



## New directions

*Overcome the obstacles to positive change*

**T**hree months ago, I walked into a company prepared to facilitate a training session. As I was setting up the room, one manager after another walked in and said, “Can we talk for a few minutes?”

After a series of candid conversations, I was compelled to approach the V.P. I explained what had just happened and asked if he would allow me to facilitate an open discussion with his management team in lieu of the training. The V.P., a man of vision who trusts his team, said, “Absolutely.”

I spent the morning with his 45-member management team who shared their concerns: the company’s business model was obsolete; marketing expertise was needed on a regional basis, not centralized at headquarters; turnover of new hires had increased; and tenured people were struggling with the new systems.

The prevalent perception is that corporate change begins at the top level of an organization. In this case, change began as a grassroots initiative driven by the team closest to the challenges and opportunities.

No matter the driving force, change presents challenges. The goal may be clear, but the terrain is new and unexplored. If you find yourself initiating change, leading change or being asked to participate in a change initiative, the following roadmap, complete with critical indicators and potential pitfalls, can help you guide your way through.

### Phase 1: Denial

People act as if nothing is happening. They remain unresponsive to information about the change effort. Their unspo-

ken intent is to preserve their comfort zone by ignoring signs that the status quo is about to end.

On the surface, people appear calm and rational. They hope that the discomfort will pass and their lives can carry on as usual. If you ask someone in denial how he or she feels, you might hear,

“No matter the driving force, change presents challenges. The goal may be clear, but the terrain is new and unexplored.”

“Things are fine. I’ll do whatever’s needed,” but their behavior will often contradict their words.

#### People in denial:

- » Avoid the topic of the change as much as possible.
- » Act as if nothing is happening.

- » Blame outside forces/others for difficulties.

### Phase 2: Resistance

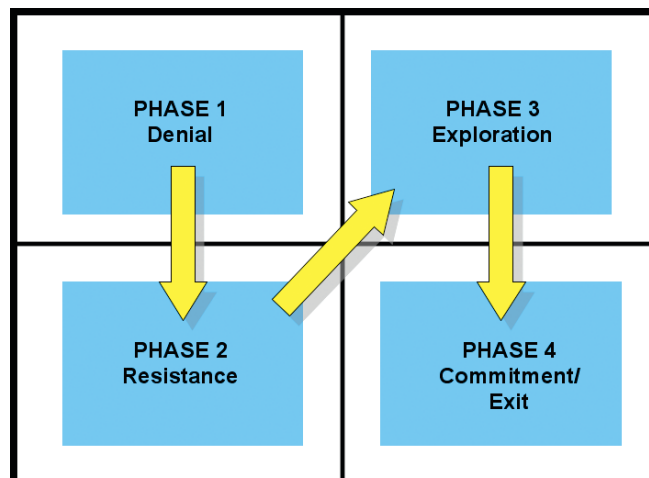
Resistance begins once people have

transitioned through denial and become conscious of the change and what it means to them personally. This is the point at which they begin to understand how upset they really are.

Resistance is also a sign that profound loss is happening. During a time of change, people may feel a loss of status, power, security, influence, relationships or meaningful work. People cannot talk themselves out of their feelings, nor can others, as much as you might like to. Feelings of resistance are real and must be responded to with understanding.

#### People in resistance say things like:

- » “I preferred things the way they were.”
- » “I think this change is bad for the organization.”



» “We’ve tried that before, and it didn’t work.”

## Phase 3: Exploration

People shift into Exploration when they accept that change is necessary, even though they may not welcome it. Their focus shifts from trying to protect the past, to considering possibilities. They are more willing to “make the best of it,” which includes learning new skills and working with potentially new colleagues. They are now able and willing to interrupt a negative mindset – often consciously – and refocus with positive intention on the desired outcomes.

### People in Exploration:

- » Have begun to envision a new future.
- » Seek new ways of doing and thinking.
- » Take risks and try new things.

## Phase 4: Commitment

Commitment is reached when people make the conscious choice to accept the change and adopt the new way of doing business. Productivity begins to return, although maybe not yet to the same degree as it was before – but just wait! That which was at first thought to be “Impossible!” begins to feel like a viable new reality.

### People who are committed to change:

- » Feel comfortable and in control of the new environment.
- » Assume accountability for their results.
- » Know what is expected of them and are on plan.

Leading change is complex. There are many unknowns. Each person is unique, each situation different, each opportunity somewhat unpredictable. A team member who championed a new software implementation just three months ago, may dig in his heels when a procedural change is announced. It’s difficult to predict how change will be received by the various members of an organization or how long it will take for them to “buy in.”

If you are leading a change initiative, be flexible. Stay close to your organization. Assess what’s working and what’s not. Explore your portfolio of strategies and have courage to make adjustments as needed. There is no one right strategy. There are a variety of possibilities and the unique circumstances of the moment may require that re-adjust the plan. ■

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