

Embracing Change

As a manager, HR professional, or employee, how do you handle the psychological aspects related to changes within an organization?

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Introduction

Organizations are like forests: They're in a constant state of flux. They grow or shrink. New recruits are always arriving. The tallest trees have to make room for emerging shoots if they want to continue to grow. Biodiversity is always either increasing or decreasing. Two forests might grow into each other and merge.

During her consultations, Madelief Falkmann, a psychologist at OpenUp, hears many stories of people who are seeing their organizations – and as young shoots or mature birches, their places within them – changing. For example, think of acquisitions that may result in changing hierarchies or lines of communication. Or colleagues dropping out and leaving. Maybe a new manager arriving with a different management style. Perhaps a promotion or a change in your job duties. The list goes on and on.

For executives, as well as HR managers and employees alike, change is almost always accompanied by some kind of challenge. Some of these may be of a more practical nature, while others will be more human in nature. In this eBook, with Madelief sharing her wisdom about management changes, we're going to be looking at the human side.

Decide below which chapters are relevant to you by seeing which statement(s) apply to you.

- a. "Hey, I'm a manager. I really want to know how I can navigate changes as well as possible for the sake of my employees." See tips 1 to 5 and also 9
- b. "Hi, I work in HR. How can I contribute to making changes and transitions as smooth as possible?" Read all the tips!
- c. "Help, I'm an employee! My organization or role has changed. What should I do?" See tips 6 to 8

Change: an important theme?

Before we take a deep dive into these practical tips, let's first look at why change is an important topic to consider as an executive, HR manager, or employee.

"People often feel comfortable when there's a status quo. We like the sense of security. That's why we often fall into habits or set patterns," explains Madelief, a psychologist at OpenUp. "This means that, by nature, we have an aversion to change."

"Whatever form this change may take," says Madelief, "employee emotions will always be involved." These emotions can be either positive or negative. And all of these emotions need to be attended to. For example, you can give positively-minded people an extra boost by offering them support so that they can get the most out of the new situation. Those who are less enthusiastic about the change also need support. Maybe as they navigate uncertainties, fears and doubts.

This means that it is very important to be mindful of the personal and psychological consequences of organizational changes.



Across these nine lessons, Madelief explains the principles we can use to do this:

1 **Don't underestimate the impact of an organizational change**

Every employee is different. This means that everybody copes with change in different ways. "Some people jump at the chance to change things. Meanwhile others might feel insecure, disappointed, or anxious. They might struggle to comprehend what is happening, be resistant, or experience stress," explains Madelief. "Show that you understand these different emotions. They're all valid."

Be cautious about your expectations for the pace at which employees will adapt to the new situation. "People need to find their place. To feel safe and comfortable again by adopting new patterns and habits. That doesn't happen overnight; it takes time."

That's why Madelief advises executives and HR managers to encourage employees to experiment with their roles. "The other day I had a client who had to reinvent herself and her role in the wake of a new manager." By explicitly declaring that this is a period of experimentation, of trial and error, you're offering a certain degree of security:

A sense that it is okay to feel uncertain during times of transition.



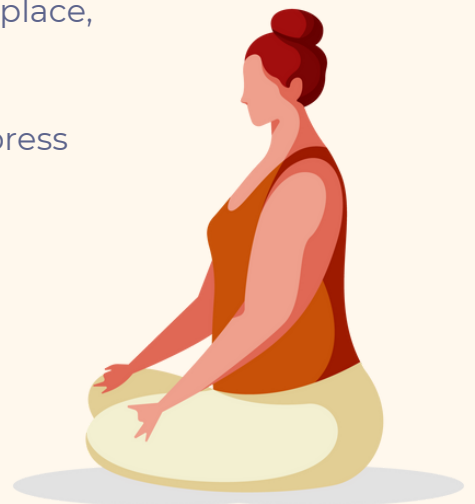
2 Communicate!

Communication is the key to a healthy organization. During every phase of a particular change, it's important to understand what's going on with employees, and to be clear about what employees need from supervisors, from HR managers, or from the organization itself to make the transition successful.

Offer employees the space to ask all their questions and voice their concerns without being judged. "If it's possible, I would always recommend having these conversations one-on-one," says Madelief. "During these conversations try to identify what uncertainties, thoughts, desires, and needs the employee currently has so that you can respond accordingly." Enter the conversation with an open mind. Your aim isn't to preach at this person. Your goal is to listen and understand. We say this a lot at OpenUp, but that's only because it's so true: In conversations like this you need to be open, honest and curious.

3 But also invite communication

If you want to have an open conversation with employees about their feelings related to the changes that are taking place, then you need to create a safe environment – an environment where people feel free to express their emotions. [\[Link to an earlier eBook\]](#)



By creating a feedback culture, you make it easier for people to share their thoughts. As a manager, you can create a feedback culture by asking for feedback on your managerial style and by being open about your own doubts and uncertainties. Also, by addressing your employees as equals. "That way people feel that they're being invited to be open and honest," explains Madelief.

"In these conversations, you need to be open to resistance: Not everyone in the company is going to feel equally enthusiastic about these changes. More than anything, don't get defensive. This is counterproductive: It will actually just make people feel even more resistant."

Also, keep an eye out for people who maybe aren't so good at expressing themselves: Don't let them get lost in the shuffle. People who are less resilient might become dejected, afraid or angry, and may turn inwards as a result. Try to make sure you're also offering people like this a solid level of support. Create space so that they can have conversations about their mental health, whether it's related to events that are going on within or outside of the organization. For example, offer them opportunities to speak to a confidant, HR, an (external) coach, or a psychologist.

"Be aware that it's possible to gradually lose people along the way. This is why continuous engagement is so important," explains Madelief.

In short: Communication is the key to success.

4 Transparency is the second key to success

There's a strong link between communication and transparency. If your organization is undergoing a change, Madelief explains, then transparency should be the goal. Communication is how you get there.

Why should transparency be the goal? Madelief: "There's little as demoralizing as having a change imposed on you and feeling that you haven't been involved in the process." The sooner you start addressing this, the better. Even if it's not entirely clear what the end goal will be. "Make employees a part of the change," advises Madelief.

There are various ways you can keep employees informed about the upcoming changes. Consider written updates and information meetings. "Don't just focus on answering 'what' questions, but also give people the 'why'. Explaining why certain choices are being made can make people feel a greater sense of commitment. Presenting a timeline for the change is also a good idea. This way people know where they stand."

5 Be positive

"If you as an executive or HR manager aren't completely behind the change and it shows, then your employees will notice and, as a result, be less committed," explains Madelief. "This means that during conversations, information meetings and written updates, you need to focus on the positive outcomes that the change is likely to bring about. Whether that's for individuals, for teams, or for the organization as a whole." Employees will feel motivated if they know that they are working towards a better future.

Be aware that there's a fine line here: Earlier Madelief advised that it's important to be open and honest about your uncertainties. But there's a limit to this. According to Madelief, sometimes you need to "push passed your own beliefs".

As a manager or HR professional, it's okay for you to say that you're feeling nervous and that you hope all of your employees will feel comfortable in the new situation. That's obviously very different from saying that you don't support the upcoming change. Conclusion? Do express your uncertainties. Don't actively object to what's happening.

You can also pick specific people in the organization and make them responsible for raising awareness about the upcoming changes. These are your so-called ambassadors. Madelief explains: "Think of your ambassadors as kind of like influencers. They are people who support the change and have a positive reputation within the organization. They're able to encourage other employees to get on board with the change. They're also the kind of approachable people that employees might turn to if they have a question."

Try something different

Regardless of how big or small the organizational change is – whether it's a new colleague or a merger – celebrating significant moments in a special way can help to put a positive spin on the change. Be creative!

Throw a party to strengthen bonds between (old and new) colleagues; ask an artist to produce a piece of work honoring the organization or change; arrange an exhibition full of portrait photos of all employees in their first year at the company versus now; make a book where each employee gets to share their most memorable moment at work; go on a weekend away together; or organize a film contest where each team gets to make their own short film and then screen it and possibly win an award during a real-life Oscar evening.

6 Take ownership of your position within the organization

The next obvious question is: How do you cope with these organizational changes yourself? Whether you're a manager, HR professional, or general employee, at some point, you'll have to address this.

"People with a growth mindset are the best at adapting to changes within an organization. They're also the ones that will benefit the most from it. People with a growth mindset see changes as an opportunity to develop as people and gain new skills," explains Madelief. For example, if you need to do project management in your new role even though don't have any experience with it, try to think: I have never tried that before, so I think I should definitely be able to do it. And yes, that is a quote from Pippi Longstocking – just think, if Pippi could lift a horse with her growth mindset, there's no telling what you can do.



In contrast to the growth mindset, you have the so-called fixed mindset. People with this attitude see change as just an opportunity to fail. If you have trouble recognizing opportunities for growth and are struggling to break out of your fixed mindset, there are a few things you can do:

- Try to get a better understanding of your own competencies and decide, based on this, in which areas you'd like to grow. Ask for feedback from colleagues and acquaintances. Perhaps “360-degree feedback” is something you might be interested in. There are various tools on the internet that can help you with this.
- Take a moment to consider where your skills lie, what your values are, and what drives you. Based on this, can you figure out what you need to thrive in new circumstances? Discuss this with your manager. Everyone will benefit from this!
- Still struggling? Then ask your manager if you can do an appropriate training or (external) coaching program.

7 Be a chameleon

Along with your mindset, your adaptability is the key to your success when your organization is undergoing a change. "Research shows that people who are more adaptable perform better at work, regardless of how complex their job is," says Madelief, referring to a 2015 study by Ohme and Zacher. [\[link\]](#) If you're more adaptable, then you'll usually have higher self-confidence, be more content, and apply more meaning to your work.

Your adaptability, or either capacity for change or resilience, are partly an ingrained part of your personality: Everybody has a natural tendency to respond to events and setbacks in certain ways. But, to a certain degree, you can improve your adaptability, by taking training courses where you work on your so-called coping style.

8 **Speak up about your doubts**

If you feel resistant, tense, uncertain, or stressed about the changes that are going on or coming up in your organization, don't just sit with it. Engage in conversation.

Before you go into these conversations, it's a good idea to map out for yourself exactly what your pain points are. "At the practice, I sometimes come across cases of people who have seen a decrease in their autonomy at work. For example, because additional managers have been brought in, or because they suddenly have to keep a strict hourly log of their activities," explains Madelief. "I always ask these people why autonomy is so important to them. And how it affects them when they see it decline. I then recommend that they speak to their managers about these feelings."

When doing this, consider which elements lie within or outside your circle of influence. Try not to struggle against things that you have no control over. This will only frustrate you. Instead, focus on the things that you can control: You can't stop the rain, but you can put on a raincoat. For example, you may not be able to get out of using the hourly logging system, but you can ask your manager to agree to letting you use it in a more flexible manner.

9 Provide room for growth

A forest won't grow if it doesn't get any rain or sun. Similarly, your employees won't grow if you don't create the right conditions. If the changes within your organization are going to mean job role changes for your employees, then it's a good idea to consider what your employees might need to perform these new roles to the best of their abilities. Madelief: "For example, do your employees need support in learning new skills? Then offer training programs or coaching."

"And once again: Give your employees the space to make mistakes and adjust to the new situation." Change doesn't happen overnight.



Don'ts

You now know what to do. But what should you definitely not do?

You might think that some of the items on the list below are stating the obvious, but it's sometimes easy to overlook the obvious. So here we go.

- Things you should avoid doing when changes are about to take place within your organization:
- Pushing decisions through without consulting the relevant employees
- Not being transparent about the changes.
- Not communicating about the changes until decisions have already been made
- Focusing on what will change rather than why
- Not being open enough to employee input
- Not being open enough to employee emotions
- Focusing too much on the practical side of the process, at the expense of the human side
- Not offering support or (external) coaching

Experiences with OpenUp

The mental well-being of employees is of vital importance. When you deal with this as an organisation in a careful and open way, you will get more satisfied, involved and productive employees in return.

It can also be very helpful for employees to receive neutral and professional support. In addition, there is a growing need to deal with mental challenges and personal development themselves. At OpenUp, employees can go within 24 hours for a 1-on-1 consultation with a psychologist. They also get access to useful webinars, self-help programmes, surveys and more.

55%

One of the employees states that they have never been in contact with a psychologist before.

95%

In 95% of the cases, we solve the request for help; the remaining 5% we guide employees to insured care.

97%

97% of employees recommend OpenUp to a friend or colleague.

9.6

Employees give the conversations with a psychologist an average of 9.6.

"With good reason, I call you OpenUp, because it has helped me to make contact in an approachable way, to open myself up to the conversations and ultimately to achieve or start to achieve (new) goals."

"To the point, no nonsense and practical, but without immediately shooting in 'easy solutions'."

Let's OpenUp

We are entering a new phase that requires care and attention. The mental health and resilience of employees is of great importance to successfully pass the coming period.

We are ready to help. Call or email our head of partnerships Djurre Jansen to find out what OpenUp can do for your organisation.



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