

UNDERSTANDING THE HURDLES OF CHANGE

Anticipating the future, managing the grey areas that inevitably accompany a shifting landscape, decision-making; navigating a changing world is a challenge that we all face. Offering the unique perspective of an executive coach, **Anna Gallotti** provides an insider look at the nature of change.

In life, change is inherent. It is one of the most important indicators of the fact that we are alive. Because of our body's metabolism, its growth and its ageing, our cells and every part of our body change every day. So since change is an integral part of our lives, why do we find it so difficult to adapt to it?

FOUR REASONS AT THE ROOT OF THE CHALLENGE

To begin with, our brain uses up to 20% of our body's oxygen and glucose. It is the main cause of how we consume energy. To preserve vitality, our brain therefore develops habits that use energy sparingly. We don't spend time every morning thinking about why or how we brush our teeth, since tooth brushing is an activity that we perform automatically. However, when we face change, we have to act counter to our habits, which results in expending more energy. Paradoxically, even though we change every day, our body is programmed to save our psychic energy.



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Secondly, humans have learned to adapt to change since they are the driving force behind the process of change. The difficult part today is adapting to change's fast pace. Change within enterprises, such as reorganisations, different procedures, new tools, etc. occur at an ever faster pace. The problem is the speed of change, rather than change itself.

Each one of us operates at two different paces: the pace of the mind and the pace of the heart. The first concerns our grasp of change and it is usually fast. The heart however has a slower rhythm. It needs time to come to terms with change. Think

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of simple events such as a change of address: how often do we take the old route, at least at first, without even thinking about it? It's our heart that resists change and is still grieving over our old address. As long as we fight against these two different paces, instead of going along with change, we are wasting our energy.

The third factor is the lack of sense, i.e. meaning, as well as a sense of direction. By lack of meaning, I am focusing on asking ourselves questions such as ‘what does the future have in store for me, for my team, for my company?’ ‘Will it be something positive for me, my team, and my company?’ Lacking a sense of direction means asking ourselves: ‘Where am I heading?’ ‘Where is my department heading?’ ‘What is our purpose?’ Often changes follow one another so rapidly that it is difficult to make sense of them.

Finally, there are other factors behind resistance to change that are linked to individual characteristics. Every individual has a different way of adapting to change, according to his/her life history, his/her experience and mental structure. In view of this, what can we do to adapt to change, knowing that it is inevitable and we can only partially or inadequately control its pace?

ON AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

In my work as coach I have noticed that managers, when dealing with change, often neglect the most important factor: recharging their batteries. Just as athletes prepare for their athletic competition by paying equal attention to exercise, rest, a healthy diet and psychological well-being, so should the manager heed their mental and physical balance

to cope with the psychological and physical energy that change demands.

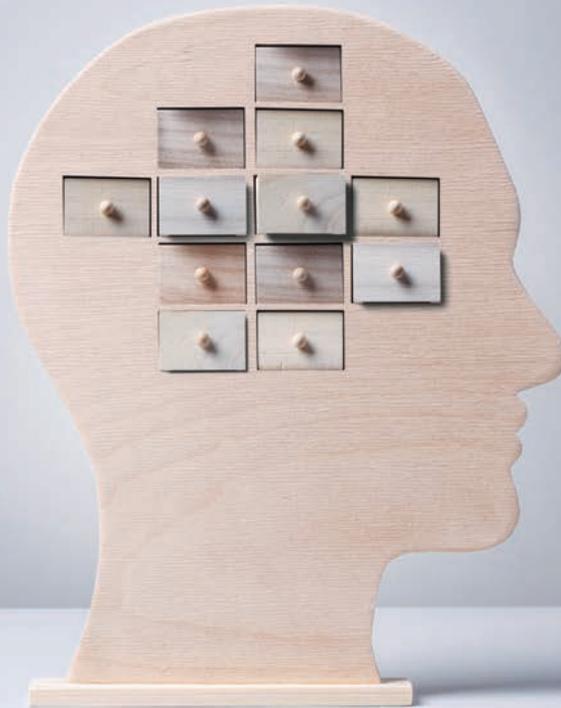
Regular rest periods (away from electronic devices), a good mental attitude, some personal activity completely unrelated to work, regular physical exercise and a healthy diet are the main factors that will help managers cope with the rapid pace of change.

Another factor that helps us adapt to change is the capacity to step back. I am referring the PRP process described by Tal Ben Shahaar in his book *The Pursuit of Perfect*, reproduced below.

➤ *Permission: when we can't step back, it means that we are overwhelmed by our emotions on a psychic level. The first step is therefore granting ourselves the benefit of emotions. Our education sometimes does not teach us to recognise emotions; that is why we feel that we do not harbour emotions or else that we have been forbidden to express them. However, it has been proven that the more we accept our emotions, the better we'll be able to cope with them. In order to accomplish this, we must learn to recognize our emotional state, which means identifying and naming what we feel and subsequently assessing its intensity on a 1 (low) to 10 (very high) scale. This exercise may seem difficult at first, but, like most exercises, it becomes easier over time.*

➤ *Once we have accepted our emotions, we can move on to the next stage, i.e. a “cognitive Restructuring”. Instead of considering change a trying, useless, incomprehensible event, we can restructure our interpretation of change. Thus we can see change as a challenge leading to development rather than a threat. We can, for instance, focus on certain issues, such as: what lies within the realm of my responsibility and what doesn't? What can I accomplish with the time and means I have? What is my role and my added value in this situation?*

➤ *Perspective: dealing with a situation in a longer time perspective. Often, if we place ourselves in a three-to-five year time span, we manage to look at the present from a different angle. One/three years from now, what will stand out as truly important from what I have done today?*



ON A COLLECTIVE LEVEL

It is a question of starting a dialogue to discuss what happens to each person in relation to change and to find a collective solution to make the best use of it. Managers often shun this solution for fear of opening a Pandora's Box and having to "suffer" their colleagues' negative emotions without being able to deal with them. I have noticed that this twofold fear on the part of managers stems from two misunderstandings.

First, they mistake listening for negotiation. Listening does not mean starting a negotiation; it simply means sharing opinions to speed up the emotional assimilation of change. The contract drawn up with the team should be clear: we are here to share, not to review, the terms of change.

Furthermore, managers mistake the pace of the heart with the pace of the mind. If their colleagues have a slow heart pace, it doesn't necessarily mean that they won't implement change. Co-workers have to be allowed to express their worries to overcome them.

In fact, it has been proven that the more managers listen and share, the quicker and more efficient will be the implementation of change. It is wrong to think that co-workers will be demotivated by change itself. Yet, they certainly will be if their manager imposes upon them a change that doesn't make sense to them.

Instead of focusing solely on the final objective – i.e. the rapid implementation of change demanded by the company – today's managers should take time to heed their own emotional state, as well as the state of their teams. "Slowing down to go faster" is healthier from a lifestyle perspective, key to being efficient and effective in turbulent periods, and enables managers to interpret change as an opportunity rather than "another obstacle that has to be overcome". ●

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