



# Adapting to Change

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand that adapting to change is not technical but attitudinal.

# Dealing with Resistance

## Understanding Resistance

Change is all around us. Many of us buy new cars, computers, phones, and clothes; paint our homes in new colors; try new food; and plant different things in the garden. We're pretty good at adapting to a lot of change, especially if it's our own idea. But there are people who will resist change, and it often seems related to their belief that they may lose control or something else that is valuable to them.

Making lasting changes is even tougher. People know that smoking is bad for them, but they smoke anyway. People know that they should maintain a healthy weight and exercise, but many people don't. They know that taking the bus to work is probably better for the environment and less expensive than driving, but they drive anyway.

Think about these situations:

- Does an employee resist a raise in salary or increased vacation allowance?
- Do you hang on to a cranky old car and resist being given a new one?
- Does a supervisor resist an imposed schedule change that has them representing the department at an important reception for the new company CEO, rather than finishing the quarterly budget?

All these changes are likely to be warmly welcomed and be implemented with great cooperation from the people concerned.

## Test Your Knowledge

**What makes these changes different from those that people resist?**

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**What might they perceive they will be losing?**

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**What might they gain?**

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## **Making Change Stick**

### **Action Planning**

It's one thing to talk about, anticipate, and/or resist change. It's another to make things happen. Depending on the size and impact of what's changing, you may need a formal project management plan to make sure that the changes are well-implemented and that they stick. For smaller changes, you will still need a way to help the employees move into the new zone, ensure that things are working, confirm that people are adapting, and then evaluate what went well and what didn't.

### **Reinforcement**

Whether the new behavior needs to be practiced, repeated, incorporated into other behaviors, or stands alone, it has to be reinforced in order to stick. The manager's role includes providing reinforcement so that people who have made the change continue to see its application and value.

Success of change related programs relies heavily on reinforcement of the new behavior, and many changes require more reinforcement than you may think. Success in weight loss programs, for example, is often measured in terms of pounds or inches lost. But the reinforcement does not always come from losing the weight. (If it were that simple, we would all be an ideal weight!) Instead, the reinforcement comes from the frequent meetings, support from a group leader and members of a group, and sometimes even a weekly fee that must be paid whether you attend your regularly scheduled meeting or not.

## **Adapting to Change**

### **Understanding Resiliency**

We can define resiliency as the ability to bounce back from change and to focus on positive aspects rather than getting bogged down in the negatives. Resiliency can be taught and modeled. It needs to be done well for people to recognize the benefits and adopt them. This means that, as a leader, we have to recognize that saying "It will all work out" is not helpful to people. Many people don't cope naturally, but they can learn techniques to help them cope better than they might without any help at all.

Daryl Conner has identified these five characteristics as key to developing resiliency. We've added some strategies for helping people cope.

### **Positive**

A positive attitude is crucial when dealing with change. Let's say that your job assignment has changed. Rather than think, "This change means I have to do that activity more and I don't like it," think about the things that you will get to do more or new opportunities that will arise.

**To teach this skill**, meet with your team individually or as a group. Have them raise the negative aspects of the change, and then have them re-frame each statement as a positive so that the positives list is at

least as long as the negative one. Though this will feel awkward to them at first, even superficial, stick with it. Eventually people will learn to reframe things themselves and to believe in what they are repeating.

### **Focused**

Stay focused on the change itself and what you can do to manage it. Try not to worry about things that are out of your control. Think about the stages of transition (endings, transition/neutral, and beginnings) and validate where you are, as well as your feelings about it.

**To teach this skill**, help staff to recognize where they are in the model, focus on the action plan or an agenda, and block out distractions and negative gossip.

### **Flexible**

Change will be much easier if you try to embrace it. Think of ways that you can adapt or things that you can do to make the change easier. Continuing with the job assignment example, you could identify training that you will need or questions that you have. **To reinforce this concept**, celebrate and reinforce when members of the team are demonstrating success, being flexible, experimenting, or taking risks.

### **Organized**

Put the changes in context with the rest of your schedule, and your approach to work, and look at it in line with the models we have discussed so far. If you try to look at change in logical fashion, it may become less personal and easier to handle.

**To teach this skill**, help staff create and update plans. Training in time management, personal productivity, and project management might help.

### **Proactive**

If you anticipate change in the early stages and modify your expectations accordingly, it will be much easier to deal with the change than it is in the later stages, when things are already underway and you have less opportunity to influence or already feel a loss of control. Change that comes as a surprise is harder to deal with than things that we can prepare for.

**To help those around you**, keep the lines of communication open. Communicate what you know, even if it may change soon and you don't have full details. Set expectations on when they can receive updates and how things may change.