

Why change is so hard — and what leaders can do about it

By Gary Bradt

Imagine that right before you drove home from work, someone told you that all the old traffic laws had changed forever: red no longer meant stop and green no longer meant go. In fact, all of the signs that used to guide you were no longer valid. The old laws were gone but the new laws were yet to be written. How would you feel and what would you think as you set out for home?

Often, change happens just like that. It's sudden, quick and disrupts our equilibrium. Whether it's the unforeseen sale of a company, the sudden loss of a job, or the unexpected loss of a loved one, the world you once knew is gone, and it's difficult to know what to do next. It's frightening, because one way we survive is by being able to predict our environment and acting accordingly. When predictability disappears, so does our sense of safety. In this way change can trigger our most basic survival instincts, and even when physical survival is not an issue, it can *feel* as if it is whenever things change. This is why change is so difficult. Our known existence, whether we liked it or not, is replaced by an unknown one, and we become fearful and disoriented, not knowing where to turn next to find the comfort and safety we seek.

Leaders respond quickly and boldly to this circumstance by taking steps to reestablish a sense of balance for themselves, and their followers. Below are four tips to help you lead yourself and others through difficult and perhaps sudden or unforeseen change.

1. Whatever you feel, it's okay.

Change may stir up a host of emotions, including sadness, fear, and anger. There are no rules on what anyone should feel, but everyone should feel something. If not, then emotions may be lurking beneath the surface of one's awareness, and make their presence known at the worst possible moment, perhaps emerging as an unintended sharp word or fit of impatience. Remember this: Emotions in and of themselves are neither good nor bad; it's what we do as a result of what we feel that determines the outcomes we get. Acknowledging feelings makes them easier to control. Therefore leaders acknowledge their own feelings when things change, and validate the feelings of others. *You shouldn't feel that way* is not part of an effective leader's lexicon.

2. Mourn first, then move on.

In a similar vein, it's important to mourn and move on when unwanted change hits, and in that order. Almost every unwanted change brings with it a sense of loss and a wistful desire to return to the way things were. In an attempt to move on, it's tempting to make the mistake of encouraging people to embrace the new without giving them time to let go of the old. Sometimes we have to go slow at first to go fast later on. Change leaders create environments where people can process their thoughts and feelings about what they are giving up and what they will miss, before they have followers focus exclusively on what they

will gain. For example, I have known business groups to hold mock funerals when an old division or department is being shut down. Everyone on the team writes his or her good-byes to the past on a large sheet of paper that is then buried, burned or otherwise disposed of. A bit hokey, perhaps, but it gets at an important point: Leaders do whatever they can to help people let go of the old before they ask them to latch on to the new.

3. Demand perfect effort, not perfect results.

Often, change comes in bursts, as one change begets another. This can feel overwhelming, especially to those who weren't involved in planning the change or otherwise didn't see it coming. To them, change can feel particularly risky or threatening. To help reduce anxiety, leaders should demand maximum effort in response to the change, but not perfect results. Not all of your change initiatives will turn out exactly as planned. Leaders acknowledge this, and encourage followers to learn and adjust as they go. This recalls the story of a young man who worked for his father. After making a mistake that cost the company nearly \$50,000, the young man was called into his father's office, believing he was about to be fired. "Why would I fire you?" his father said. "I just invested \$50,000 in your education!"

4. Break long-term change down into doable chunks.

One organization I encountered had this operational philosophy toward change: "*We're born on Monday, we die on Friday, and we're reborn on Monday.*" It worked like this: Every Monday each work group would get together and decide on the two or three big ideas they would concentrate on that week, whether it was customer service, operations improvements, or whatever else tied into their longer term strategic change plan. On Friday they debriefed what they learned during the week from their focused efforts, and on Monday they started the process all over again. In this way they took longer-term



change and broke it down into short-term, doable increments. Keep your daily operational focus on immediate steps, lest followers become immobile in the face of seemingly unattainable longer-term change goals and objectives.

A Final Word

Sudden and overwhelming change can trigger fundamental survival instincts. Effective leaders recognize this and move quickly to help followers regain a sense of balance and equilibrium. •

About the Author

Dr. Gary Bradt is a keynote speaker, leadership consultant and the author of **The Ring in the Rubble: Dig through Change and Find Your Next Golden Opportunity** (McGraw-Hill, 2007). Go to www.GaryBradt.com for more information.



Operator training is the mandate of the Manitoba Water & Wastewater Association. In support of Manitoba municipalities and other groups involved in this field, it is our desire to aid you as responsible caretakers of the environment in providing clean, safe drinking water to all Manitobans.

As the voice of water professionals across the province, we are currently assisting with the development of post-secondary water and wastewater training for Operators, as this type of training is now being widely offered across the country, with Manitoba being the exception to the rule.

The MWWA, in conjunction with stakeholders in Alberta, Saskatchewan, NWT and Nunavut, are in the process of development of a Career Attraction Project in an effort to attract the next generation of water and wastewater professionals. To date a number of Operators in Manitoba have been interviewed for this project, and filming of water and wastewater facilities has taken place in an effort to highlight careers in the industry.

Manitoba Conservation has mandated that Continuing Education Unit (CEU) will be required for renewal of unrestricted operator certification every 5 years. The Manitoba Water & Wastewater Association offers workshops throughout the year to assist your water professionals in meeting their CEU requirements.

MWWA courses have been assigned CEUs (continuing education units) by Manitoba Conservation - this training will aid your community in ensuring that your Operators meet the certification requirements as set out by the Province. For further information on the Province of Manitoba regulations will regard to Water and Wastewater Operators please visit the MB Conservation website at: <http://www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/eal/certification/ceuguideline.pdf>

We would like to come to you! Please contact the MWWA if you are interested in a workshop or workshops in your area. For further information on MWWA educational opportunities please check out our website Training section at: <http://www.mwwa.net> or contact the MWWA office by email at: mwwa@mymts.net or call us Toll Free: 1-866-396-2549.