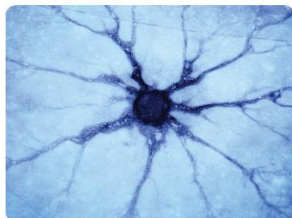


the
**psychological
manager**

change:
increasing resilience through transition



peter storr

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Biography

Peter Storr is a Chartered Psychologist with 30 years of organisational experience. He has led both large and small teams in the private and public sectors and has many years' experience as a management coach. Peter has worked as both an external management consultant and an internal Occupational Psychology consultant at the BBC. Most recently he was strategic Head of Organisation Development at a London-based Russell Group university. His expertise is centred on management and leadership; helping managers to lead and manage individuals and teams, designing and running managerial assessment and development centres, coaching and coaching training, group facilitation and designing management development programmes. He is married, lives in Berkshire and would like to grow chickens when he is older.

Peter runs his own consultancy, dealing with all aspects of management and team development, assessment and management development project work. He can be contacted at thepsychologicalmanager@gmail.com. Let him know what you think of this book, or just say hello.



The only constant

I will be honest with you here. If I hear that hoary old chestnut “change is the only constant” one more time, I will saw my own leg off with a rusty spanner. It is so painfully obvious and overused that it has failed to have any meaning. It’s also untrue.¹ But, of course, like many trite and annoying sayings and those pithy phrases that get posted on your LinkedIn timeline every day, it’s sort of true. The world is constantly changing. Society is. The world of work is. And we are.

Who we are changes. Who we were changes (or at least our perception of whom we were). Who we want to be changes. What we want to achieve changes. The circumstances of our lives both at home and at work changes. Constantly.

Curses. Perhaps they have a point after all.

We had better get used to it then. But it’s hard. And most of us don’t like it. Some do, and are actively searching for it, but most of us don’t – or at the very least, it makes us uncomfortable. Dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity is a life skill that most of us would rather not have to develop. It would appear, if the Leadership literature is anything to go by, that it will become increasingly important in this new technological age where Moore’s Law (computing power doubles around every two years or so) is still law after 40 years of it being posited. It changes everything. I use no more than about 20% of my phone’s capabilities (and that is pushing it) so I can’t imagine double the capability of the two-years-hence version.

I do have two favourite quotes about change though. The first is from AD10 from a not particularly insightful or forward thinking *Sextus Julius Frontinus*; “Man has run out of things to invent”.² It is easy to make fun of our Roman though. In a way, many of us do this – as I said, I can’t imagine my phone having double its capacity. I am horrified that some say the email is dead and we will all soon communicate by social media alone. I’ve only just got used to it. It is so seductive to think “that’s as good as it will get” about anything because we are limited by our imagination.

Here’s another selection of change quotes. Let’s get them out of the way. Consider them a gift.

- Change imposed is change opposed. *Anonymous*.
- The universe is change; life is what thinking makes of it. *Marcus Aurelius*
- It is said that I am against change. I am not against change. I am in favour of change in the right circumstances. And those circumstances are when it can no longer be resisted. *Paul Johnson in The Spectator*
- They must often change who would be constant in happiness or wisdom. *Confucius*
- You cannot step twice in the same river. *Heraclitus*
- Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better. *Richard Hooker*

¹ Pedants amongst you will have already thought about Pi, or, of course, Euler’s constant; approximately equal to 2.71828, and is the limit of $(1 + 1/n)^n$ as n approaches infinity, an expression that arises in the study of compound interest. I looked it up. It’s probably not what they meant though.

² He patently didn’t see the Corby Trouser Press coming.



Anyway. You get the picture. There are a lot of them. One I do really like though, and use a lot in my change workshops, is the classic Charles Darwin one; “it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change”. A powerful lesson. If we think back 65 million years to when a big lump of rock hit what would eventually be a Tequila bar on Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsular, it wasn’t the biggest or strongest things like the dinosaurs that survived but the little warm-blooded mouse-type things that were flexible and adaptable and eventually stood upright and became us and created the need for the Trouser Press.

The corporate world often fails to heed this message. Let’s take three recent examples. In 2013, two companies announced that they were in difficulties; HMV and Blockbusters. One of the reasons given in the press was that they did not see the writing on the wall with regard to the downloading phenomenon; to some extent, they still subscribed to the “people want to go into stores and browse” model. Which, of course, some do. But not enough anymore. It doesn’t matter how big you are as an organisation, or how long-established you are (HMV had been going since 1921); if the business model doesn’t flex and adapt to what the people want and/or technological changes, then it’s curtains.

And take Nokia. I don’t know of many people past a certain age who didn’t have one of their phones.³ They were one of the world’s most successful mobile phone brands. But they rested on their laurels, didn’t adapt to the meteorite of the smart-phone and now appear to have been quietly shelved by their new owners.

The Leader vs Manager debate

Some writers on change (John Kotter, for example; we will meet him later) argue that change is the whole thrust behind the leader/manager distinction. Leadership *is* change, according to Kotter. Management is about efficiency in the here and now. It includes such vital competencies as planning, budgeting, organising, solving problems, managing people. It’s really important stuff and if we don’t pay attention to these areas as a manager then we end up being an example of the Peter Principle (people usually get promoted to their level of incompetence). Leadership is different. It defines what the future should look like, determining what should be next on the agenda, and then developing the case for urgency to change the now into the next. This involves setting strategic direction, creating the inspiring vision and then aligning everyone behind it so they make it happen successfully⁴. It didn’t matter how efficiently an individual Blockbusters store was being run if the business model that suggested it should be there in the first place was flawed.

This is the essence of Transformational (as opposed to Transactional) Leadership. Instead of focusing merely on “stuff”, the Transformational leader inspires people to reach for the improbable, stirs the emotions and motivates people to buy into the vision for change. Management creates predictability and order in the short term. Leadership produces change in the longer term. As Steven Covey puts it, management tells you how to climb the ladder of success. Leadership tells you what wall to lean the

³ Ahh. The days when your battery would last a week.

⁴ We should add a note of caution here. No matter what level we are in an organisation, we can all demonstrate both managerial and leadership qualities. Leadership is not exclusively for the big cheese.



ladder against. As I put it in my training, management directs the boat and leadership chooses the port.⁵

What creates change?

The glib answer, I suppose, is what doesn't? But we can be a little more helpful than that. One tool used by change and marketing consultants is the PESTLE analysis, and it is as good a framework as any for thinking through what changes may have an impact on the work of, say, our department or business.

Let's use the university sector as an example of how to use this.⁶ All we have to do is use the mnemonic to think about what *out there* can have an impact on us *in here*.

Political: How does the Government of the day view higher education? What about a potential next Government? What do they think education is for? How will this impact on the number of places available? What about higher degrees? What about the value placed on research? What about immigration policy with regard to foreign students and academics?

Economic: What impact is the above political landscape likely to have on the funding model? What about the grant vs loan debate and the threshold when they have to be paid back and the impact this may have on student numbers? What about the wider economy? What about the even wider global economy and its impact on overseas students? What about the possibility of mergers?

Social: What are the social drivers behind going to university? What about the impact of more foreign students studying in the UK? Or, due to Brexit, fewer? What about changes to the way younger people view education? What about demographic changes of both students and staff? What about the impact of student expectations now they are classified (by themselves, if not by most university staff) as fee-paying customers, not students?

Technological: How do students want to learn and on what electronic devices? What about the technological skills of lecturers and the level of IT investment (and therefore support they can get) from internal IT departments? What is the impact on the estate if foreign students can access lectures through massive open online courses (MOOCs) and therefore stay in their own country?

Legal: in an increasingly global student economy, what are the legal implications of allowing unlimited – or of limiting – free speech? What about the impact of the Freedom of Information Act? What about the implications of data being compromised? What about changes to Human Resources laws such as the end of the default retirement age?

Environmental: What about government policy and sustainability targets? What about the university's green agenda? What about the impact of older estate on the green agenda? What about

⁵ In my experience, they usually drink it as well.

⁶ The following analysis is for illustrative purposes only and may be completely inaccurate. But then, I am not in charge of a University.



property prices or even changing location? What type of environment do students and staff want to study or work in?

So. You get the picture. Try it for yourself. Think about the area (in every sense – physical, sector, profession, department) where you work and run through the list. You may be surprised at what you think of by having a framework such as PESTLE to work from. The point is that there are so many factors that can potentially have an impact on your area of work – and you – that the one thing you can be certain of is that things will not stay as they are. And whilst it is the leadership’s job to pre-empt this as much as possible by having a vision for where you need to be heading, my argument here is that we are all leaders. Don’t just leave it up to the people in charge. They may be too busy being managers.

Having a vision

In section Five, we will explore how a leader of a team can take that team successfully through change. That change may or may not have been decided by that leader – it could be a diktat from the senior board or the enforced consequence of one or more of the PESTLE considerations,⁷ but regardless, it may be your job to implement the changes by translating them into what they mean for your remit.

Either way, if you are taking a team through change you have to start with a vision for what it is trying to achieve and what it may look like. What changes do you need to make to ensure you don’t go the way of the Nokia 3330? The PESTLE considerations may have given you the *why*; you will need to have a cunning plan to address the *what* and the *how*. We start by thinking about what the future should look like, what our dream is, and what we really care about.

But, we are not working in a vacuum. Unless you are the ultimate boss, you will have a boss. And there will be an organisational strategy; there may even be a 10 year strategic plan⁸. Whatever you decide to do has got to align with whatever is going on organisationally⁹. It’s a bit like having your annual appraisal before your boss has theirs; it doesn’t make any sense because their appraisal could change everything, and most probably yours.

I do a little exercise with teams to illustrate this point. You get everyone in the team to wander around aimlessly in a big room, looking all casual and random like some kind of human Brownian motion machine, and then shout “STOP”. Everyone at that point has to stop and, without letting anyone else in the room know, fix two individuals in the room in their mind. Everyone’s job is then to try and form, in silence and without letting on who their chosen individuals are, an equilateral triangle with them.

⁷ Or even the result of a dream your boss had after too much cheese. Stranger things have happened.

⁸ Which half the workforce will think of as a prudent idea and half as a waste of time because of all the potential PESTLE changes.

⁹ Or at least with what your boss wants.



It's really hard, which is sort of the point. Just as you get there, one of your two chosen people moves to form a triangle with someone else. Ad infinitum. It can go on for 5 minutes. At the debrief, we make the point that this is meant to illustrate the fact that any changes you and your team make have a knock-on effect elsewhere, which may even be hidden to both you and the other teams affected and eventually come back again to affect your own changes. Ad infinitum.

Having a vision, then, involves identifying what you would like to see in the future. You have got to care about it. It should fit with your values and be aspirational. But you should want it. Ask yourself questions such as:

- What is the difference between where I want us to be and where we are now?
- What haven't we thought of yet?
- What are the most urgent PESTLE considerations?
- How does this fit with organisational strategy and culture?
- What do I want personally from all this?
- What do I care passionately about?
- What possible future will this open up for me? My team?
- What does that future look like?
- What would fabulous look like?
- What does my boss want?

Your own engagement

We may be used to thinking of employee engagement as an abstract concept that involves things such as development and promotional opportunities for staff, informal and formal feedback practices, leadership styles, communication and work-based relationships. The things they ask about in Staff Surveys. First of all, however, we have to engage with our own work. When we really are feeling like we are totally absorbed in our work, using our skills and strengths to achieve stretching targets and meet challenges head on, we may enter a state of flow¹⁰. Flow is when we enter a mini time-warp; we look back on a task and think "that was me on a good day". I sometimes experience this when presenting to an appreciative audience¹¹, or when writing; time flies and the sense of satisfaction and happiness is palpable. There is a knock-on impact on your self-esteem and intrinsic motivation. And, of course, your performance.

We are at our best, then, when we are enjoying what we do and the way that we do it. When we are working in accordance with our key skills, strengths and motivational drivers, we bring our best selves to work. Add to this our vision for the future, our own career or managerial aspirations and some clarity of whatever direction our team or organisation needs to head in, and we are being leaders.

¹⁰ Made famous by Csikszentmihalyi. I don't know either.

¹¹ Yes, it does occasionally happen.



There's another reason why this is important. Again, section Five will expand on this but if you don't have engagement, it is really difficult to help your teams have it. Emotions leak. When you are the boss, however, multiply the leakage factor by a factor of 10.

Your team's engagement

Engagement is therefore partly about the impact you have on your team and colleagues. Get this right and you may become a catalyst for creative thinking about the future of your area and you will draw to you those that connect with your vision and want to be a part of it. It's all about relationships, ultimately. Leadership is a relational thing; management is a process thing. We need both.

This is why command and control is fine in an emergency, but ultimately has a shelf life. It doesn't create engagement. If we carry on being directive after the emergency, we tend to be met with apathy, grudging compliance or outright resistance. My first book (**The Psychological Manager; improve your performance conversations, p105**) explored this concept. Here's what I said;

"... command and control doesn't really work that well with adults, as many dictators have found. We don't remember things as effectively when we are told, as opposed to when we have experienced them for ourselves. We don't perform to goals as readily when they are imposed. If we accept that a manager's job is to get the task done and retain/grow his or her team, then coaching hits both spots. It is not always the best approach (pure knowledge transfer when time is of the essence is not a recipe for a coaching conversation) but it is a great one for your toolkit. And one in which you learn too. Win/win."

In that book, I explored the key concepts of people management; having the attitude that it is an important part of the day job, understanding how to motivate your staff, setting great stretching goals with your team and giving excellent constructive feedback on the results. We really turned the dial up on your people management skills by suggesting that creating a coaching culture is one of the most effective ways in which we create engagement. And creating engagement helps the change process. We create the vision; then inspire our teams to work towards it through really good people management.

Organisational engagement

This discussion on engagement would not be complete without mentioning the bigger picture of organisational engagement. As we have said, your team does not work in a vacuum. The MacLeod report to government (November 2012) was written in response to the perception that there was an engagement gap in the UK; people were not as committed to their organisation's goals and values as they could be – and had maybe lost the link with this and their own sense of well-being.¹² The paper suggested a causal link with productivity – that low engagement correlates with low performance.

¹² In the survey, only one third of UK workers said they were engaged at work.



This obviously passes the common sense test¹³ but the authors claim hard evidence¹⁴ and suggest that increasing employee engagement should be - and is - a key priority for UK leaders. It impacts on performance and productivity as we mentioned, but also absenteeism, staff retention, levels of innovation, customer service and on positive outcomes in public services.

The MacLeod report identified four enablers of engagement – and this is where we start to see the link with creating successful change. Whilst the report was meant to be for the bigger picture, whole organisation level - and as such needs to be role-modelled and reinforced right from the very top – there are lessons for every leader of every team. Bear these four enablers of engagement in mind when we get to section Five. To be honest they are common sense, but unfortunately pretty rarely specifically addressed.

These four enablers of engagement are:

- Having visible, empowering leadership providing a strong strategic narrative about the organisation, where it's come from and where it's going
- Having engaging managers who focus on their people and give them scope, treat them as individuals and coach and stretch them
- Having an employee voice throughout the organisation, for reinforcing and challenging views; between functions and externally. Employees are seen as central to the solution
- Having organisational integrity – the values on the wall are reflected in day to day behaviours – with no “say-do” gap

We will be reinforcing many of these concepts when we look at managing successful change in your own teams. Your team will want to know the narrative – the story of what it looks like – of the change and what it means for them, and they will have to be (and if you are an excellent line manager¹⁵ will want to be) stretched and coached. You will have to see them as part of the solution, not the problem. And you will need to role model what you want to see behaviourally.

Organisational Culture

Of course, all of this engagement and visioning can be overridden (or underpinned) by the prevailing culture of your particular organisation. The oft-styled management guru Peter Drucker once said “culture eats strategy for breakfast” and by that he meant that whatever strategic direction you wanted to take an organisation (or by inference, your team or department) in, its success will be

¹³ If not falling foul of the “no shit, Sherlock” school of research.

¹⁴ 94% of world's most admired companies believe that their efforts to engage their employees have created a competitive advantage (Hay); the top 25% of organisations (in terms of high employee engagement levels) had twice the annual income and returned seven times more to shareholders over a five year period than the bottom 25%; Marks and Spencer's own research showed that those stores with a focus on improving engagement levels delivered £62 million more sales every year than those with declining engagement. You get the picture.

¹⁵ Or have read my first book. It's really rather good.



determined by whether the culture supports it or not. Culture triumphs in the organisational Top Trumps card deck.

It doesn't need to be as black and white as McGregor's concept of dividing managers (and an organisation's culture) into "people are lazy workshy fops and need coercing into performing" (Theory X) or "people just need the encouragement and then will naturally seek meaningful, challenging and stretching work" (Theory Y). Culture is ultimately more complex.¹⁶ It is pretty much defined as "the way we do things around here" and being helped into understanding and finding your way around a brand new organisation culturally has a massive impact on attrition rates in the first six months of employment. This is why organisational mentoring schemes or buddying programmes are such good value. Culture is the by-product of a variety of influences. The organisation's history, for example. The beliefs and values of its founder members. To some extent, its structure and location(s). Its sector. Changing this culture is usually really, really hard.¹⁷

Let's go back to the concept of flow. That is what we need organisationally – to have a culture of flow – if our organisation is going to be one of engagement. It may be that we have to start small – creating a culture of flow within our own teams first and see who notices. You may just find people start wanting a bit of it themselves. Whether it is the whole organisation or your part of it, creating a culture of flow requires some key elements:

- Ensure you demonstrate best practice in goal-setting and constructive, coaching style feedback.¹⁸
- Provide appropriate challenge to match individual skill. In other words, keep people challenged but not too much.
- Try to keep distractions from the key tasks to a minimum. People will get deeply involved in their task and too many distractions will reduce focus.
- Allow your people autonomy and independence – give them control.

Big culture change projects usually fail.¹⁹ Depressing but there you go. The reasons are many and complex and we will address some of these later, but one of the main reasons is that they are treated like an IT implementation project (nothing wrong with that) with spreadsheets and Gant charts and everything, and the fact that the changes have to be undertaken by real people who need to be engaged and behave in accordance with the changes is forgotten (plenty wrong with that). Cultural change is the end point of the transformation process and in big organisations it can take up to 5 years.

John Kotter thought he had the answer. His analysis was based on watching (or being involved with) 15 years' worth of organisations failing in their change projects. His starting point echoes the gist of the next section in this book; that change is painful and most of us don't like it so most of us resist it.

¹⁶ I have, however, worked in what felt like a predominantly Theory X culture. It wasn't pleasant. I didn't survive.

¹⁷ Think banking. What gets measured, gets done. That will be profits then.

¹⁸ If only there was a book that could help you. Ooo, I know! *The Psychological Manager; improve your performance conversations*. That one.

¹⁹ According to Mckinseys, two thirds of them do.



So, he worked out why the particular change initiatives he had observed had failed, and came up with an 8-stage model to address each one. The antidote, if you like, to each of the 8 reasons why big cultural change projects fail.

Stage One; establish the sense of urgency. People don't like change. They often resist it. Or are in denial about its need. So we are going nowhere if we fail to jolt people out of their comfortable complacency. Which very much includes management, by the way. The need for change is often underestimated, or the focus is on short-term profit not long-term success – or otherwise.²⁰ People need to be convinced - from the Board down; if you are being profitable now, why the need for change? I shall let the names Blockbusters and HMV roll around your unconscious until section two. Consultants are often used to do the convincing – the organisation can metaphorically shoot the messenger then reluctantly and begrudgingly agree with the findings and blame the consultant.²¹ As an illustration of this, a few years ago the CEOs of some US car firms went cap-in-hand to government, asking for money. In their private jets. It was duly commented on that they were hardly creating the sense of urgency. One Congressman asked specifically why they hadn't jet-pooled! Kotter suggests that the sense of urgency can be ramped up by creating a financial crisis, eliminating obvious examples of excess (like a jet, for example) or even set unreachable targets.

Stage Two; form a powerful guiding coalition. Whilst the initial impetus behind the cultural transformation may be led by just a few people (or even just the CEO), a successful large change needs a core team whose job it is to focus on the change. This group needs to be seen as an autonomous unit with a high degree of trust and a shared objective that appeals to both head and heart. This team needs to be credible (not driven by HR although they should be represented) and its members should have enough position power and expertise – as well as individuals with strong leadership qualities.

Stage Three; create the vision. Once again, we are back to vision. A clear vision must be established that appeals to all likely stakeholders; management, staff, customers. It should be a pull into the future to counter the push of stage One – motivational, aspirational and positive. It should address the *why* and start to address the *what*; the *how* should be left to local devices to avoid claims of dictatorial micromanagement. It is the direction of travel that should be determined here; simple, clear, powerful. Without it, people will not understand why they have to go through short-term pain to get to long-term gain. As Kotter himself puts it “A good vision acknowledges that sacrifices will be necessary but makes clear that these sacrifices will yield particular benefits and personal satisfactions that are far superior to those available today – or tomorrow – without attempting to change.” It aligns people; we are all in this together and going in *that* direction.

Stage Four; communicate the vision. In every way possible. Using technology such as chat rooms and wikis, websites and email. Using meetings and roadshows with the help of Marketing or Internal Communications teams. Most organisations cascade to middle management and hold them to

²⁰ The university sector has been accused of this. Because of the time lag (students already booked onto courses, the vagaries of the funding model etc) the impact of the 2009 recession hit them later than it did industry, and yet still seemed to catch some of them by surprise.

²¹ “Don't look at us! The big boys made us do it.”



account for having meaningful change-based conversations. And then communicate some more.²² It needs to be simple, using metaphor and analogy and examples; it also needs to be repeated often in a variety of formats and needs to be role-modelled from the top. And as good communication is always two-way, concerns and opinions need to be listened to; remember the four enablers of engagement!

Stage five; empower others to act on the vision. There is no point in an organisation attempting to bring about some big cultural change if the systems and processes and structures aren't aligned - or even work contrary to the vision. If an organisation wants to improve its cross-team collaboration, then those behaviours needed to be noticed and rewarded, but also anything that gets in the way (such as an internal funding model based on competition) needs to be changed. You have to help people to behave in accordance with the shift in culture you want. In addition, people who are blockers to the change need to be brought on board. We will look at how we might do this in section Five.

Stage six; generate short-term wins. Culture change takes time. A long time. So long that some argue that it is easier and more effectively to just work with what you have got and nudge it. It is really hard for people to stay focused and keep the momentum and motivation for change going for prolonged periods, so milestones along the way need to be built in and celebrated. These wins need to be clearly related, unambiguously, to the bigger change effort.

Stage Seven; consolidating improvements. This means, effectively, don't declare victory too soon as forward momentum will stop. If the changes already built have not fully bedded in, the danger is that the organisation – or more accurately, the people in it – will slip back to the old ways. The guiding coalition (see Stage Two) needs to build on the credibility they have gained from the short-term wins and make bigger changes.

Stage Eight; institutionalising the new. This is about anchoring the new ways of behaving so they become the new normal. This will be about good old-fashioned performance management and the setting of behavioural expectations, but also about helping individuals explicitly see the benefits of the changes. And, no doubt, further nudges will be needed to build on the change effort and to make *change* the new normal as well.

If we can bring this back to the individual level,²³ we need to be lifelong learners, according to Kotter. Original models of change, such as that of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s talked about change being a three-stage process; unfreeze the old, tinker about a bit then refreeze the new. The problem is it never quite refreezes anymore, if it indeed ever did.

We therefore have to be more tolerant of ambiguity as the world stays stubbornly slushy. As we will be covering in the next section, most of us find this rather uncomfortable for all sorts of biological,

²² Whenever I have done a team diagnosis, a team build or a 360 degree feedback project, communication is the number one gripe. Every single time.

²³ It's amazing that we can so easily fall into the trap of conceptualising an organisation as a thing in itself, with a personality and motivations. It is usually just a building or two with people in it. The culture becomes the sum total of the people, practices and systems. But ultimately, it's just people.



neurological and evolutionary reasons. Kotter argues that we need to break ourselves out of this craving for order and become habitual self-aware risk-takers, being open to new ideas and essentially embracing change. It would appear that most of us still have some way to go.

I would like to mention one more model before we move on to the really interesting brain stuff. It is not a model of culture change per se, but rather a way of determining what needs to change and what existing strengths our organisation or team have that we need to keep²⁴. Most change models (like the Kotter one already mentioned) tend to start with what the problem is, what is going wrong or what needs to change. At an individual level, this is what clumsy appraisal processes can make us feel like and it is negative and energy draining and can make you feel like you don't quite cut the mustard. A different way of looking at change is to take the perspective of identifying what is already working well and you want to keep, and then build on this by turning the dial up on *those* things. There are many writers on organisational culture (Kotter amongst them, as we have seen) who argue that it is best to try to work with what you have got and nudge, rather than go for big culture change because as we have already seen, big culture change is really hard and often fails.

This methodology is called Appreciative Enquiry and the principle is pretty simple. If we spend time and energy focusing on what is currently going well, it generates more positive energy and enthusiasm and, as we shall see in subsequent sections, that tends to generate more solutions because we are not merely in survival mode. The process is all about asking the right powerful questions and creating an atmosphere of curiosity and a willingness to take a step back and view the organisation or team through a new lens. For it to work, you need to try to “get the whole organisation in the room” as one of the founders of the process David Cooperrider suggests, because all bits link to all the other bits. At an organisational level, this can be a logistical nightmare, although Cooperrider himself has used the technique with getting close to a thousand participants. For most of us, getting a selection of interested stakeholders (more on this in section Five) and the creative use of technology may be helpful.

The starting point is to determine, not the problem you want to solve which is the more usual way, but the positive future that you want to create. This works with goal-setting theory too – you are far more likely to achieve results if you develop goals that move you towards something rather than away or stopping something. It feels different and generates a solution-mindset. Once you know what the future could be, there are four stages to the process:

- Discovery; this is about the identification of processes or behaviours that are already working well. Participants often tell stories (tapping into the way our brains are wired - to understand the world through narrative) about successes, key qualities, resources, talents or strengths your team or organisation has
- Dream; what might be? What does a glorious future look like, sound like, feel like? This is about taking the Discovery stories and projecting them into the future to the brave new world that you would like to create. How could things be even better? How precisely is it different from now? What will you be noticing? How will people be behaving?

²⁴ There is a real parallel with dealing with change at an individual level here which we will see in sections Four and Five, all of which come from the positive psychology movement.



- Design; this is about identifying how we get there. The important thing is to keep the focus on the positive and not get sucked into problem solving. What needs to stay the same? What needs to change? How can we do that? What systems can support the new behaviours? Who else needs to be involved?
- Destiny; this final stage is about implementing the plan – when the dream becomes a reality. Focusing on the positive again is vital here, the argument being that people will become naturally energised and will work towards this new future because they have passion for it. There is no one way to achieve this and the positive changes will create more positive changes; therefore, a change champion or project leader may help keep everything on track.

Appreciative Enquiry, then, is perhaps more a model of how to create the energy to make the change stick rather than the more process- and solution-driven approach of writers like John Kotter. In section Five, we will look at a model of taking a team through change that in many ways builds on both of these models but is to many people more practical and immediately implementable at a team level. It also takes into account all the exciting biology bits that we are going to discuss next; why we react to change in the way that we do.

Section summary; The context of change

The aim of this section is to reinforce the message that change is inevitable due to the huge number of factors that seem destined to stop things being as they always have been. Some writers have called the rise of the internet as the new industrial revolution and its impact is likely to be no less radical. It already is. There is more computing power in your smartphone than in a bank of 1970s mainframe computers that would fill a small building.

When looking at change in our own area - change that affects our jobs, for example, it is useful to think of the wider context; the vision of the leadership, your organisation's striving for engagement and the overriding culture of that organisation. Kotter's model of taking a whole organisation through a major cultural change may be beyond our own particular remit, but we can and should learn some lessons from why those change projects usually are less than successful.

A step back in time

Picture the scene. It is sixty thousand years ago and you are sitting there in your hunter/gatherer cave in what will eventually be Essex. You are calm, relaxed, feeling secure in your surroundings and the company of your tribe when all of a sudden you notice a change in the atmosphere. Your senses pick it up before you fully realise what is going on; your hearing is suddenly heightened and the hairs stand up on the back of your neck. Something isn't right.



Then, out of the corner of your eye, you see in the cave entrance the unmistakable shape of a sabre-toothed cat²⁵. Along with the rest of your tribe your reactions are phenomenally quick. Your heart beats more quickly to get blood to where it is needed and you breathe quickly and shallowly to get a rush of oxygen. You grab your spear and with your compatriots rush towards the source of danger in as threatening a way as possible and chase the cat away.

There's a reason why we react like this, of course. It's quick. In the normal measurement of human (and we were pretty much human by then) reactions, it's virtually instantaneous. And in immediate danger like this scenario, "quick" wins over "considered" every time. It's the classic *fight/flight* reaction and those that had it survived to tell the tale and no doubt use it as a chat-up line to help further the species and ensure the survival of the process²⁶.

Feeling an emotion, such as fear in the example above, then reacting, is quick. Thinking about something and deciding what course of action to take is slow. So we learned to do both. And most of the time it works. If it hadn't evolution no doubt would have had something to say - and then done something about it. The quick mode (Daniel Kahneman (Thinking, Fast and Slow) calls it system 1, or Thinking Fast) helps us now when we see an angry face and we instinctively know how to respond or at least put us on our guard; it is there when we dive into a canal to save someone or push someone out of the way of a falling piano. Thinking about it takes longer – at least 5 times longer – so we developed a bypass system for emergencies.

Our brain. It's a bit weird.

Our brain is essentially a 3 lb mass of jelly-like cells that convert the "out there" into some sort of reality. The "real" world as such has no sound, or colour, but our brains construct these things in our head so we can live in it. I know this sounds a bit weird and is a throwback to the "if a tree falls in the forest and there is no-one to hear it, how many badgers does it kill" or whatever the saying is. It's the truth though. All sound is, for example, is a stream of air molecules hitting your ear drum, converting the vibration into noise which the brain interprets as sound. No brain, no noise. The upshot of this, of course, as this works for all our perceptual mechanisms, is that reality is personal to us and made up. All of our senses depend on the others – our sight affects our hearing, our smell affects our taste and so, surprisingly, does our sight. Sight leads to an expectation of taste. Try this test (this has been done by a wine-expert friend of mine and also in published psychological tests). Chill two glasses of wine, one red and one white, to the same temperature. Blindfold yourself. Get a friend to pass you one of the glasses. Even wine experts cannot tell the difference once they don't know whether it is red or white. Expectation affects taste²⁷.

²⁵ No doubt pretty miffed at being downgraded from a tiger. Actually, we met him in my first book *The Psychological Manager; improve your performance conversations (p36)*

²⁶ Presumably those that said "Ooo, look at this stripy orange and black thing with big teeth and everything! I wonder what that does" didn't live long enough to find out and certainly not long enough to pass their genes on.

²⁷ The outcome of this research means that there is no point buying anything other than the House wine at a restaurant if you train yourself to expect it to be just as good. Unless it's Blue Nun, of course.



Even our perception of time is a bit dodgy. We live half a second in the past. It takes that long to perceive things so by the time you notice anything, it has already been and gone. The upshot of all this is that the bit of reality that we perceive is determined by the brain structures we have in place for noticing it. It is only a bit of what is “out there”. X-rays and ultraviolet are out there, but we wouldn’t know it because we don’t have the right bits. In the case of ultraviolet light, bees can because they do.

The final nail in the coffin of our concept of reality is that all of our perceptions, memories and attention first pass through the filter of our beliefs and values which come from our already existing versions of reality which in turn are based on our upbringing. This is important because many of the remedies to a lack of resilience (section Four) are based on this concept. The first step is recognising that all anything is, ever, is a made-up interpretation of it based on a fraction of the evidence and drained through the sieve of our belief systems.

At the time of writing, therefore, there is something like 7 billion different versions of reality on the planet. When I was born in the early 1960s, there were about 3 billion versions. That must mean that the world is just a bit more than double as weird as when I was born.

So, what makes us *us* then? We don’t come as hardwired as a meerkat. We are far more of a blank slate, which means we are helpless for a lot longer, but we also have the luxury and capability of creating things²⁸. We tend to learn on the job; by the time we are 2 years old, each of our neurons (we will come on to discuss these later in this section) has around 15,000 connections but then we start to lose them and keep (and reinforce) the important ones. This process affects what we learn and what we *notice* and who we, as an individual, become. Our memories are constructed using this process but the problem with memory is that it changes after the event. We do not have the equivalent of a hard-drive recorder in our head. We have a forever-changing interpretation of the event but that is not how it feels. Later memories change and even override earlier ones.²⁹ Even our memories, then, are a myth.

The other bit that feels like us is our consciousness. There are whole books devoted to this subject and we still don’t really know what it is, but most writers in this area seem to agree that it emerges from the integration – and as a sort of by-product - of all the other bits of the brain so it can work as one. David Eagleman, a prolific writer on the subject, likens this to the CEO of an organisation; the CEO is there to join the dots between all the bits and decide the direction of travel for the organisation; likewise, consciousness does the same thing for us. It helps all the bits work in sync. According to most neuroscientists, consciousness is therefore a by-product of having a lot of component parts. Develop an artificial brain powerful enough then theoretically at least, according to some neuroscientists, consciousness could spontaneously emerge.

²⁸ Such as toy meerkats.

²⁹ The fallibility of memory to manipulation was famously demonstrated by psychologist Elizabeth Loftus who has done a huge amount of research into eyewitness testimony. Two groups of people are shown the same video image of two cars crashing. One group was asked to estimate the speed one of the cars was travelling as it hit the other (stationary) one; the other group was asked the same question, worded “how fast was the car travelling as it *smashed* into the stationary one. The two groups remembered different speeds despite watching the same video.



And what's the point? It helps us to deal with the unexpected by making various parts of the brain work together to deal with the threat or potential opportunity. It rises out of the detail and takes the long view. It's the brain's leader.

Brain structure: the old bit

Let's go back to our sabre-toothed cat scenario again. The process described above is reflected in how our brains are structured. The oldest bit of the brain, evolutionarily-speaking, is the bit at the top of your spinal cord with parts called, variously, the hindbrain, the cerebellum, the reptilian brain, brain stem or Reticular Activating System if we want to be clever. This part of the brain keeps you alive when you are not thinking about staying alive - but more importantly for our purposes, it acts as our first filter on the world. It effectively says to the next bit of the brain "you had better pay attention to this, it may be important." Some writers have referred rather unkindly to this part of the brain as asking three questions of any change in the environment; can I eat it, can it eat me and can I mate with it³⁰. Anyway – its function is to notice change, and if it detects it, to pass the information on to the next part of the brain. If things haven't changed, those things that didn't change probably didn't hurt you, so to this bit of the brain, it makes sense to focus on new things that might.

This is important for the theme of this book. This 200,000 year old (at least) system is still with us – we effectively have the same hardware – and so this part of our brain is continuously scanning our environment for threat or opportunity. It is on the lookout for whatever our sabre-toothed cat equivalent is nowadays and our response – a fight/flight response – may not be the most appropriate, even if we are still in Essex.

As an example of the vestiges this bit of the brain has left us with, consider moving in a car or on a rolling cross-channel ferry. This bit of the brain tells you that you are moving, and can't tell that you are not just because your legs aren't. Your sense of balance, determined through the fluids in your inner ear, doesn't think so. There is a mismatch of signals and the result is you feeling unwell. To your hindbrain, this means one thing: poison. So it makes you say hello to your breakfast again to get rid of it. Your hindbrain did not evolve to deal with a P & O ferry.

It is easy to see why we need this primary filter on the world. There are billions of bits and bytes of data flying around us at any given moment and we cannot possibly pay attention to all of it so it filters out what isn't that important. This system therefore tells us what *is* important by focusing on change. If there appears to be a material change, as gleaned often unconsciously through our senses³¹, then the information gets through the filter to the next bit of the brain.

It's emotional.

³⁰ Not necessarily always in that order.

³¹ Interestingly, it appears that smell is the one sense that doesn't pass through this part of the brain, but rather has a direct hotline to emotion.



Brain structure; the next oldest bit

Or at least part of it is. The middle part of the brain again has a few working parts but collectively it is often called the limbic system and comprises largely our memory bank (the hippocampus – effectively our hard drive) the thalamus and hypothalamus (memory relay stations and primary drive regulation respectively) and the amygdala. The amygdala is important and we will revisit its role in the section on emotional intelligence, but for now we can think of it as our second filter and where our brain catalogues emotional memories. It is responsive to the classic threat responses we have been discussing above and will start a stress response that will eventually lead to the fight/flight mechanism being invoked. Not only that – it actively releases hormones that stop the more logical parts of the brain from functioning because survival is more important and being right.

This system works in tandem and very quickly. Your hippocampus has remembered what a sabre-toothed cat is, and your amygdala knows how to respond based on emotional memory from the past or similar transferable situations that it is reminded of. It doesn't do subtlety. When we have a seemingly irrational reaction to someone we have never met and feel we just don't like them, one possible explanation is that this system is remembering someone else from your past and you are having the emotional reaction driven by your amygdala transposed onto them. This could also be the root of some phobias.

This limbic system, then, has created the stress response attributed to our sabre-toothed cat invasion by releasing the stress chemical norepinephrine to prepare the body immediately for attack. In a way, the amygdala acts as our second filter as it stops the brain from thinking. Thinking is slow (system 2, according to Kahneman) and time may be of the essence. We have therefore what is called an amygdala hijack or limbic system overload and our response is an emotional one based on survival. No room – or time, for thought. And one of the reasons why we all react slightly differently to change or other stressful situations is that what is stored by our amygdala as emotional memories depends on our own past events, culture and upbringing. It would also appear that the amount of perceived control we have over the situation causing the overload has a large impact on this limbic system arousal which gives us a remedy – we can choose, with practice, to think about things differently.

This system can be amazingly quick. Researchers in Sweden found that people reacted (by generating a sweaty palm) to pictures of snakes when the image was shown for less than 1\300th of a second. As it takes nearly half a second to consciously perceive the image, the participants were in effect responding to things before they had seen them. We might label this “intuition”, of course.

Interestingly, the olfactory system (which detects and recognises smell) is part of this limbic system as we mentioned earlier, which is why smells are often associated with powerful emotional memories, aided by the fact that the olfactory bulb and the hippocampus are pretty much next to each other. How we label the smell can also affect our experience of it; one well known experiment found that people determined whether a smell was pleasant or unpleasant after smelling it simply by the label (“Christmas tree” or “Toilet Cleaner”, for example) – back to our wine story!



Brain structure: the new bit

This final part of the brain is the bit that makes us “human”. It consists of grey matter (our neocortex; 5mm thick, the size of a tea towel and folded around our brain so it can fit in) and white matter; the two types of matter combine in various structures called lobes (four pairs, one in each hemisphere) to form the thinking part of the brain. There are lobes that store visual memories and process visual stimuli (occipital lobes), those that do the same for auditory information and auditory memory (temporal lobes) and those that deal more with spatial awareness and perception (parietal lobes). More importantly for our purposes, the fourth pair is responsible for planning, judgement, decision making and creativity. This is our frontal lobe and prefrontal cortex; the bit behind our forehead that hurts when we have been thinking a lot.

This was the last bit of the brain to develop in evolutionary terms and is the last bit to develop as we progress through our childhood and young adult stage; our ability to logically reason and understand risk seems to peak at the age of 23 or so with the full development of our frontal lobe. It is the fine-tuning that happens after then³². It is also the only part of our brain that can control emotions – one of its functions is therefore to control the impulses of the amygdala. Without it, you would not be able to control urges or solve problems or make decisions. As this bit was the last to evolve, it didn’t hold us back when we “decided” to come down from the trees, and certainly didn’t worry about the lack of trouser-presses.

An awful lot of our decisions are not exactly, erm, decisions. Sometimes, we have a hunch, or intuition about something; this is merely the various bits of the brain noticing things before the conscious mind does. Remember, our prefrontal cortex is often playing catch-up. Sometimes, our bodies notice and respond to things without our being aware of it entirely. In one study (I will let you decide whether it was gratuitous or not) psychologists found that lap-dancers earned more tips when they were ovulating as men can pick up on the subtle bodily clues without being aware of it³³. This prompted the men to find them more attractive as potential (fertile) mates.

Some decisions may even have genetic roots. One of the “Big Five” personality variables (see chapter 8) is *Openness to Experience*, which may have some genetic markers and helps create a more liberal political persuasion. Your politics may have a genetic root. Likewise, the strength of our disgust response (to images of rotting corpses, for example) correlates with a more conservative outlook politically. Some argue that our over-arching political bias is therefore a function of our DNA! This does not mean that we can’t change it – as we shall come on to see, eventually we can change any belief system – it’s just that it is hard so we don’t tend to.

Finally, this frontal lobe contains our chief executive; the prefrontal cortex. It receives information from pretty much everywhere else and sends commands out to them and is our primary decision-making structure. It is therefore trying to make sense of all the separate bits of information and sensory input and make decisions as to how to think or act. In a way, as we have already seen, it is the seat of our consciousness.

³² Practicing brain-training games help you get better at brain-training games. Nothing else.

³³ Psychologists. How we suffer for our science.



Brain structure: Putting it all together

This description of the brain is of course grossly simplified³⁴. But even this simplistic explanation of its structure helps us to understand something quite profound. Our brain is geared to notice and react to change as if it is a threat. It therefore creates an emotional response to that threat before it even gets to our prefrontal cortex and starts actually thinking about it. We can eventually route it through logic, rationality and decision making areas of the brain but it takes a lot longer and we may not always have time. This really helped when we had to be mindful of stripy cave invaders, and is still useful when we are faced with an attack or have to dodge an errant shopping trolley, but the same mechanism is potentially invoked when we are faced with a stroppy customer or an angry email from the boss. More generally, however, it is often the process behind our reaction to all kinds of change in our home or professional lives. Essentially, we operate in survival mode and that comes at a cost – poorer decision making, poorer interpersonal skills and poorer emotional control.

How we learn

So, we have described the basic structure of the brain and how this all works through a sequence of processes when we notice a change in our environment. The implications for how we deal with change in general terms may be becoming clear, but before we look at that, there is one more process to discuss; how we learn.

Our brains are made up of a particular type of cell called a neuron. Their job is pretty simple; to form connections. We have around 100 billion of these cells³⁵ and it used to be thought (as late as the 1990s) that we were unable to generate new ones. We now know that learning something new cannot only force new connections, but also create new brain cells in a process called neurogenesis. The brain is far more malleable, or plastic, than we ever thought and we are actually physically changing our brain by what we think and the way we think as we generate new cells and connections through purposeful practice - self-directed neuroplasticity, if you are interested. Reading this book is changing your brain physically.

The neuron's job, then, is to talk to other neurons. Each neuron has three main parts – the cell body, dendrites (which are like a set of filaments coming from the cell body) and the main stem of the neuron, the axon. If you imagine an eyeball on a stalk you are not far off.³⁶ The gap between the cells (between the end of one axon and the dendrites of the next neuron – or more accurately, thousands of others) is called a synapse.

³⁴ I love the saying that if the brain were simple enough for us to understand it, we would be too simple to understand it. It also seems to try to avoid being studied, which is just rude.

³⁵ Interestingly, we have more of these cells in our stomach than a cat does in its head. Which says a lot about cats. This has been used as an explanation for the existence of “gut feelings” and the stupidity of cats. I may be giving personal feelings away here.

³⁶ 10,000 biologists have just put their head in their hands.



The process works like this. The neuron sending the signal to talk to the next neuron releases a chemical that changes the amount of electricity in that cell which then travels down the axon. Axons are covered by a fatty substance called a myelin sheath which aids the transmission of the signal; we get this from omega 3 (amongst other things) which is why fish is considered brain food.³⁷ When the signal gets to the end of the axon, it releases chemicals called neurotransmitters which swim across the synaptic gap and are taken up by the dendrites of another neuron.

These dendrites grow as we learn, are pared back when we don't, so as we learn and think, our brains change. The more times we repeat the thought or behaviour (a B minor guitar chord or the French word for red) then the impulse sequence through the neurons is repeated until it becomes hardwired into a network of cells that get used to firing together. Many parts of the brain can "learn" to fire together through this process to complete a specific task – Hebb's law states "cells that fire together, wire together". All a memory is, when you think of it like this, is a sequence of firing synapses, not the neurons themselves. It's the sequence that holds the memory, called encoding. And, of course, unlike a computer, our perceptions and existing memories affect the new one and therefore change it. Memory is constructed after the event as we have said, not a digital recording of it. The result of that is that nothing you remember is ever "real", for any given definition of real. You made it up. Or rather, your brain did.

It is worth spending a little time thinking about the neurotransmitters – the chemicals that jump the gap between neurons and forge connections. Some neurotransmitters cause a neuron to send a message to another cell and some stop it from firing. There are dozens of neurotransmitters, but some of the most important for our purposes are norepinephrine (also called noradrenaline, and affects our moods and triggers the stress response), serotonin (enhances mood and calms us), endorphins (the brain's natural painkiller often generated by social contact and laughing) and dopamine (assists with focus). An important one that is both a hormone and a neurotransmitter is oxytocin – the "you are my friend" chemical. This gives you that lovely feeling when you are in love or lust, or feel a close bond with a significant other. This seems to have been important in helping us to bond as a tribe back in that Essex cave by suppressing norepinephrine (the stress chemical) which is normally a more sensible survival strategy with anyone not in our tribe. I have written about this before (in *The Psychological Manager; improve your performance conversations (p137)*) and the impact this process has on teams and our natural tendency for silo-working. It is, in effect, the science behind ingroup vs outgroup. HR vs Finance. Or Arsenal vs Tottenham.

When we exercise, or take anti-depressants, or eat certain foods, or have social interaction, or receive praise, or go through change, our brain's chemistry changes at the neurotransmitter level. This affects how we feel. Which affects our thoughts. Which affect our behaviour. We will be returning to this model later on but it is useful to have an idea of the science behind it as this helps us to have more control over it. And when we have more control, we have more options for how we deal with change. This process is at play when we learn a language or a skill – but it is also how we learn to deal with our emotions and behavioural responses to those emotions.

³⁷ But not the night before an exam. It's a little late by then.



What this all means

All of this – our evolutionary history, our brain structure and the way we learn - means something quite profound. Our first reaction to change, which our brain tends to perceive as a threat, is emotional, not rational. The result is the classic *change curve*.

Now, everyone is different and every situation is different. But our responses to change and life's stressful events tend to have some commonalities. So much work has been done in this area that it has almost passed into folklore, but essentially our classic response to change, heavily influenced by the way our brains work, can be fairly predictable.

Firstly, there is typically shock, followed by a period of flat affect – numbness. Essentially, our brains find it difficult to comprehend what is going on and therefore go into buffer mode. This may be fleeting or may last for several days as we keep on repeating the circumstances that led to the shock in our thoughts. This is often followed by a period of denial – or even a sense of false optimism and heightened mood! This is our brain's way of putting you into a holding pattern; the event may be just too enormous to deal with right now so it goes into protection mode and pretends it isn't happening for a while whilst it regroups and gets the energy to deal with it. It is amazing how long we can last in this denial phase, and how illogical it would appear to an observer. People can still turn up for work long after they have been made redundant. We may set a place for dinner for someone who is no longer with us. We may steadfastly ignore all the warning signs of an impending change and yet somehow be surprised and shocked when it happens.

Of course, sometimes the change may be made up of small incremental changes or nudges which are harder to spot on their own. A frog may allow itself to be boiled alive if you very gradually increase the temperature of the water.³⁸ But regardless, our capacity for both conscious and unconscious denial is greater than most of us realise. Denial is not bad in itself – it is putting things off until we can deal with them – but long term, it can have a dramatic impact³⁹ if we don't eventually accept the event and go through the rest of the change curve.

And that is when it hits you. This emotional rollercoaster usually comprises anxiety, anger and sadness or even depression; not always in that order and sometimes jumbled up together so that it becomes hard to separate them. Anxiety is about concern for the future or the implications of the change on you or those around you. It is not the same as fear, which is about something real and now, but more about something potential that is anticipated. Our amygdala and hippocampus get locked into a neural loop which seems to feed on itself. There is a lesson here which we will return to later on. Whereas fear is an understandable reaction to an imminent threat, with anxiety we are effectively doing it to ourselves and it may not be helping us. This is not to judge it unduly – but it does give us some power over it.

Think about our emotions. All an emotion is for is to prompt the body to act in some way –either towards or against something. Once the action has been performed, the chemicals – the

³⁸ Please don't.

³⁹ Both mental and physical illnesses according to Freud.



neurotransmitters we met earlier - gradually dissipate. There is no need for them. The result is that emotions (or at least the initial hit) last around 10 to 20 seconds. But of course, they don't. They linger because we have a prefrontal cortex and think about them and the causal event which generates the neurotransmitter hit all over again. Animals feel emotions and behave accordingly (fear, for example) but the resulting flight/flight response eventually dissipates the chemicals and normal mood state is resumed.⁴⁰ They don't spend time afterwards saying to themselves "Well really. That just wasn't on". They don't really have much of a sense of future so anxiety isn't generally on their agenda either.

But we do and it is. So we repeat the pattern of thinking and keep on generating the chemical hit, time and time again. We may find ourselves getting angry at the circumstances, other people related or even completely unrelated to the stressful event, or ourselves. As we said before, logic and rationality is not our default during times of change. The anger may be expressed outwardly or may be held inside, festering away.

Eventually, reality sinks in and with it the (perceived) enormity of the event and this is where the low point occurs. We all feel sad from time to time but this process can also lead in some circumstances to outright depression. Martin Seligman suggested that one of the major causes of depression was *learned helplessness* – where we feel out of control of a situation and that the world is happening to us, instead of us happening to the world. If that is how we feel as a result of the change, it is easy to see how this could have an impact here. Again, the more control we have, the easier it is to deal with it.

Gradually, however, we do usually deal with it. We accept it. It doesn't mean we have to like it or even agree with it but we put it more into its correct perspective and achieve some sort of proportionality. This is where we start to make choices and we start looking to the future. Our frontal lobes gain mastery and we start to plan, make decisions and regain control of our mood state.

An example

Let's have a look at this process using the hypothetical example of a redundancy.⁴¹ There you are, doing a good job and being generally successful in what you are meant to achieve, when the recession happens and you are called in to the HR Director's office to be told that your post is being deleted in a few months. The second part of the conversation becomes a blur; your limbic system is in overload, your heart rate rises temporarily and you find you are unable to concentrate on the conversation. The sabre-toothed cat of redundancy has entered your cave and your amygdala is trying to work out how to respond.

To protect you, your mood state is flattened and after the initial shock, there is a strange sensation of numbness, where you not only don't know how to feel, but you don't know what you are feeling. Eventually however, after a few days you may go into denial, by either putting it to one side and not

⁴⁰ Which is why exercise or going for a long walk or run can temporarily help our mood state.

⁴¹ Not autobiographical at all. No, really. Not at all. Nada.



thinking about it at all or convincing yourself that there must be some mistake – or that they will change their minds.

Reality then sets in. Anxiety and concern about the future (how am I going to pay the mortgage and who will feed the badger? What if I never get another job?) is usually first often followed by anger and frustration at them (how dare they? Don't they realise what they are doing?) and ourselves (I should have spotted it or done something differently). This will go round and round in your head until the result is lowered mood states of sadness or even temporary depression.

Eventually, however, you realise that you are starting to deal with it. You are starting to understand what parts of this scenario you can control and what you can't, and what choices and the possible consequences of those choices may be. You start to make plans, make decisions and your old energy returns. You may not be happy at the situation and you may still wish it had not happened, and you may think the decision was a flawed one, but the point is you are now dealing with it and accepting it. And moving on. In the end, you may even get to full acceptance or closure on the situation and realise that there were in the end many positives you can take from the situation.

On death and dying

You may have already made the leap with change (such as redundancy as in this example) and the process of bereavement. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) pretty much invented this model as a way of describing impending loss and grief, and it has since become a recognised way of understanding our reactions to many forms of loss. Whilst she labels the parts of the curve slightly differently (denial, blaming others, blaming self and confusion leading to eventual acceptance) the process is pretty much the same. It has been argued that whole organisations can go through this process as well as the individuals within it. You will often hear these sorts of comments at work:

Denial; "I've seen it all before" or "if I just keep my head down, it will pass"

Blaming others; "It's the system" or "the bosses are making us do it"

Blaming self; "I can't do it" or "I'm too old to change"

Confusion; "I don't know what to do" or "should I stay or should I go?"

Acceptance; "OK, how do we make this work?" or "what choices do we now have?"

It is fairly easy to come up with a list of similar phrases that are about the loss of a loved one. There is a single, rather profound conclusion. Your brain, at a fundamental level, doesn't really distinguish between a change, such as a redundancy or enforced office move, and bereavement. To your limbic system, change is loss.



Positive change

It is very easy to fall into the trap of thinking that all the above explanations of how and why change affects us in the way described only applies to bad news. After all, it's only logical. But there's the problem. Your limbic system is not too concerned with logic – it has an emotion caused by a neurotransmitter in response to a stimuli then it just does its thing. Of course, no-one is saying that if you win £10,000 on the premium bonds you will go through the bereavement cycle, but you may well do if you win £10,000,000. The history of the lottery is full of examples where people have not been able to cope with the change that those amounts of money makes to their lives, and in a way, something has died; their old self. With that comes a loss of self-identity, their old reasons for working at what they were working at, a potential loss of friends and their sense of place in the world. There is no point in saying “well, what did you do the lottery for?” or “why don't you just give it away if it isn't making you happy?” because that is applying logic when pure logic doesn't always compute during this process.

Positive change can therefore have the same impact. When you get married, there is the loss of your old single self;⁴² when you move to that house you wanted, there is the loss of the old; when you get a promotion there is the loss of comfort and your old job description – doing what got you the success in the first place. And if we don't get that bit sorted out, we end up with the Peter Principle; being promoted to our level of incompetence because the job has changed and we have not changed with it.

The point is that it often catches us unawares because it is not logical and we didn't expect it. But it can happen anyway. Even if we wanted it in the first place.

Individual differences.

Finally, let's look at why people, notwithstanding the above, vary in their ability to deal with change. The following list is not exhaustive but will give the general picture. The mere fact that there are so many reasons why our resilience in dealing with change varies means that there is more scope and options to take control of it.

- Age. Let's get this one out of the way first. As many of us get older, we get a bit fonder of security and routine, but this is by no means universal and conversely, many people through maturity and wisdom have more resources and strategies for dealing with it. So, it may have an impact at an individual level but it is the height of laziness to say that older people can't cope with change. They may also have increased economic security and therefore be better able to get a sense of perspective and proportionality.
- Differing levels of emotional intelligence. We will explore this in quite some depth later in the next section as it forms the bedrock of our model for increasing resilience, but for now, the more emotional intelligence we have, the better we are able to deal constructively with change.

⁴² And certainly the loss of speakers, now relegated behind the sofa.



- Personality. If we take the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) model, for example, as one way of understanding personality variables, then it could be argued that those with a Perceiving preference as opposed to a Judging preference deal more easily with change. Those with a Perceiving preference favour adaptability and flexibility, keeping their options open until the last minute; those with a Judging preference prefer and value closure, completeness, structure and control. This may ultimately just reflect the way in which change is dealt with rather than ability to cope with it, of course.⁴³ We will look in more depth at this model in the next section.
- Attitude. Again, we will explore this in some depth later. We can choose our attitude and our process for developing resilience through change looks at precisely that. Our attitudes leak into our thoughts and feelings and therefore our behaviour.
- Past experiences. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. The more often we go through change and life's experiences, the more often many of us have built strategies to cope with them. This does depend on attitude, of course – we could also decide to have had enough. The point is, it's a choice.
- Whatever else is going on. We have lots of stuff going on at any one time, home, work, financial, health – and going through a work-based change may be the straw that breaks the camel's back. We may be at different points on many different change curves simultaneously.
- Our genes. Your genes may influence how sensitive you are to emotional information; a variation in a gene⁴⁴ which influences the neurotransmitter norepinephrine may mean that you show greater attention to negative words and see the negative aspects of the world more clearly. Not a huge amount you can do about this one, to be fair.

Taking your Team through Change

In many ways, we are back at the beginning. We started our journey looking at the notion that change is (usually) necessary because of the internal and external drivers that are a constant tap on the shoulder.⁴⁵ We then looked at the biology and neurology of change before turning our attention to the remedies for ourselves; self-awareness and then increasing our resilience. Our final section addresses the extra things we have to do if we are responsible for managing a team through this heady process.

⁴³ As a Judging preference person myself, I am quite happy dealing with change as long as I can control it or at least put some sort of structure to it.

⁴⁴ ADRA2b if you are interested.

⁴⁵ A perfectly good repost to the “We’ve always done it like that” is “That’s probably why it needs to change”. Stand at arm’s length though.



Here is a quote on how to bring about change. You may have a view on this, but there is at least an element of truth in it. See if you can guess who it is: “The change is proposed; it is denounced as a disaster; it proceeds with vast chipping away and opposition; it is unpopular; it comes about; within a short space of time, it is as if it had always been so.”

This can work for some elements of Government policy, for example. Think how vehemently people opposed the introduction of the compulsory wearing of seatbelts in cars; the banning of smoking in pubs and on the London Underground and in aircraft; the more recent introduction of charges for shopping bags, ~~the invasion of Iraq~~. Yes, that’s right, the quote is Tony Blair. He sort of has a point. Many of us think that the imposition of the change is a diabolical liberty and will never work, and then we very quickly get used to it *and cannot imagine it any other way*.

If there is one thing we can take from this it is that management is not a democracy. If you are charged with taking a team through change, then often it has been imposed on you from those above you and you have to implement it. It may also be a change that you can see is necessary for yourself after being all Leader-ly and having done a PESTLE analysis. A leader’s job is to create the change and make it happen.

There are ways of doing it, however. One of the themes of the first couple of sections of this book is that people generally don’t like change. So they will resist, or at least grumble a bit. Their chimps get agitated. The implications of section Two were quite profound. We are “designed” through evolutionary advantage to treat change as a threat – or even in some cases a bereavement. Which means that we tend to avoid it, or, at least, to resist it when it is imposed on us. And because our first reaction tends to be emotional, there is little point overselling the logic in the early stages of taking a team through change – *that* part of their brain won’t be listening! So, we have to do something in addition. The rest of this chapter will look at a well-known model of change that includes this additional bit and how it can act as a blueprint for your own change plan.

The Managing Transitions model of William Bridges

The first major insight that Bridges alludes to is simply that all the material we have covered in section 2 affects how people typically react to change and therefore we have to do something with it. If we are going through change ourselves, there are things we can do to help ourselves, and if we are taking a team through change there are things we can do to make it more successful by acknowledging our basic biology and putting things in place to mitigate the impact. Secondly, Bridges distinguishes between a change and a transition; a change is the event itself (“we are all going to start hot-desking on the 1st May⁴⁶) whereas it is the *transition* – the psychological readiness to behave in accordance with the change – that determines whether it will work or not. It isn’t an optional extra – it’s the transition that makes the change actually happen.

Bridges’ model is deceptively simple. It is a three stage process:

⁴⁶ Now THAT gets chimps agitated. Think threats to status, territory. . .



1. *Letting go of the old.* This first stage is the acknowledgement that things are ending, that there has to be a period of letting go psychologically – perhaps even to an existing identity – and ultimately deal with loss.
2. *The in-between time,* when the old is gone but the new hasn't yet arrived fully. This is when the crucial psychological adjustment takes place.
3. *The new beginning.* This is when we create our new identity, get used to the new way of doing things and embed the new processes or thinking until it becomes the new normal.

The simple premise, therefore, is this. Change of any sort succeeds or fails on the basis of whether those affected by the change start *behaving* differently. And that is determined by the way you have dealt with the ending of the old – a transition starts with an ending.

Dealing with Endings

Before we can learn anything new, we usually have to unlearn the old way. It isn't changing to something new that people tend to resist – it is stopping what they used to do. Think back to the last section; the first stage of learning a new habit is letting go of the old one. This is why overselling the positives of the new – no matter how logical or beneficial they may be to the team or even the individuals themselves – doesn't really work. We certainly have to give some of the rationale and the case for change, but we should not go overboard with this. Instead, we have to deal directly with the ending first. This is not to say that we don't talk about the positives of the new – far from it – but the point is, that is not what is going to make people change their behaviour. It's just not how we are wired.

Here's how we do it according to Bridges.

- *Identify who is losing what.* In the planning stage, determine what exactly will change, who will be affected and in what way. What will be the (not immediately obvious) knock on effects? Ask yourself who is going to have to let go of something – physical things, status things, attitudes, comfort. . . if the change is already underway, it's not too late. Just ask people what they have had to give up or what they miss.
- *Accept the importance of the losses.* These losses are subjective but real to those going through them. Treat it – and them – seriously and with compassion. Remember that your view to them is irrelevant. You won't get commitment if you don't make the effort to understand.
- *Don't be surprised at overreaction.* It is their world that is changing and they may not feel they have a choice. Therefore, threat buttons are being pressed! You don't know what experiences people have had in the past or what previous small changes have led to in other parts of their lives. They may also assume it is leading to something bigger, and past experience may tell them so. This does not mean that we avoid the change – far from it – but it does mean that we have to be prepared for big emotions that seem, on the face of it, out of proportion. Remember the the bereavement cycle. Our brains do not distinguish well between levels of emotion.



- *Acknowledge the losses openly.* Bring them out into the open. Make it normal to talk about them. Admit that it may be painful for some people. We rarely make things worse by being honest about them. This doesn't mean we have to accept disruptive behaviour, and we may have to make it clear what is not acceptable, but we can at least acknowledge and understand the feelings driving the behaviour.
- *Try to help people find the "what's in it for them".* There may be things you can give back – after all, in your team's minds you may have taken things away, so this may help to get some sort of psychological balance. How can you give them more control, for example? What might it mean for future career choices, employability and skill development?
- *Communicate.* Then communicate more. Communicate the who, the what, the where, the when, the why and the how as far as you know these at this stage. Tell them what you don't know yet. Don't fall into the trap of telling yourself that you will only upset people, or they don't need to know just yet, or assume they already know. They may know something and will start making it up anyway, so better to be honest about what you do know, what you don't and when you are likely to know.
- *Define what is changing (or over) and what is staying the same.* This can help reduce psychological tension and stress levels. After all, if absolutely everything is changing, then that is a complete restructure with all posts redundant and new posts to apply for. That is rarely the case. If we don't make explicit what needs to change and what doesn't, then people will make their own decisions on this which may not fit in with the strategic plan.
- *Mark the ending.* Have an activity or ceremony. Help to draw a line in the sand. Remember that our brains understand the world through story and narrative, so how can you help people picture the ending symbolically?
- *Treat the old ways with respect.* If you start acting as if the old ways were bad and you are going to save them from themselves, then that is a fast-track to limbic system overloads!⁴⁷ Try to make any distinctions between the old way and the new way non-judgmentally. Helping your team decide what already goes well and needs to be kept can help here.
- *Finally, demonstrate how the endings they are having to go through ensures the continuity of what they care about* – their jobs, the department's success, reputation. A past idealised is just heuristics – cognitive biases or selective memory. They will already have had to make successful changes to get to the point they are at now. Remind them of this and how it can pave the way to future success.

Managing the Neutral Zone

Not dealing satisfactorily with Endings is a major reason why change projects often are less successful – or at least, take longer to embed – than you would like. Get that bit right and the rest becomes easier. The Neutral Zone, however, has its own challenges, not least the feeling of being trapped between a rock and a hard place. And remember that we are wired not to like ambiguity! Just to add to the difficulty, you may find yourself getting pressure from above, especially if you have spent some (worthwhile) time helping your team deal with the letting go. Forward motion seems to

⁴⁷ Try to avoid the messianic approach. "I am your Saviour, and everything you have been doing up until now has been rubbish" will not win followership and will merely lead to the digging in of heels.



have slowed down and old certainties are less certain and the new ones haven't been built yet. This will often be a period of anxiety and reduction in motivation and ultimately performance and productivity. There may be increases in absenteeism and teamwork can be undermined as people retreat into looking after Number One.

However, it's not all bad. This is also a period of high energy and creativity. There may be more new ideas and the freedom to just try things out and see what happens. Chaos breeds life, order breeds habit! The role of the change manager is therefore to capitalise on this confusion by fostering innovation and creativity, whilst keeping the ship afloat and your team in one piece.

Here's how to do it:

- *Make this period of uncertainty feel normal.* Help people to understand that the journey takes time, that it is a process and that this stage is an important and necessary part of that process. It is not a wasted period of waiting and it is important to give the message that it is normal to feel frustrated and "on edge" during this phase. Perhaps you could find a team-appropriate metaphor to illustrate this period; a river of transition, or the winter before the spring, or even the last voyage of the old ship before it sinks! And remember – in uncertain times, people tend to follow those who demonstrate confidence that everything will be just fine.
- *Create temporary systems* to give some semblance of structure to this ambiguous time. You may be able to protect your team from other changes at this point or at least reframe them into "it's all part of the bigger change". Do new policies reporting lines, roles and procedures need to be created, even if they are just temporary? Are there short-term and relatively easy goals that you can get your team to set? You may also need to manage expectations, within the team itself, with connected teams and with those above you.
- *Build strong relations with connected teams.* This may help reduce the feeling of being isolated or "all at sea" and may help to stop old patterns or habits repeating themselves. It may help to set up communication channels or even newsletters to keep people feel abreast of progress, foster a feeling of "we are all in this together" and reduce the potential for the rumour-mill.
- *Depending on the size and scope of the change, you could consider creating a Change Team* (Bridges calls this a Transition Monitoring Team, Kotter calls this a Guiding Coalition). This team should be representative of the team at large and should meet regularly to discuss progress, troubleshoot and facilitate the solving of problems (but not doing it themselves), ensure the communication upwards and outwards is up to scratch and report back to the group regularly. It should also have a very clear and explicit, not implicit, remit.
- *Finally, use this stage to really enhance the creative output of your team.* Capitalize on the breaks in the normal routine to encourage people to think differently. Use facilitation techniques (e.g. brainstorming, 6 Thinking Hats) to add rigour to this process. Model the process yourself to provide a steer that fresh, innovative thinking is not only OK but welcomed – and make sure there is no semblance of a blame culture. Creativity and innovation are the first casualties of a punitive, command and control-style culture. As much as you can, reframe mistakes, losses and setbacks as learning tools. Make sure you have



some budget for training in new techniques and above all, encourage experimentation (with review systems in place).

The New Beginning

If we have successfully navigated our way through the first two stages, this last stage is where we reap the rewards. This is the release of energy into a new direction, where the “stuff” happens and where there are physical signs that things have really moved on. Again, the Beginning is not necessarily the same as the official start date. Beginnings are when people do things differently. There is often a conflict of feelings here. The tension of the neutral Zone has gone and its demise has been eagerly anticipated, but the New Beginning part is also a scary time for many. So there is a curious mixture of relief and nervousness, of anticipation and resistance.

You will, of course, have outlined what the change is for. Section One covered this but you may have done a PESTLE analysis to determine the factors impacting on your team and worked out what the new direction of travel should be. It may have been given to you from above, but whatever the scenario, you will have communicated the headline of the changes and the aims. If we have done the first two stages properly, then people will be ready to hear the logic, rationale and purpose behind the changes in more detail. They may also be more willing to listen to the case for urgency (see the summary of Kotter’s work in section One).

Bridges identifies the Four Ps that we need to communicate here:

- The *Purpose* behind the change; what you are trying to achieve and why. Some of this will obviously have been communicated at the Endings stage but this is where we go into the detail. You may have to sell the problem before you can sell the solution and, of course, you will have done this at the Endings stage, but it certainly doesn’t hurt to reiterate it now. What is the problem we are trying to solve? Why has this come about? How does this fit into organisational strategy? What would happen if we did nothing? If you, as Manager of the Team, are unclear about the answers to these questions, how can you find out? Successful New Beginnings are based on a clear purpose.
- A *Picture* of what the outcome will look and feel like. Help them imagine it. Purposes are abstract – help your team to see it. What will people be doing? How will they interact with each other and with other teams? What will the office look like? How will work be organised? How will they feel? Use any visual techniques you can get hold of; floor plans, flow charts, organograms, maps. Can you arrange a visit to another team or even organisation that has successfully navigated something similar?
- A *Plan* for phasing the outcome. Help people know what they have to do and when. Some people will get all they need from the Picture, but many others will need more guidance and want to know what, when, where and how. They will need the plan of the Change, and the plan of the Transition. Remember that they are different. The transition plan is more people-oriented and starts with where the people are now; a Change plan starts with the outcome and works backwards.
- Give each person a *Part* to play in both the plan and the outcome. This gives people new insight into problems and reduces the “us and them” feeling. It taps into their existing



knowledge and problem-solving abilities and increases the feeling of ownership and accountability. Individuals will also feel an element of peer pressure and conformity – they won't want to let their team-mates down.

After all this has been done, your role is to continually reinforce. Be consistent in all your messages, make sure you behave like a role model by demonstrating the behaviours/following new procedures yourself and reward the new behaviours, punish (not punitively, obviously) the regression to the old. Try to build in quick wins and celebrate those successes. Change takes a long time and it is easy for the energy to slacken off. Rewarding small but constant successes keeps motivation and drive up and keeps people in touch with the ultimate plan. Change requires focusing our – and other's – attention in the new direction for long enough for it to rewire the brain and become a new habit. And finally, turn the dial up on your performance management and team-building skills. You may find the checklists (Appendices Nineteen and Twenty) useful.

Bridges' model of change helps us to deal with the messy, sometimes irrational way we typically react and provides a clear three-stage process for getting the most out of people during change. If you read the "Of Fish, Chimps and Elephants" chapter (13, section Four) then you will recognise the journey we have to take. Change is inevitable, and where there is change, there is Transition. Bridges puts this succinctly:

Change + Human Beings = Transition

Dealing with Resistance

Finally, what if, after all our efforts, certain individuals still seem to resist the changes we are trying to implement? One useful model of understanding why people (our teams and maybe our stakeholders) may be resistant to our change is to ask these three questions:

1. Is there a lack of awareness about what the change is about? Your team or stakeholders may not be as aware as you are of the bigger picture – the reasons behind the change or the drivers for its implementation.⁴⁸ What would happen if nothing changed? How might the change affect the individual's job or working practices? How should they behave in the new way? What will change and what will not? In other words, why is the change happening and what does it actually mean for the individuals concerned? Remember *Switch* from section Four; clarity dissolves resistance.
2. Is there an unwillingness to go along with the changes? Individuals may be aware of the changes but they either do not agree with them or just not do want to behave differently. How can you use the Laws of Persuasion already alluded to? Can you encourage small behavioural changes to start with? How can you tap into what really motivates them to get them to go along with the changes? Can you tweak the environment so that change is

⁴⁸ Think Nietzsche; He who understands the *why* can put up with almost any *how*. . .



inevitable anyway? How can you make the consequences clear for non-compliance? What *are* the consequences for non-compliance in your organisation?⁴⁹

3. Is there a fear about not being capable of working in the new way – or a fear of the unknown or not being able to cope? Is there a lack of confidence of skillsets or are there deeply ingrained behaviours that people don't think they can change? How can you encourage small steps and reward successes? How can you help identify existing skills and strengths that may just have to be applied in a slightly new way? What isn't actually changing at all? How can you shrink the change into manageable chunks to reduce stress levels? What training, coaching and mentoring can you provide?

Obviously, the only way of finding out what is causing the resistance is to ask. Calmly, kindly, supportively. Use your coaching skills. See what small steps can be encouraged. But above all, give them a good listening-to.

So, there it is. Managing ourselves (and our teams) through change. Please join me for other courses such as Building a High performing Team, Increasing Resilience and many others. Thanks for reading!



⁴⁹ This author is long enough in the tooth to know that in some organisations, it is a fast track to a P45; in others, people are left to go stagnant; in others, they and their behaviour are just ignored and everyone just hopes their toxicity won't leak. Note: Toxicity leaks. Every time. We need to help people to understand that it is necessary and why it is necessary. There is a great quote by Julian Cope in *Repossessed*; "The rejection of technology [for example] is only sound when it's done through understanding. Rejection through ignorance or belief in the natural superiority of the old ways seems to me to be as bad as drably accepting all modernism."

