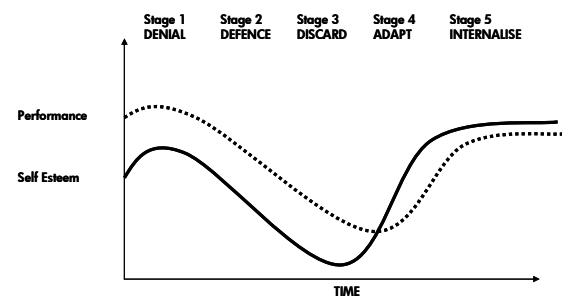


Change affects us all, but how we 'cope' with it differs from individual to individual. Do not assume that because you are coping, the rest of your team are

As the change agenda kicks in yet again – post the effects of the Iraq War, July 7, global warming and general global economic turmoil, understanding how the change agenda affects us (and those we work with) is critical. Why? Because 'change' affects all of us in different way, and over very different time scales. Some individuals welcome change – indeed often encourage it. For these individuals the ability to cope with change and the attendant emotional stress appears not to be a problem. For others change is a nightmare scenario – full of the unknown and the dreaded new. For those individuals the process of coping with change can be long and fraught with stress and emotion. And when someone is feeling like that then the quality of their work will suffer.

Some years ago we came across an excellent text book which had a chapter on the subject of *Coping with Change*. The book references the work of Cooper, 1981; Ket de Vries & Miller, 1984; and Kirkpatrick, 1985. We also refer to research carried out by Lawler (1978), Steers & Porter (1979) and finally Adams, Hayes & Hopson (1976)

Often the problems with implementing change are expressed as 'resistance to change'; however what causes this 'resistance'? Change creates anxiety, uncertainty and stress – even for those managing the change process. One way to understand what is going on is to look at the relationship between self-esteem, performance and stress, in what is termed "*The Coping Cycle*" (see figure below).



THE COPING CYCLE

The Coping Cycle recognises that there are five stages to the process of change and that both our *self-esteem* – the way we feel about our self, and our *performance* – how well we actually carry out tasks, will be affected differently at each stage.

THE FIVE STAGES OF THE CHANGE CYCLE ARE:

DENIAL:

"Why change – we have always done it this way and it's worked" or... "We've tried this before and it didn't work"... These are the sort of phrases heard at this stage. Fear of the unknown causes this reaction and it is to be expected.

DEFENCE:

However eventually the reality sets in and people have to face up to the fact that the change process is underway. As change begins so do feelings of depression and frustration of having to cope with a new situation or environment. So often one encounters 'defensive behaviour' – defensive about their job, their territory, and sometimes this behaviour becomes almost 'ritualistic'. It appears that this defensive behaviour takes place to give the individual time and space to come to terms with the changes.

DISCARD:

Here the individual begins to let go of 'the past' and look forward to 'the future'. Sometimes it is all about deciding that it is no use worrying yourself silly or maybe the future is seen as not so forbidding as first imagined. Often it is as though a light has been turned on in your head. "Now I get it!".....

ADAPT:

This is where experimentation takes place, where new behaviours are tried and where new ways or 'doing things' emerge. Learning from ones own experiences and from others, sharing best practice and benchmarking are all common activities that take place during this phase.

INTERNALISE:

This is where the new behaviour and attitudes become part of everyday life – "The way we do things around here"... becoming part of the culture and values of both the organisation and the individual.

SO WHAT?

The problem with change is that whilst we all move through this cycle, we do so at our own pace – for some it could take a few hours or days – for others, months. In a few cases the individual may never get past the 'denial' stage. In one particularly tragic incident some years ago, the 'change agenda' introduced by a high street bank so affected one 'old time' bank manager that he committed suicide rather

than accept the change! Depending where the individual is on the cycle will condition their attitude and response at any given time.

The 'change agenda' also invokes change in how you *feel about yourself*, the job, your employer etc. so your *performance is affected*. It is important to recognise this link between how the individual is feeling about themselves – *self esteem*, and *performance* – the results of work activity. As our figure above shows, the 'self esteem' curve is in advance of the 'performance' curve, so whilst you may observe the individual feeling more positive about change, there will still be a delay before performance catches up.

IN CONCLUSION ...

Understanding the Coping Cycle and using it to identify where you people are on it is an important element of managing a group or team through day-to-day activity in an environment of 'change'. For more information on this topic or for a face-to-face meeting with the NATION specialist on this topic, please e-mail:

richard.grimes@nation.uk.com

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