

Change Partners

Experiencing the Impact of Change

Activity Summary

An activity that uncovers emotions typically experienced in change situations and helps people understand how these emotions influence their reactions to change.

Goals

- To experience a variety of emotions and reactions resulting from change.
- To determine what is needed to maintain energy and a positive atmosphere during a change initiative.
- To identify the shared responsibility of management and employees in a change situation.

Group Size

A minimum of 10 participants participating in an organizational change initiative of some type.

Time Required

45 to 55 minutes.

Materials

- A watch with a second hand or a timer.
- Flip chart and markers or a whiteboard if the room is small enough.

Physical Setting

A room with chairs around a U-shaped table or several round tables. Six to eight square feet per participants in pairs.

Facilitating Risk Rating

Moderate.

Process

1. Explain that the group is going to experience a change that they will all be able to participate in equally. Ask them to pick partners. Depending on other goals you may have for the training, ask that they select someone they do know or someone they do not know well.
2. Give the following instructions:

You will have exactly 1 minute to study your partners and to notice everything you can about them.
3. Call time and ask participants to turn their backs to their partners. Once everyone has turned around, have them change three superficial physical things about themselves. Give them 1 minute to do this.

(5 minutes.)
4. Time them for 1 minute and watch the room. You want to create a little urgency, but also to give enough time to allow most to finish. Say, "OK, time's up. When I say 'begin,' turn around and take turns identifying what is different about your partner. Go back and forth until you have noticed the three changes that each of you made."
5. Observe the room and notice:
 - How the group is reacting.
 - Whether all are participating.

(5 minutes.)
6. Call time and ask them to turn their backs to each other again and change three more things about themselves in the next minute. Expect groans and resistance. Notice what happens.

(5 minutes.)

7. Again, call time and have them identify the three things that have changed about their partners. Give them slightly less time than before and call time. Without time for discussion, have them turn their backs to each other again and change three more things. Expect more resistance this time. Notice people's reactions. Give them about 45 seconds this time. Call out, "Time's up," when some are still changing.

(5 minutes.)

8. Again, have them identify what is different about their partners.

(5 minutes.)

9. Depending on the group size, you can debrief the experience with the whole group or you can pose questions that they can discuss in small groups and then share highlights with the larger group. Use the following questions to get started:

- What was your first reaction to the request to change three things about yourself?
- Did your reaction to the task change as you went into the second and third rounds? If so, what made the difference?
- Who enjoyed the challenge each time?
- What were you thinking that helped you to enjoy it? (Here you are looking for thoughts that lead to emotion. To enjoy the exercise, one may see it as a game, a competition, or an opportunity to be creative, for example.)
- Who felt frustrated by the challenge to keep changing?
- What were you thinking that resulted in your frustration? (Thinking that leads to frustration could be wanting to get it right and not look foolish or the pressure of digging more deeply to think of things to change.)
- Who felt angry?
- What were you thinking that made you feel angry? (Look for violation of rights thoughts like "This is a waste of time," "It's beneath me," "I don't have enough options for all the changes you want me to make.")
- Who already put everything back the way it was? (Expect laughter at this. And make the point that, without reinforcement, change is difficult to maintain. We want to get back to the status quo.)

- What would have made it easier for you to do the exercise? (Anticipate answers having to do with sharing what was going to happen, knowing they should have worn more jewelry, having more time, and so forth.)
- What have you noticed about other people's reactions to the same experience? (Highlight answers that reflect understanding that people react differently to change and that the change agents need to take that into consideration.)
- How were your reactions during the exercise similar to or different from your reactions to changes your organization is making now or has made in the past? (Some will say that they felt many of the same emotions, so point out that often people have patterns of reactions to change—anger, avoidance, dismissal, and so on.)
- If you were in charge, how would you set up an organizational change to get the best results? (Here you are looking for a desire to involve those impacted, communication requests, lifelines for those who may have their employment impacted, and similar ideas.)

(20 minutes.)

10. In closing, reinforce the idea that we all have habitual thinking patterns and that these come out under stressful change conditions. We might be aware, for instance, that we are cautious about changing or resistant to the very idea. If that is the case, having an awareness of how we react gives us an opportunity to choose a different way of thinking that might work better for us in a given circumstance.
11. Also make the point that it is both the responsibility of those initiating a change and those participating in the change to communicate their needs. Understanding the various ways people react and what people need in times of change opens the way for better communication and smoother change initiatives.
12. Express the thought that sometimes, when working with other people and seeking their buy-in, it is faster to take more time to plan than it is to speed through and find that the change didn't really stick.

Variation

For a longer debriefing, pose a variety of change scenarios and place participants in small groups to discuss them. Scenarios need to be relevant to the group involved and could include some of the following:

- Launching a new product
- Merging with another company
- Adding a new shift
- Downsizing
- Reorganizing
- Cutting an old product
- Changing longstanding procedures

Some questions to consider might be:

- What would be some expected reactions to the change?
- How do you expect specific groups to react? (Different departments, employees with different longevity, etc., may react differently to the same news, depending on whether they see it as a threat or an opportunity.)

Submitted by Beverly J. Bitterman.

Beverly J. Bitterman, owner of Beverly Bitterman and Associates, is an executive and team coach. She is an experienced facilitator who creates environments in which groups are comfortable communicating about issues, uncovering and removing barriers to high performance, and taking concrete action to move forward on projects. She works with individuals in the areas of forgiveness and life balance. Ms. Bitterman delivers the Trimetrix assessment instrument, teaches facilitation and communication skills for the University of South Florida Continuing Education Department, and has held several offices for the Nashville, Tennessee, chapter of ASTD.

