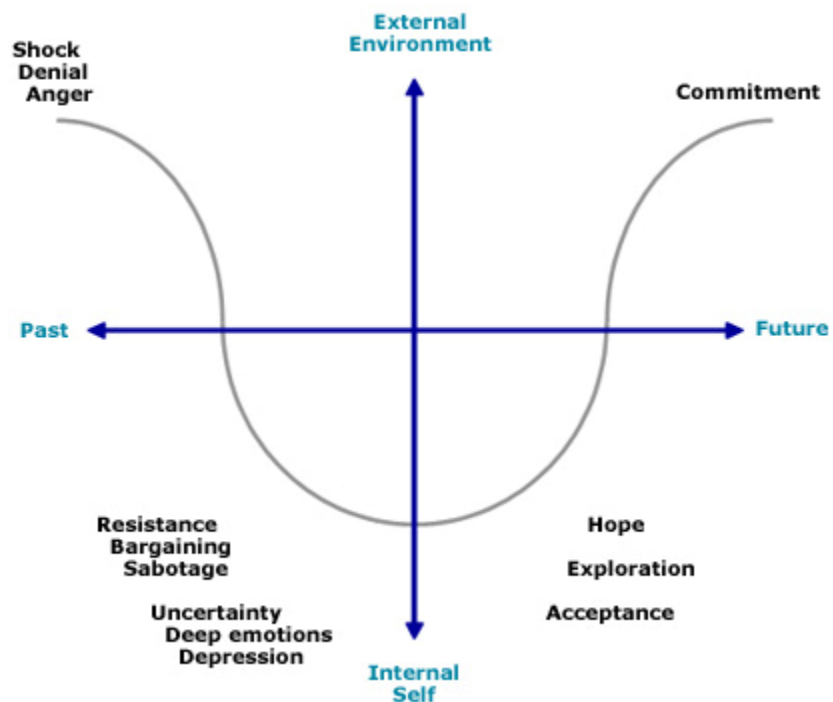
The change curve is based on the emotions we go through when suffering bereavement and was first identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Her seminal book was *On Death & Dying*, published in 1969, in which she explained her now classically regarded 'five stages of grief'. These stages were identified as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

They have since been adapted and modified by the business world. They are now frequently used as a 'change model' which reflects the emotions we witness in people experiencing change at work.

The change model (which often uses slightly different elements) demonstrates the pattern of emotions people undergo during change. The model is used as a guide rather than a highly accurate measure as emotions are not always evident and can be deliberately hidden, especially when people are resistant to change.

The change curve

A typical model that we use is shown below.



The journey of change

The process is like a journey - descending into a valley and climbing back out and leads from the way things were done in the past to a new future state.

In the early stage of change people concentrate on the past, and deny the change.

Next, they pass through a period of preoccupation, wondering where they stand and how they will be affected. This is often where resistance occurs. If they are not helped through the change some people can become 'stuck' and fall into depression where specialist counselling help is needed.

Finally there will come a point where the person accepts the new scenario and begins to explore what it might mean. They become more hopeful and optimistic about the future and finally as they gain commitment they start to look towards the future and the opportunities it can bring.

People's responses to change are remarkably consistent, irrespective of their seniority, role or indeed the nature of the change itself. However, some people go through the change curve very quickly and come out the other side in no time at all, whereas for others it can take many months or even years.

Stress and the City

In TV's 'Sex and the City', Samantha was always aiming high, confident she would capture 'Mr Big'. Equally when there is 'Stress in the City' people need to retain that confidence like Samantha, that they can achieve their goals, however impossible they may seem at the time.

Case study – Creating high performing teams during change

In 2007 we helped a well established, growing small business in the design sector, based in the South East to overcome problems caused by change. We provided a year long programme of small coaching and team building modules working initially with an audience of Project Directors, Account Managers and team members and eventually with the Chief Executive and the Board as well.

The objective was to help survivors from a redundancy exercise to cope with the impact of change, with new responsibilities and ways of working, and to assist managers with their teams

We worked company-wide with people at all levels. Many people were young and relatively inexperienced and undergoing major change for the first time. Many were so stressed that bursting into tears was a regular occurrence. The disruption was costing the company time, effort, productivity and money. One of the managers had become 'stuck' and was sinking into depression and needed specialist support from our team.

The solutions were simple and within just three sessions, the problems were exposed, opened up for discussion and were well on the way to being resolved...

After a long period of unrivalled success the company had gone through radical change and re-structuring and had not really communicated it properly to the new teams. The managers hadn't been given any coaching or training in how to deal with change. They didn't understand the impact it had on their people.

Just by explaining the change curve and the natural cycle of emotions that they were going through helped enormously.

One-to-one coaching sessions helped to draw out the real issues from the individuals. Communication coaching and team building helped the teams, and especially the managers, to understand each other better.

From stress to success

The outcome was very successful. Group relaxation sessions helped enormously by de-stressing the team and building their self esteem and confidence. Each person had a personal goal-setting session to help them to move forward and overcome the barriers that were holding them back. Each team had a communication plan, a performance measure to show how well their team was performing, a leadership audit and a clear understanding of their team's purpose and role.

The Directors of the company were soon offering congratulations describing the teams as 'on fire'; 'exceeding their targets'; 'taking control'; and 'taking the initiative'. Everyone else in the company could also see the difference in the positive team attitudes and soon they were asking for similar coaching sessions to help motivate them and improve their performance – including the Directors!

Managing people through change

In summary the challenge for managers is to:

1. Help and support people as they work through the change
2. Minimise disruption to day to day business activities during a time of uncertainty.
3. Reassure and communicate frequently with short, focused, consistent messages – often people cannot concentrate or listen properly during change
4. Help to realise the business benefits of the change as soon as possible so that people can get into a more positive frame of mind more quickly
5. Reinforce the long term goals and company direction. Explain that more change is always potentially on the horizon because change is a constant in the modern world and is needed to keep businesses competitive and successful.

If you would like our free 'Managers' Guide to Communicating through Change' or to know more about our 3 hour 'Surviving and thriving through change' workshops please contact us on kk@karenkimberley.co.uk

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