



NAVIGATING White Water

The People Side of Change



About the Author

TJ Titcomb has been helping organizations manage change, develop leaders and prevent problems for more than forty years. She holds a master's degree in counseling psychology and a PhD in organizational development. Now mostly retired, Dr. Titcomb is sharing workbooks from presentations she has given at conferences.

Jumping into the Water



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Sometimes we fool ourselves by thinking that, once the news about an organizational change is out, things will get easier. The hard stuff comes after a major change is announced. What are your top three concerns about either delivering the news or dealing with the aftermath?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What did you learn the last time your organization experienced major changes? What can you use from that experience with this round of changes? What did you do right? What should have been handled differently? What was surprising?



The worse the news,
the more effort should go
into communicating it..

– Andy Grove, Intel

BE: Serve as a Leader

When a company is going through turbulent change, it needs something more than just competent managers, supervisors and employees. It needs **LEADERS**. One of the top experts on leadership, Warren Bennis, states most organizations are “**over-managed and under-led.**”

Leaders rarely influence team members with their words. Their **actions** have the most impact on employees. People watch what leaders do every day on the job. This is also a perception game – if employees don’t *feel* you are honest and trustworthy, it will be hard to convince them with facts and lectures. If they don’t see you as fair and sincere, more words may not help. If the group believes employees are being treated badly, your road is going to be rocky.

To prevent or at least reduce these reactions to you during turbulent change, build trust every day with your actions. Don’t just provide emotional support; jump in with tangible aid and resources. Really listen to people and let them know you hear their concerns. Accept reactions even if they’re not what you’d like. Invest time in learning about the practice of *servant leadership*.

Add your own ideas and commitments to the list of what you can do as a leader to help the team.



The Army has a simple yet practical model of leadership – **Be, Know, Do.** We’ll adapt that framework to discover ways you can lead turbulent change.

KNOW: Common Crisis Reactions

Don’t fall into the common trap of believing that, in today’s economy, employees will be grateful they still have a job. When there is a lot of uncertainty and change in the workplace, folks often show signs of the classic crisis reaction:

at first → IMPACT

shock ... disbelief ... denial ... emotionally numb ... hunker down ... try to be invisible ... immobilized ... difficulty making decisions and concentrating ...

then → RECOIL

irritability ... sleep and appetite changes ... lack of energy ... unpredictable roller coaster of emotions (sadness, anger, fear, guilt, blame, loneliness, apathy, grief, mistrust) ... some experience traumatic stress symptoms (heightened startle reaction, hypervigilance, alternating cycles of intrusion and denial) ... continual questions: *why?* and *what next?*

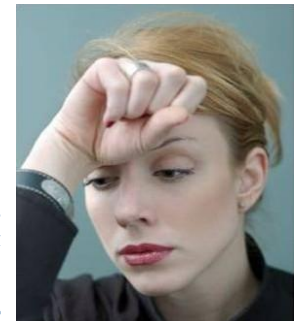
eventually → RESOLUTION

level of activity more balanced ... increased physical and emotional energy ... feelings diminish in intensity, frequency and duration ... increased sense of perspective and acceptance ... view of the world permanently changed

NORMALIZE → however this individual is reacting is normal for them

How long each stage lasts varies dramatically from person to person. The differences are based on personality, life experiences, coping skills, support system, other life crises ... That variance adds to the challenges. Be aware that some of your folks will be ready to move on while others are stuck in the shock stage.

After a crisis, 75% of people will have physical or emotional reactions. Most will work through it on their own with the support of family and friends. 10-15% will need additional help



KNOW: The Importance of Control

uncertainty + no control = HIGH STRESS

Not knowing what will happen next and feeling little or no control over situations is a prescription for high stress. Human beings like to feeling they have power over their own lives. What can we do to have a sense of control in situations where there is no control?

Do something – **ANYTHING !!!**

Each of us needs to develop an extensive smorgasbord of coping energizing strategies.

COPING DON'Ts

Be unrealistic
Numb symptoms meds/alc
Look for easy answers
Withdraw from others
Reduce leisure activities
Stay away from work
Pretend nothing is wrong

COPING DOs

Expect consequences
Get rest, good nutrition + exercise
Accept the healing process
Find supportive people
Take time for yourself
Connect with the world
Get help when you need it

Seek Balance → if who you are is what you do and where you work, you are especially vulnerable any changes on the job. Work is just a slice of the pie; it's not the whole pizza.

One of the basic human drives is a desire for power and control over one's life. Experiences with uncontrollable events lead to the **expectation** that future events will also be beyond one's control. The result is chronic stress.



DO: Over-Communicate

Survivors of major organizational upheavals have told researchers the one thing that would have made handling the change easier was more communication, especially direct messages from executive management. People cope better when armed with information. They crave both the little details and the big picture. If you don't provide info, employees will create it and distribute it through the rumor mill.

- * What obstacles exist to frequent, open communication with employees at every level in your organization?

Because managers have had more time to adjust to the news through the planning process, you're usually more able to focus on the business needs for the decisions. To employees, it's all about the impact on **people**.

The biggest issues are very personal. Each individual employee struggles with *Is my job at risk? What will happen to me? How will this affect what I do here? What will I have to do to protect my position? How can I stay motivated and focused? What will be expected of me? What's in it for me?*

Two-way communication is essential during any major organizational change. And ... that means talking with and listening to ALL employees on ALL shifts in ALL locations. Team members need to have safe avenues to express their concerns and get their questions answered. **Listening** to employees is perhaps the most critical communication task for managers.



* Obstacles are not brick walls; they are railed fences in the pasture. Choose specific actions to get over, under, around, or through them.

DO: Tell the Truth

Organizations show their real values when they communicate bad news. Motivation, service and productivity can't happen if employees don't trust the company. They need to believe they have been – and will be – told the truth.

Never say never. Since uncertainty is the hardest of all feelings to cope with, many employees just want to know that "it's over." Resist the temptation to give easy reassurances or say what you think they want to hear. It's a quick fix in the short term that has serious after-effects. Trust is impossible if employees are not consistently told the truth. And sometimes the truth is "we don't know what might happen next."

Telling the truth also means spending a good chunk of time discussing the reasons behind the change. The WHYs help employees understand that leadership is not just taking action blindly in a frantic effort to survive.

Don't lie, sugarcoat,
minimize, or make promises
you may not be able to keep.

After a series of acquisitions, the CEO embarked on a communications tour of the new companies. To ease staff tension he reassured them, "Don't worry. Nothing will change." Months later the employees told the new HR rep, "That guy from Pennsylvania came here and said nothing would change. **EVERYTHING CHANGED!!!!**" It took a long time to build trust with that group.



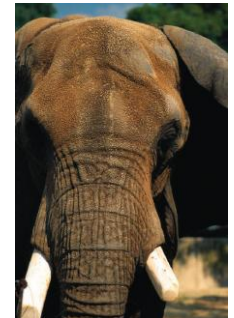
DO: Have Realistic Expectations

Don't be surprised by lowered productivity, increased irritability, lowered concentration, more mistakes. It will take time – more than you anticipate – to move from feelings of distress and loss to previous levels of customer service and productivity.

Changes are often made as cost-savings measures with layoffs as part of the package. Being realistic means adjusting productivity expectations. It will be difficult if not impossible to do the same volume and quality of work with fewer people. Don't burn out your remaining team members with impossible demands. Rather than wanting or waiting for things to return to "normal" – recognize that this is the *new normal*.

Managers need to prioritize tasks and customers and assess how things are done. Use that framework in helping employees choose what, when and how to do their work.

How do you deal with the elephant in the room? How might a manager handle the pervasive but usually unspoken thought, "Why work hard when I'll probably be the next to go?" Employees may be reassured by more contact with their manager and by clearer expectations. They especially need to know what they are doing right so they can keep doing it. Every employee needs to feel sincerely valued and appreciated. They also need genuine opportunities to feel successful as soon as possible.



There are no magic wands to make this transition easy and there is no one right answer on how to handle the changes. You have to get through a period of rebuilding before you can count on past motivators to work again with your employees. Getting there is not a smooth, steady road but rather a series of lightning bolts – the classic few steps forward and a few steps back.

DO: Offer Support and Assistance

Reach out to team members. Respond empathetically – work to understand what they're thinking and feeling. **Listen.** Be open to offering ideas, options, suggestions – but only when someone asks for them.

Encourage staff to take of themselves and be helpful to each other. Allow them to set limits on their "giving" according to their own resources.

Don't use your awareness of common crisis reactions to put people into little boxes. Respect individual differences. Don't pressure anyone to use your coping strategies; help each person find their own answers. Remind yourself that whatever that person is doing that works for them is exactly what they should be doing.

Going into a major change, identify your key indicator employees – the ones who will give you a quick, honest snapshot of how the group is doing. Monitor their reactions and seek their perspectives. Also, don't dismiss your chronic complainers. They may be the canaries in the coal mine, warning you of serious problems in the team.

Watch for severe stress reactions. Look for warning signs that someone needs extra help:

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ increased isolation | ☐ extreme denial |
| ☐ withdrawal from others | ☐ super-human facade |
| ☐ unending complaints | ☐ unhealthy anger |
| ☐ increased absenteeism | (excessive anger directed inappropriately at other workers, managers, the company, self) |



To make sure help is readily available, work closely with your EAP throughout the change journey.

DO: Take Care of Yourself

Many organizations forget that managers and supervisors are also employees and not immune to stress symptoms. Take care of yourself so that you can take care of others. If you get stuck in own reactions, you won't notice when others are struggling as well and you won't be able to respond.

What are your favorite **coping** strategies?



Stay vigilant and rely on the time-tested basics:

- ✓ Get 7-8 hours of **sleep** each night
- ✓ **Exercise** – a walk outdoors is ideal
- ✓ Eat **healthy**, wholesome foods
- ✓ Replace coffee and soda with **water**
- ✓ Experience your feelings and be honest in expressing them **but also**
- ✓ Don't fall into the complaining trap
- ✓ Get **support** from family and friends
- ✓ Seek out your **Stress Buddy** – the person who laughs at the same things you do
- ✓ Remember what's **most important** in your life and make time for those priorities

While you can be a positive force in your work group, you also need to let yourself be **human**. If you put on an artificially cheery façade for employees, most will sense your insincerity. You may also be driving their reaction underground. Employees who see managers denying any impact may interpret that it's not okay to show any concern or worry.

KNOW: High Hopes People

Psychologist C.R. Snyder studied resilient people who retained a sense of hope during extremely difficult times. He wrote about what we can learn from these “High Hopes People” in his book, *The Psychology of Hope*. Being a High Hopes Person doesn't mean that you no longer have difficult and painful periods in life. It means taking specific actions and nurturing hopeful attitudes to remain resilient while experiencing high stress. This is what he found that HHP consistently do:

↑ SUPPORT SYSTEM

HHP have a strong social network of friends and family they call on during good times and bad – they help others and are comfortable asking for and accepting help in return

↑ LAUGHTER

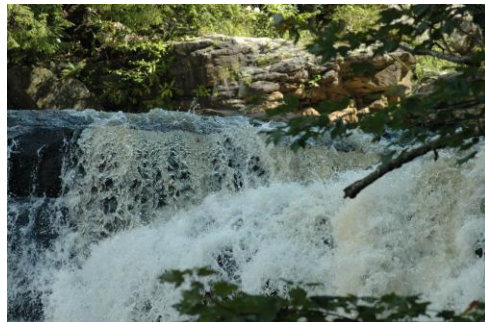
HHP are able to laugh at things happening around them and, more importantly, can laugh at themselves – s/he who laughs, lasts – they use healthy *laughing with* v. toxic *laughing at*

↑ PRAYER

religious HHP use prayer as a means to increase mental energy or willpower – it also helps provide a larger perspective and focus

↑ HEALTH

rest, regular exercise, healthy eating habits and a limit on energy drains such as cigarettes and alcohol are common in HHP



Resources to Learn More

- 📖 Autry, *The Servant Leader*
- 📖 Burley-Allen, *Listening: The Forgotten Skill*
- 📖 Fullan, *The 6 Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do*
- 📖 Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant Leadership*
- 📖 Hiatt & Creasey, *Change Management: The People Side of Change*
- 📖 Kotter, *Leading Change*
- 📖 Kotter & Cohen, *The Heart of Change*
Cohen, *The Heart of Change Field Guide*
- 📖 Seligman, *Learned Optimism*
- 🌐 UC Irvine, *Change Management Tools*
- 🌐 apa.org/topics/stress
resources from the American Psychological Association
- 📺 Jim Hemerling, *5 Ways to lead in an era of constant change*
- 📺 John Kotter, *Change Management vs. Change Leadership: What's the Difference?*
- Mind Tools, *Lewin's Change Management Model*
- Simon Sinek, *The Truth about CHANGE*

The central issue is never strategy, structure, culture or systems.

The core of the matter is always about changing the behavior of people.

- John Kotter

