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Implementing Change Successfully

Betty Krecji

Purdue University Department of Consumer and Family Sciences

Change is constant in today's world. Because everything we once knew and depended on is changing, it can be overwhelming. When major change occurs, people have similar reactions of fear, anxiety, self-doubt, and a lack of control. The difference occurs in how individuals respond to change.

Change and Transition

It is important to differentiate between change and transition. Change is situational. It is the event, such as a new house, a new job, or the loss of a family business. Transition is the psychological process one goes through in adapting to change. Unless a successful transition occurs, change will not work. Since change is often beyond our control, it is important to focus on how individuals respond to change, or make the transition.

View of Change Impacts Response

How one views change has a great impact on the transition. Typically, individuals view change as either opportunity or loss. How individuals view change is dependent on many things.

- The number of changes occurring at once. Individuals can only handle so much change. The greater the number of changes occurring simultaneously, the more likely that they will be viewed negatively. Ask family members and employees to make only a few changes at once.
- The pace at which change is occurring. The faster the changes come, the more difficulty we have in adjusting to them and the more likely we are to view change as loss. Give family members and employees time to adjust.
- An individual's perception of change. The greater the meaning one places on the change, the greater the sense of loss. Try to view change in the eyes of each individual impacted and how the change affects him or her.
- The amount of control in times of change. The greater the involvement individuals have in making change, the greater their sense of control. The greater the sense of control, the more likely the change will be viewed as an opportunity. Open communication and involvement by those impacted by the decision will increase their sense of control. This includes children!

Change as Loss

When people view change as loss, they must actually go through a grief process in order to effectively make the change. There are five stages in the grief cycle as identified in the work of Kubler-Ross in 1969.

The first stage is **shock and denial**. In this stage, people are numb and often deny that a change has even occurred. They blame others and do not recognize the need to make decisions.

Once shock wears off, people enter a stage of **anger, frustration, and anxiety**. So much energy is placed in negative emotions at this stage that there is no energy to make critical decisions. This is an important part of the grief process, but how the negative emotions are played out should be watched carefully.

The next stage is **depression**. At this stage, individuals experience an overwhelming sense of "the blues" and a lack of energy. Because of the energy spent in negative emotion in the previous stage, there is no energy at this time to make decisions for oneself. This is a stage where individuals need the help of family and friends.

Once individuals enter the **dialogue and bargaining** stage of the grief cycle, they are more open to exploring alternatives. At this time they need to gather information and consider options. Frequently, individuals feel a need to tell their story in order to make sense of what has occurred. A good listener can be critical.

The final stage is the **acceptance** stage. Entering the acceptance stage doesn't mean individuals necessarily like the change, but rather they are beginning to accept that it has happened and are willing to work it into their lives. At this time, they feel empowered and in control of their life, but things will never be the same. Change has occurred.

Unfortunately, individuals do not go through the grief cycle in a neat, step-by-step fashion. Rather, they move back and forth between the various phases. The important thing is to recognize the stages of the grief process as normal and to be prepared for what each stage has in store. The danger lies in "getting stuck" in any one phase, especially the anger or depression phases. If this happens, individuals may need to seek professional help.

Although change is often beyond our control, it is important to remember you are not alone. Open communication and a positive attitude will help everyone involved manage the transition to successfully incorporate change.

References

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