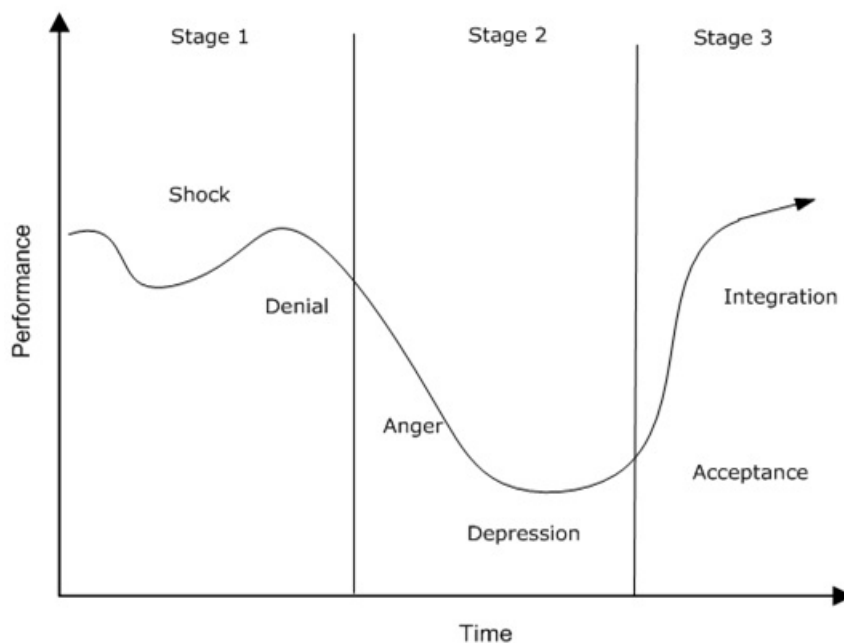


The Change Curve

The Change Curve is based on a model originally developed in the 1960s by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross to explain the grieving process. Since then it has been widely utilised as a method of helping people understand their reactions to significant change or upheaval.

Kubler-Ross proposed that a terminally ill patient would progress through five stages of grief when informed of their illness. She further proposed that this model could be applied to any dramatic life changing situation and, by the 1980s, the Change Curve was a firm fixture in change management circles. The curve, and its associated emotions, can be used to predict how performance is likely to be affected by the announcement and subsequent implementation of a significant change.

The Change Curve



The original five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – have adapted over the years. There are numerous versions of the curve in existence. However, the majority of them are consistent in their use of the following basic emotions, which are often grouped into three distinct transitional stages.

Stage 1 – Shock and denial

The first reaction to change is usually shock. This initial shock, while frequently short lived, can result in a temporary slow down and loss of productivity. Performance tends to dip sharply, individuals who are normally clear and decisive seek more guidance and reassurance, and agreed deadlines can be missed. The shock is often due to:

- lack of information
- fear of the unknown
- fear of looking stupid or doing something wrong

After the initial shock has passed, it is common for individuals to experience denial. At this point focus tends to remain in the past. There's likely to be a feeling that as everything was OK as it was, why does there need to be a change?

Common feelings include:

- being comfortable with the status quo
- feeling threatened
- fear of failure

Individuals who have not previously experienced major change can be particularly affected by this first stage. It is common for people to convince themselves that the change isn't actually going to happen, or if it does, that it won't affect them. Performance often returns to the levels seen before the dip experienced during the initial shock of the change. People carry on as they always have and may deny having received communication about the changes, and may well make excuses to avoid taking part in forward planning.

At this stage, communication is key. Reiterating what the actual change is, the effects it may have, and providing as much reassurance as possible, will all help to support individuals experiencing these feelings.

Stage 2 – Anger and depression

After the feelings of shock and denial, anger is often the next stage. A scapegoat, in the shape of an organisation, group or individual, is commonly found. Focussing the blame on someone or something allows a continuation of the denial by providing another focus for the fears and anxieties the potential impact is causing. Common feelings include:

- suspicion
- scepticism
- frustration

The lowest point of the curve comes when the anger begins to wear off and the realisation that the change is genuine hits. It is common for morale to be low, and for self-doubt and anxiety levels to peak. Feelings during this stage can be hard to express, and depression is possible as the impact of what has been lost is acknowledged. This period can be associated with:

- apathy
- isolation
- remoteness

At this point performance is at its lowest. There is a tendency to fixate on small issues or problems, often to the detriment of day to day tasks. Individuals may continue to perform tasks in the same way as before, even if this is no longer appropriate behaviour.

People will be reassured by the knowledge that others are experiencing the same feelings. Providing managers, teams and individuals with information about the Change Curve underlines that the emotions are usual and shared, and this can help to develop a more stable platform from which to move into the final stage.

Stage 3 – Acceptance and integration

After the darker emotions of the second stage, a more optimistic and enthusiastic mood begins to emerge. Individuals accept that change is inevitable, and begin to work with the changes rather than against them. Now come thoughts of:

- exciting new opportunities
- relief that the change has been survived
- impatience for the change to be complete

The final steps involve integration. The focus is firmly on the future and there is a sense that real progress can now be made. By the time everyone reaches this stage, the changed situation has firmly replaced the original and becomes the new reality. The primary feelings now include:

- acceptance
- hope
- trust

During the early part of this stage, energy and productivity remain low, but slowly begin to show signs of recovery. Everyone will have lots of questions and be curious about possibilities and opportunities. Normal topics of conversation resume, and a wry humour is often used when referring to behaviour earlier in the process.

Individuals will respond well to being given specific tasks or responsibilities, however communication remains key. Regular progress reports and praise help to cement the more buoyant mood. It is not uncommon for there to be a return to an earlier stage if the level of support suddenly drops.

Individual reactions

Each person reacts individually to change, and not all will experience every phase. Some people may spend a lot of time in stages 1 and 2, whilst others who are more accustomed to change may move fairly swiftly into stage 3.

Although it is generally acknowledged that moving from stage 1 through stage 2 and finally to stage 3 is most common, there is no right or wrong sequence. Several people going through the same change at the same time are likely to travel at their own speed, and will reach each stage at different times.

Summary

The Change Curve is a very useful tool when managing individual or team change. Knowing where an individual is on the curve will help when deciding on how and when to communicate information, what level of support someone requires, and when best to implement final changes. Furnishing individuals with the knowledge that others understand and experience similar emotions is the best way to return, with as little pain as possible, to optimal performance.

Related Items

Related Resources

- The Tortoise and the Hare - Diffusion of Innovations
- Impact Plus: Managing Hostility and Resistance
- How to Adapt to Change Positively