# Top Tips

Change Management

Continual change

You may have seen many times the statement that the only constant in business today is change. In the past, a period of stability was followed by a change, which had time to settle down during the next period of stability. Now however there is little time to settle before the next change happens, and very little time to adjust to a new way of working before it changes again. This continual process of change makes it all the more important to manage change effectively, both personally, for the team, and for the business.

Some of the problems during change include:

- Uncertainty breeds discontent; team members may even leave for what they believe to be a more settled environment.
- Personal stress levels rise; some people cope better than others.
- Reliable information is scarce and rumours are common; people may not know who they can trust to give an accurate picture of what will happen.
- Work output and productivity drops, which shows up in KPIs & sales figures.
- In order to manage these, the key is to have reliable information, and this includes knowing how and why an individual reacts to change.

The Change Curve

The process an individual or team goes through may be shown as a diagram:
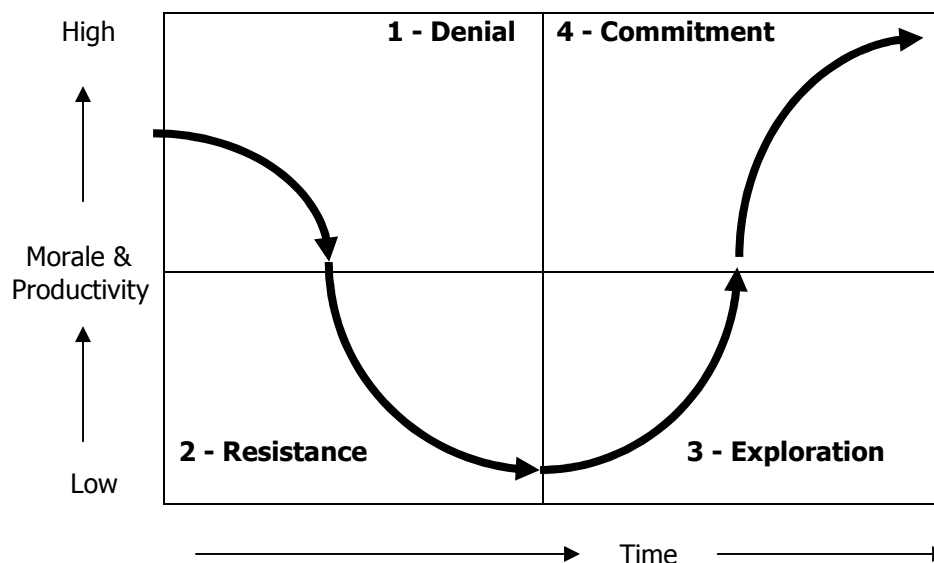
Managing progress through the Change Curve

Usually people will go through the four phases in the order shown, although at varying speeds. In order to make the change effectively, they must reach and go through the last stage, having successfully moved through all the others. They may on occasion get stuck in a particular phase and need helping out, possibly by counselling; again the key is to recognise the stage an individual has reached. Note that although there is a dip in output, the end result is a higher level than before the change.

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Denial

In the first box, the individual is in the **Denial** phase. Typically, they may:

- Avoid discussing the topic if possible, appearing unconcerned
- Wait and see, avoid taking initiative, act as if nothing is happening
- Do routine work only, avoiding stepping outside their own job role
- Focus on small details and disregard the 'big picture'
- Blame other people, the company, the state of the economy
- Question the method or data used to make a decision

Consequences of this include:

- Delaying the inevitable, lost opportunities to adapt early
- Poor or no planning, hindering the changes needed

Resistance

In the second box, the individual is in **Resistance**. Typically, they may:

- ❖ Be angry at, and complain to others about the company
- ❖ Disagree and refuse to comply with decisions made
- ❖ Feel overwhelmed, unfairly treated, and powerless to affect matters
- ❖ Become quiet, passive, and careless of the future

In addition to the behaviour of its individuals, a team may:

- ❖ Have little energy, and wait for direction and specific instructions
- ❖ Not take the initiative, such as starting projects or new work
- ❖ Argue over new ideas, and criticise those who are positive
- ❖ Predict doom for the company, giving examples of past failures

Consequences of this include:

- ❖ The system is challenged and the change process slowed
- ❖ Outcomes of the change are influenced
- ❖ Accountability is temporarily avoided

However, it will also:

- ❖ Provide time to seek order and stability
- ❖ Give an opportunity to vent feelings and emotions
- ❖ Create visibility for concerns, leading to addressing them

Exploration

In the third box, the individual is in **Exploration** and the focus becomes more positive and forward looking. Typically, they may:

- ➢ Look for new ways of thinking and working, and take more risks
- ➢ Have the energy and the desire to learn and solve problems
- ➢ Create a vision of the future, involving generating lots of new ideas

Consequences of this include people being:

- ➢ Ready to adapt, learn and plan for the future
- ➢ Prepared to consider and agree to help the change and each other
- ➢ Able to work well together but have trouble staying focussed

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Commitment

In the fourth box, the individual is in **Commitment**. Typically, they may:

- ✓ Feel confident and in control of their own work and life
- ✓ Feel they have 'come through it' and are consequently less stressed
- ✓ Work efficiently and effectively, and in a focussed manner
- ✓ Feel they know what to do, can do it, and agree this within the team

Consequences of this include:

- ✓ High performance
- ✓ Achievement of results
- ✓ Focus on continued improvement
- ✓ Improved readiness for subsequent changes

Change and the individual

In order to make the change people will need both the skill and the will. The skill is about their capability to change, the will is about their motivation to change. There are two essentials needed to support their successful movement through the curve:

Appropriate support, particularly where an adjustment to their role and responsibilities is concerned. Although counselling is one option, there may be other alternatives that would help the whole team, such as a team building activity or event. They may just need time to get used to the idea, or training may be necessary if the person's role has changed greatly. This will mainly support the skills needed to change.

Sufficient information on the change and their role within it. This means the right amount of information at the right time, which again might vary from one person to another. Some will want the big picture overview first, others will want to know their role first, and will not be concerned about the remainder until they are more settled. This will primarily support the will to change.

Given the support and information, people will be better able to:
- Control their responses and attitudes towards the change.
- Influence the process by communicating and making positive suggestions.
- Gather further information and use this to plan the next steps.
- Take physical and mental care of themselves and deal with the symptoms of stress that may arise.

The manager's role

Consider also the method of communication – will you use the notice board? A team briefing? Individual discussions? The best choice for one change will not necessarily be best for all circumstances; the important thing is to avoid giving the grapevine a chance to flourish, which usually happens when there is little genuine information. Another method is to be a role model, and embody the changes needed yourself – lead by example. It may also help to emphasise the things that won't change, and can provide stability.

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An alternative view

The change curve has also been presented as a seven-step curve, as shown below:
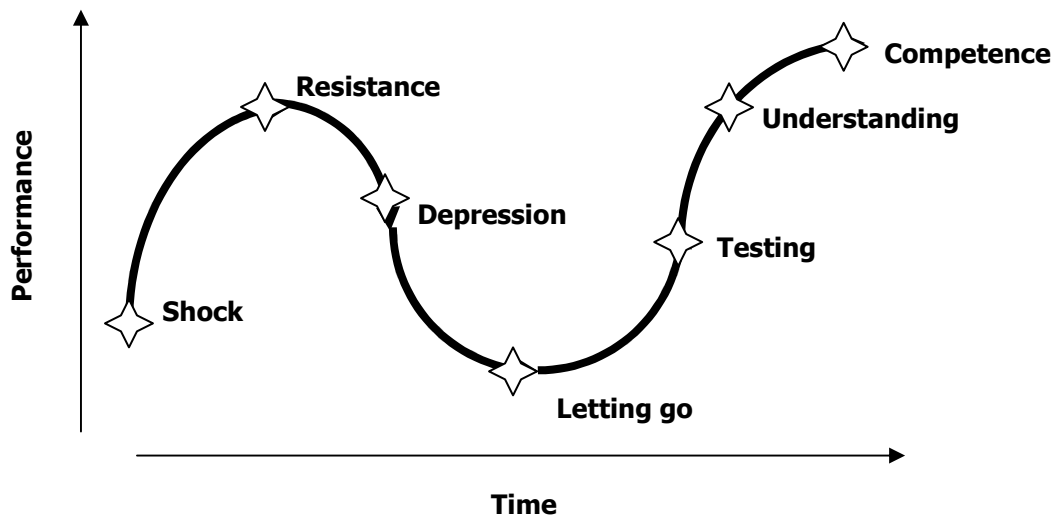
Again, although there is a dip in output, the end result is a higher level of performance than before the change. The stages are similar to those above with three additions. Briefly they are:

Shock

People may feel overwhelmed or immobilised by the change and unable to act, make plans, or think about it.

Resistance

Here people resist and deny the change; performance may rise as they attempt to show that the change is unnecessary.

Depression

Here people will feel despondent and will need a lot of support and reassurance.

Letting go

Where people give up their attachment to the past and start to accept that the change will happen.

Testing

The stage when people start testing the parameters of the situation, learning new skills, and exploring possibilities. They will need coaching, feedback, and encouragement. Similar to the Exploration phase.

Understanding

People come to terms with the change and can rationalise it in their own minds.

Competence

Where people have recovered from the shock, incorporate the change into their everyday lives, and after a while may forget that things were ever different.

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The two diagrams, although different, contain many similarities and should not be seen as contradictory, merely as different ways of expressing the same ideas and feelings. Much of the detail of the four-step curve will apply also to the seven-step curve.

For related topics see Top Tips:
➔ **Leadership**
➔ **Project Management**
➔ **Succession Planning**