Imagine that your organisation has just initiated a re-org. You know you will have a job in the new organisation, but you will have a new manager, most of your team members will be new, and what you are actually doing is likely to change substantially.

If this scenario actually happened, what would your reaction be? What questions would you have? What would you say? What would you do? What would your internal dialogue be? What would you be noticing about your fellow teammates and their reactions to the change? Would you be energised, or perhaps find yourself without any energy or motivation?

This situation, or ones like it, is quite common in today's world, and it can shake us and make us question our ability or our chosen job or company or path. Yet because they are so frequent, we need to find ways to be resilient in the face of this kind of major change. In this article, we'll discuss the two most important factors that contribute to personal resilience through change: awareness and the ability to reduce stress.

Awareness is important because as we become aware of how we typically respond to change **and** how those around us typically respond, we will begin to understand behaviours (ours and our colleagues') we see during times of change for what they are rather than giving a more sinister interpretation to what we experience. The **ability to reduce stress** for ourselves (rather than waiting for somebody else to do it) is important because change is often accompanied by stress that can affect us both at work and home. We are resilient when we understand our own and others' reactions to the change, and when we are able to recognise when our stress levels are getting too high and to do something to reduce it.

You have probably experienced some level of change (personally or professionally) in the none-too-distant past. The old adage is true: change is a constant. Most people experience some level of change every day, sometimes planned and other times more spontaneously. Maybe there is construction on your regular route to work so you drive on new roads. A toilet in your favourite stall is plugged, so you go next door. You reach for the cream for your coffee and it has turned, so you drink

your coffee black. Maybe it is a positive change, like getting that new computer or phone you've been asking for for months! Or you've lost those ten pounds and now you need new clothes.

Most of us handle many relatively small changes on a daily basis, and manage to keep making it through our days relatively unscathed; but if we stop to pay attention, we will notice that all these changes have an impact on us. We may also notice that change impacts us differently from how it appears to impact some of those around us.

For some people change is an energiser, a motivator; in fact, these people may seek out change and appear to thrive on change. For other people, it is just the opposite, and change is experienced as exhausting and demotivating, something to be put up with and endured. Knowing how change affects you can help you determine your own strategies that will allow you to be resilient in the face of the often constant changes we face in our personal and professional lives.

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My 'Yippee!' is your 'Oh no!' – Different reactions to change

The causes of stress-related change, how it shows up, and the tactics to combat it can be different for different people. This truth points to another interesting point about change. While we can agree on what changes may frequently occur in our lives, and while we have an idea of what our reactions would be to these changes; we are often surprised by other people's reactions. As human beings, our perspective on the world is largely influenced by our own perceptions, our own ways of taking in and processing information; and we often forget that others may have different ways of perceiving events. This can result in uncertainty about ourselves or others, and we may find questions arising such as, "Gosh, why is John so excited by getting a new manager? I thought he liked Susan" Or "How come everybody seems so depressed? This new project is going to be so exciting!" We may even move to placing judgments on ourselves or others based on these reactions. We may condemn ourselves for being such a stick-in-the-mud, unable to get enthused by yet another re-org; or maybe we thrive on change and we find ourselves dismissing those who are slower to get on board or who actively resist what we see as a great new opportunity.

Understanding how these different reactions to stress may reflect our personality preferences can be very freeing. There is a broad spectrum of responses to change that are all considered 'normal'; understanding where you (and those around you) fall on this spectrum can allow you to cut yourself **and** others some slack where it comes to change, and can also help you know what are the best steps to take to help yourself and others make it through the 'change du jour'.

Transitioning through change

In his 1991 book, "Managing Transitions", Change Consultant, William Bridges describes change as something that happens to people, even when they do not agree to the change. He stresses the importance of transition, which is defined as what happens in people's minds as they go through change. Bridges writes, "It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions. Change is not the same as transition. Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal."

Bridges' philosophy is so critical to understanding change because it outlines the stages of transition – essentially the phases people go through when they are undergoing change.

It's a simple three step model that includes:

1. **Ending** – The Endings phase recognises that a transition begins with letting go. If, for example, there is a new manager joining the organisation, then employees may need to let go of the ways that they worked with and related to their previous manager. Whether they had a good relationship with their manager or not, they had established a pattern of working together that they had come to depend on and use as a kind of compass during their day-to-day work. Now they have to let go of that.

2. **The Neutral Zone** – The Neutral Zone recognises a space between the old and the new. The old is gone, but the new is not yet fully established.

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Using the previous example of a new manager joining an organisation, that new manager will be there every day leading meetings, providing feedback, setting up one-on-ones with each of her team members. But the 'compass' is not yet set. All parties are likely fairly alert to the actions of the other, and may be trying on new ways of being and interacting to see what will work best in this new situation.

3. **The New Beginning** – The New Beginnings phase recognises the establishment of a new compass made up of new understandings, values, attitudes, and identities the team has with their new manager, and perhaps even between each other as well.

We all go through these three phases of transition, but the amount of time we take in each one will vary based on the type of change we are experiencing and on our personality. And understanding that others around us may be in a different phase is the key to working together well as a team and organisation going through change.

How do you react to change?

Think about recent changes that have taken place in your organisation, particularly ones that affected you in your everyday work routine. Then use the questions below to assess your own typical reactions to change. Rank order the four categories, with a '1' for the category that is most like you, and a '4' for the category that is least like you.

○	• Supports change if there is convincing rationale or tangible benefit; is not inclined to support change when there is no business case for it • Tends to have strong views of what ought to happen, often based on past experience • Capable of dealing with multiple factors and complex change situations; may move quicker than others are comfortable with
○	• Willing to try new approaches and is often the initiator of change • Is aware of and responsive to others' needs during the change • Looks forward to the change, sees what's positive about it and promotes it
○	• Needs to be convinced that the change is based on logical factors and may become baffled by non-logical factors • Needs time to think about the change, particularly if it involves personal change • Tends to be risk-averse and moves slowly
○	• Ok if the change is congruent with their values; can be resistant if a deeply held value is threatened or compromised • Is reflective, open and willing to listen to all points of view; is inclusive in the process • Is concerned that others are treated respectfully; is concerned about others

Consider how this information might impact your journey through the transition process. Which phase of transition are you most likely to spend the most time in? What can you do to help yourself effectively move through each phase?

Now consider somebody who appears to approach change differently. How would you rank the four categories for them? Does this put their behaviour around change in a different perspective? What conversation might you have with them that could help you **both** move through the transition process?

Fill your cup

Whatever our reaction to personal change, in order to be successful in our work, we need to remain resilient through change. Being resilient in this case means that you are able to sustain your energy and motivation during times of stress associated with change, although what is actually stressful about change may vary across individuals.

We will explore what aspects of change are stressful for different people, how that stress might show up, and what you can do to remain resilient in the face of change-induced stress.

The Goldilocks Principle

We often think about stress negatively, but it is not all bad. "I'm so stressed out!" is not something we look forward to saying (or hearing!). However, some stress is actually good. There is a curvilinear relationship between stress and performance such that too little stress results in poor performance **and** too much stress results in poor performance, but find just the right amount of stress and your performance will actually peak. Of course, that amount is different for every person, as is what causes stress. Becoming aware of your levels of stress and your stress triggers can help you take actions to reduce stress when it is getting too high, and perhaps even to increase it if you notice it may be too low.

During times of change there are lots of things that may cause stress, but they are likely to be different across individuals. The common thread is the uncertainty that usually surrounds change. Even if the **what** of change is actually able to be stated

(which is not always the case), the **how** and the **when** usually takes some time to become clear, and uncertainty in these areas is often stressful. Consider the following possible stress triggers. Which are relevant for you? Which are not? Can you see others being stressed by some of the things that may not cause you stress?

- **Loss of Competence (self and others)** – For some people change is stressful because of possible loss of competence. Will my skills be enough to help me succeed under the new conditions? Will this new manager hold the same standards as I do? Is our company losing its focus on quality or customer service? Will we be given too many responsibilities so I won't be able to do as good a job as I used to? The lack of information that commonly surrounds a change, at least at first, can feed this concern about competence as many questions are not able to be answered right away, and that contributes to the stress for some people.

- **Loss of Connection** – For some people change is stressful because of loss of connection. Relationships are disrupted, and it will take time to build up the trust I had in those established connections. Will that need for time be respected or will I be pushed to perform right away before I have solid relationships formed? How will people be treated in this change? If people are being let go, is that being done respectfully? Will the new direction be in alignment with my values so that I can continue to feel connected to the mission of this organisation/team?

- **Loss of Choice** – For some people change is stressful because of a concern over possible restriction of their behaviours. Will I be involved in the change; will I have a say? Will this new direction still allow for the possibilities that we had in the past, or is it closing some doors?

Where is my place in this new scenario; is my expertise and perspective valued? Will this change be over-engineered so that it takes months or years and we never get to the fun stuff?

- **Loss of Control** – For some people change is stressful because they aren't in control of it. They like to be in control of their roles, their projects, and their direction; and change messes this up. Even if on the other end of the change they'll have their control again, if they can't keep that control through the change, this is stressful. Why aren't we there already? If that's the direction we are going, let's go, darn it! Is the person leading this change competent? Will they get it right? Will the organisation be able to maintain focus and output through the change or will we lose ground?

As in many areas of our lives, awareness leads to opportunity. When we are aware of our stress triggers, we open up options for choices we can make to help reduce negative stress, and thus maintain our resilience through change.

Stress associated with change is often related to loss as well as uncertainty, although the focus of the loss or the area of ambiguity that is a concern differ. The principle for the remedy is the same across all four. Where there is a fear of a loss, find ways to increase more of what might be lost. During change, there is often ambiguity; there is a time when certain answers cannot be given, and different approaches are being tried out. Remember the Neutral Zone; this is an important part of the transition process for organisations and for individuals. Even though it may be uncomfortable to be in this space, out at sea, as it were, it is essential preparation for a solid landing at New Beginnings. To sustain yourself in the Neutral Zone, however, you may need to find ways to sustain yourself while at sea when you can't go down the street to the nearest restaurant.

Imagine a cup full of water. While the cup is full and doesn't have any holes, you can feel comfortable and confident that if you are thirsty, it will be there for you to take a drink. Now, a change comes along, and it may feel like your cup now has a hole and your water, your 'reserves', are being drained out. This is stressful. When the change you are dealing with is at the organisational level, you may not be able to plug your own cup. However, at some point you believe the hole will be plugged or even better you'll have a new, stronger cup; but until then, you're going to be worried about having water to quench your thirst unless you find a way to keep refilling the cup faster than the water is draining out.

If we apply this idea to the four types of stress triggers, we will see that we can reduce stress for ourselves (and that is key; we are not waiting for someone **else** to reduce our stress) by finding ways that **we** can pour more water into our cups while we wait for the uncertainty and ambiguity to get sorted out … and maybe by doing that, we can actually help that process to go faster on an organisational level.

In the **first situation** above, the stress triggers are **loss of competence**. People for whom this is a stress trigger often have lots of questions and want lots of information so that they will know what skills are needed and what standards will be held.

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During times of change, this information may not be available right away, thus the stress. Using our principle of finding ways to increase what is draining out of the cup, we would look for ways to increase the information that is so comforting to our sense of competence, even during this time of ambiguity. We need to pour more information into the cup during this time. If this is important to us, we could look for what information is available, we could do research to fill in as many gaps as we can, we can share that information with others or our manager. We can make lists of the questions we have and share those with leaders, as that will help them know what people want to know. We might also consider various scenarios and note what skills would be required under these scenarios. Note that if loss of competence/knowledge is not a stress trigger for you, this remedy might actually cause you stress. If this is the case, don't do it! These remedies are not to be used indiscriminately by all, but rather to be considered based on your own stress triggers.

In the **second situation**, stress is caused by concern over **loss of connection**. The change may result in loss of connections. So how can we add more of this flavour of water to our cup? What connections can we shore up? What new connections can we establish that are outside of the scope of the change? What can we do to ensure that people are being considered and treated fairly during this change? What support and connection can we offer to those leading the change? What support can we set up or offer to others who are experiencing the change? By intentionally focusing on this ourselves and finding ways **we** can add this connection to our own cups, the stress will go down during the time of uncertainty.

In the **third situation**, stress is caused by worry about **loss of choice and involvement**. Reducing stress here may mean focusing on areas, even small areas, where we do have choice. Volunteer to be involved in any aspect of the change, even if it isn't an obvious connection to your current role. Create opportunities for yourself and others to be involved in something outside of the change; go big picture and focus there for a while until the dust settles around the more immediate change.

In the **fourth situation**, stress is caused by **loss of control**. Following the same principle, find things that you can control and focus there. What decisions can you still make, even during this time of uncertainty and change? What are the low hanging fruit, the tasks that still need to be accomplished even while the broader picture may be changing. Focus here, and that will fill your cup.

Ultimately, you have to determine how to best fill your cup given the change you are experiencing and what your particular stress triggers are. The important thing to remember is that the actions you come up with must be things you can do yourself. It won't work if you determine that what will reduce stress for you is for your manager to answer all your questions, or for your peers to invite you to a support group. Part of resilience comes from the knowledge that you have choice; that you can respond in an intentional way that reduces your stress rather than just reacting to what is happening.

About the author

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Tanya came to Insights to follow her passion for helping individuals and teams develop and perform to their highest potential. She brings over 10 years of consulting and teaching experience to her role on the Insights US Consulting team. With a PhD in Industrial/Organisational Psychology, Tanya has worked as an internal and external consultant as well as a university instructor. She has also worked for and consulted with organisations across the globe, including: Boeing, Microsoft, Collective Brands, Seattle Pacific University, and Payless ShoeSource. Her varied background and strong listening skills allow her to help clients get to the heart of the issue in order to move to new levels of performance.