

Dealing with Change: Some Theory & Strategies¹

Huge changes have been required of workers in the Community Services and Health Industries over the past 30 years. These changes have affected every aspect of their work role:

Knowledge Required

It is now a routine expectation that workers (and Management Committees!) have sound bureaucratic, legislative, political, industrial, cultural, community development and research knowledge.

Skills Exercised

Workers now need many (or all) of the following skills, often at quite an advanced level: administration, communication, conflict processing, integrated programming, management (self and/or others), public speaking, group work, promotion, tendering & contracting, income generation, research, advocacy, team building & maintenance, working with community members, dealing with media, new models of *best practice*, (workplace) training and the specialised competencies specific to their job.

Values and Attitudes

There is an assumption that personal and professional values/attitudes should: be compatible with current Equal Opportunity and other *social justice* legislation, consistent with government policy, involve making a commitment to ongoing learning/development **and** be responsive to external stakeholders' priorities (... even when, often, these are incongruent or even directly contradictory).

And, all this, generally *in addition to what workers were expected to achieve in the past!* No wonder the issue of *dealing with change* is uppermost in the minds of many in the sector!

¹ © Copyright Suzi Quixley 1991 (Revised 1996, 1997 & 2008). It is an updated version of a *Keynote Address* delivered to Eastern Region Pre-School Conference Day, April 8, 1991, conducted by the Children's Services Office, Adelaide, entitled *Making Change Work for You!*, and a follow-up workshop with some staff several weeks later. Further dimensions were added following input from participants at the *Experienced Trainers/Facilitators' Weekend* held in Brisbane, July 1997.

The Nature of Change

Change is occurring constantly! Sometimes it's *big*; sometimes, *small*. Sometimes it's global; sometimes, local. It may be personal or professional ... or a combination of a number of these.

This means that everyone is dealing with change continually, whether consciously or not. Our dealings may be direct or *by default*; reactive or proactive. Regardless, change is going to occur whether we engage with it or not. We don't choose **whether** change occurs or not (although we might **influence** the nature of that change) ... only how we respond to it!

Life is a dynamic process, with a lot of minor changes adding up to major changes on an ongoing basis.

Responding to Change

The common factor in any changes that affect you ... is **you**!

You always have a choice as to how you respond to changes - *positively* or *negatively*; constructively or destructively; enthusiastically or defensively. You can choose how you behave - *helpless* or *powerful*. This is not to suggest that you can **control** any change - only that you can, to a greater or lesser degree depending upon the situation, take **some** power. Generally, the fewer people involved in affecting change, the greater the proportion of power you can take.

You can pre-empt change in a direction you consider useful, or embrace changes you already perceive as positive. You can simply *live your life* and adapt to change as you go (... that is, *by default*). You can react against changes with which you disagree. Most of us have a mixture of these responses in different situations, at different times. How we respond will significantly affect the level of influence we have in change and its implementation ... and therefore on how *powerful* we feel.

The **PEAR**² model describes four key responses we can make to change:

P	Pre-empt
E	Embrace
A	Adapt
R	React

² Participants at the Brisbane workshop proposed that it could also be used to describe the **impact of change** (*Personal Excitement and Anxiety Result*) or the **process of change** (*Prepare, Exchange, Alter, Review*).

Pre-empting change is the process of identifying emerging change, deciding that you don't like the way it is *shaping up*, acknowledging that some change will happen regardless of how you feel, and actively seeking to have an alternate change implemented. This is the most proactive approach to unwelcome change.

Embracing change is also a proactive approach ... this time, to welcome change. Playing an active role in advocating for, and supporting, an emerging change can certainly increase your *brownie points*! Having responded positively to a change you support, your credibility in challenging future negative changes is likely to be increased. This is particularly true in the workplace.

Both Pre-Emptive and Embracing approaches to change are long term approaches to dealing with change. **Proaction** involves looking in advance at potential areas which might be considered to require change (from your own, or others' perspectives), and trying to come from in front with proposals about the content or process of change. They might involve developing alternatives or using preventative strategies (eg. consultation with those likely to be affected by the change). In this context, change is treated as a *normal* and *neutral* thing. Change is approached in an assertive, cooperative manner, and in the context of clear values and a long term vision of a better world/workplace/life.

Adapting to change is a useful response when you *missed the boat* on an emerging change. This can apply whether or not you agree with the change. If you agree, then quick affirmation and implementation of the change is generally seen as a positive response. If you have concerns about the change, it is important that you implement some change in response to the directive that appears consistent with it. (This may include reframing the proposal to suit your purposes!)

Response is a shorter term approach than pro-action, however it still promotes a thoughtful manner and approach to the change. Adaptation can involve a *win/win* approach and assertive responses. It can be a cooperative endeavour which looks at dealing with the change in a manner that is useful for all affected. However, it is not functioning as part of a long term vision, and involves coming from behind ... particularly when faced with an unwelcome proposal/directive for change.

Reacting to Change is generally the least useful approach. Simply being negative about a proposal/directive is more likely to alienate you from others, than to produce a variation. No-one likes *knockers*!

Reaction to change is bouncing off the change as it happens, with limited planning or foresight. Generally reactive responses are competitive ... that is, based in a *win/lose* approach. The hope generally is that, by reacting to the change, you will *win* over the other party. (Of course, if you *lose*, you can always be the *hard-done-by victim*!) This sort of approach to dealing with change usually involves behaving in an aggressive or passive manner.

Clearly, a proactive approach to change is the most likely to be productive and effective. At the very least, you will understand the motives behind the change far better, than if you had been a *non-player*. **However, it is simply not possible to respond to every change affecting you in this way ...** there are not enough hours in the day!

If you plan to initiate a change, encouraging an early, proactive involvement by those affected is likely to minimise their later resistance to this change.

Conscious Change is Often Difficult

What is the hardest change you've consciously made in your life? For some, it might be staying on a diet, drinking a litre of water each day, or giving up smoking. For others, it might be leaving a war-torn country as a refugee, dealing with a friend's death, having a child or changing their religion.

It doesn't seem to matter whether the change appears *major* or *minor* ... different people find different changes more or less difficult. Different people, too, have had more and less experience/practice in dealing with significant changes in their life, and therefore may have a greater or lesser fear of change.

Different individuals and groups experience varying levels of ease with, and willingness to, engage with change. **Some of the factors affecting personal or organisational responses to change are:**

- **Degree of Choice About the Change:** Imposed changes tend to be particularly difficult because you feel powerless from the outset, even if you happen to agree with the change. It is hard to generate a sense of *ownership* over a change which is imposed. Similarly, a *black and white choice* is more difficult to *own*, than one where you have the opportunity to select from a range of options (or generate your own ideas).
- **Compatibility of the Change:** How does the proposed change relate to your life/organisational context - your values, beliefs, lifestyle, preferences or habits? The further you are required to move away from your ideology or *comfort zone*, the more difficult it is to respond positively to change.
- **Magnitude of the Change:** Will it continue to impact on your life? If not, you might be able to tolerate an unpopular change more readily. Is it a *big* or *small* change? A *small* uncomfortable change is easier to make than a *big* one. The size and duration of the process of change, too, can affect your attitude to change. How much time and effort will be taken, firstly, in making a decision and, secondly, in implementing it?

- **Ability to Undertake the Change:** Do you know exactly what change is being asked for? Do you have the competencies (skills, knowledge, attitudes and values) to adopt the change? Have you experienced a similar or related situation before? Are you aware of precedents elsewhere? Are there others who might be able to resource you in this process? Clearly, it's impossible to implement a change unless you understand what is required, and have the ability to do it!
- **Awareness of the Impact of the Change:** Have you thought through the overall consequences of this change occurring? Sometimes, fear of the unknown (the possible impact of the change) is unnecessarily overwhelming. On the other hand, without forethought, an apparently simple change can have serious implications which you didn't plan for. Processing the possible implications of the change in a balanced way (looking equally at positives and negatives) can help overcome *false barriers* or challenge naive acceptance.
- **Number of Dimensions to the Change:** Singular/isolated goals are easier to manage than multi-faceted ones which impact across a range of areas in your life/work.
- **Level of Control/Influence over the Change:** This can apply to either the process of change or its outcomes. *Personal change* is generally easier to handle than *structural change*, because you are likely to have more *power* (or, at least, your sense of power seems more tangible). There are many aspects of *power* - *control, influence, personal, cultural, structural, formal, informal, internal, external ...* The degree of control or influence you have may vary in the decision making and implementation phases of the change. Information about *who owns what* may be clear/open, or confused/hidden. If you are dissatisfied with your level of *power* in one or more of these areas, it is likely to affect your willingness to change.

Dealing with Others' Resistance to Change

Often we need to deal with (our own and) others' reactions/responses to change. The following are some ideas on how you could productively deal with people resisting change, related to some of the key factors that affect people's ability to handle change:

Factors in Dealing with Change	Possible Strategies for Dealing with Resistance to Change
Degree of Choice About the Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Check whether the perceived degree of choice is the reality (or an emotional response to another factor). ▪ Be clear/honest about the degree of choice around different elements of the change (if you know this) or help them to process this. ▪ Maximise their power in the process of change (in particular, look at whether there are opportunities in the decision making and/or implementation phases of the change). ▪ Help them to understand the reasons behind the change (including looking at the possible merits of the change).
Compatibility of the Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clarify the values involved with this change ... every change is values-based at some level! ▪ Enable them to analyse and <i>name</i> their personal and collective reactions to the change. ▪ Identify and validate any perceived <i>conflict of interest</i> with the change (without judging the validity of this). ▪ Encourage them to distinguish <i>comfort zone</i> issues (likely to be a matter of ease) and values based issues (likely to generate fundamental conflicts of ethics or meaning). ▪ Acknowledge feelings and take them into consideration, particularly if this is a <i>big</i> change for them. ▪ Develop ideas for reframing or developing the change to make it more acceptable. ▪ Periodically review personal responses to the change.
Magnitude of the Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Name the changes and current <i>myths</i> (eg. <i>that everything is wonderful now!</i>) ▪ Allow <i>time out</i> to cope or think and/or develop support structures to help them deal with the impact. ▪ Name/be honest about the constraints eg. time, money. ▪ Help them to break the change down into sections/stages, to make it more manageable. ▪ Help them timeline the process (including addressing priority concerns and negotiating key issues). ▪ Encourage lateral thinking about dealing with the change.
Ability to Undertake the Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assess the level of knowledge currently available about the change, and who <i>owns</i> that (in an organisational setting, you might use a <i>mapping exercise</i> to explore who this is - staff? management? particular individuals?) ▪ Ensure that they are clear about exactly what's required, and the competencies needed to implement the change, or their part of it (in group settings - ensure everyone has the same and adequate information), ▪ Provide opportunities for them to develop competencies required to manage the change.

Factors in Dealing with Change (cont)	Possible Strategies for Dealing with Resistance to Change (cont)
Awareness of the Impact of the Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Help them identify possible implications/consequences of the change, equally valuing exploration of possible positives and negatives. (A <i>Web Chart</i>³ might be a useful tool here.) ▪ Give a personal/peer account of going through similar process. ▪ Clarify the <i>bottom lines</i> and consequences of non-implementation.
Number of Dimensions to the Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure all information about the change is <i>on the table</i> (ie. no <i>hidden agendas</i>, particularly in group settings). ▪ (Encourage them to) seek out additional information about the change if they don't have enough to identify the different facets. ▪ Help them to identify all the facets to both the decision making and implementation phases of the change. ▪ Encourage them to focus on advantages of going through the process, if they are pursuing the change. ▪ Help them to break down the change into single goals/ manageable phases. ▪ Enable or provide ongoing reference point/support, if they are implementing the change over time. ▪ Identify a wide range of other people from whom they make be able to get support (eg. family, friends, co-workers).
Level of Control/Influence over the Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Help them to identify whether they are looking for <i>influence</i> or <i>control</i> over the change. ▪ Help them understand different types of <i>power</i> and internal/external power structures relevant to the change. ▪ Help them identify those parts of the change that are structural and/or outside their control (ie. depersonalise situations and develop an analysis of cultural context in which change is occurring). ▪ Enable them to identify ways of influencing structures and/or using them constructively. ▪ Help them to identify the areas in which they do hold some individual or collective <i>power</i>, and develop strategies for exercising their influence.

Some core competencies for change management which regardless of the resistance factors at play are:

- Maintain high order communication skills (eg. listening, valuing, respect, openness).
- Name/explore expectations (hopes and fears) of change.

... and, in organisational settings:

- Establish clear *group norms* around processing issues arising from the change.

³ An outline of how to process a *Web Chart* exercise is included in: Quixley, Suzi (1995) **8 Participatory Training/Learning Methods**, Revised Edition, ESSQ, Bowden, SA.

- Develop open, transparent processes in relation to both decision making about the change, and implementation of the change.
- Enable opportunities for participation in the change process proportional to the impact of the change (ie. maximum opportunities for those who will be most affected; lesser opportunities for those more marginally affected).
- Enable clarification of levels of participation preferred (in decision making and/or implementation) by those affected by the change.
- Try to *stand in the shoes* of individual players and the group/organisation, and encourage others to do likewise.
- Acknowledge individual and collective feelings.
- Identify which individuals are potentially impacted upon by the change, and focus on minimising negative impacts for individuals and maximising positive impacts for the organisation.
- Enable and validate development of a personal position and options by each individual affected by the change.
- Operate from a position of *suspended disbelief* (ie. *each person is doing what they can*).
- Define the organisation's understanding of the concept of *power* and explore its potential role as a barrier to change.
- Review any internal power structures which are a barrier to change, or processing of issues related to change.
- Distinguish the personal and organisational dimensions of the change and its impact.
- Make decision making structures and processes transparent.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we decide how we will approach change ... as an *opportunity* or a *threat*. Regardless of our decision, change is here to stay ... it is a *fact of life*. The more familiar you are with your **values** and **vision** (your ideology - at a personal and agency level), the easier you will find it to:

- assess your immediate reaction and the possible motivations behind that,
- critically analyse emerging/actual changes and whose interests they serve, and,
- develop viable strategies in response.

Choose to see change as *curious and exciting*. Look for the positives in every change ... or, the positives you could create by reframing them, or through implementing them! Take on a proactive role with enthusiasm and optimism. The more you take this attitude ... the more likely others will come along with you ... and the more likely that the power to make positive social change will be taken!

Enjoy the dynamism of the change process!