

TOOLS OF THE TRADE



In a new series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she looks at Elisabeth Kubler Ross' *Change Curve* five-stage model

One of the greatest challenges for corporate staff today is constant and unwanted change; there are mergers, acquisitions and demergers, chief executives moving on every few years or less, new systems to contend with which may change the demographic of whole departments and similar situations which employees can feel are inflicted upon them.

The Change Curve was devised by Elisabeth Kubler Ross, a Swiss psychiatrist who worked extensively with the bereaved and dying and was a key founder of the hospice movement. She noticed a pattern of reaction to news of impending death, which went through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance.

A number of variations on Kubler Ross' original stages have taken their place in corporate management training, and a reasonable representation of the corporate model is as follows:

Stage 1: Shock

People's faces may turn white on hearing the news that an unpopular boss is taking over the department, or the organisation is moving to the other end of the country, or the expected large-scale redundancies have turned out to include them personally.

TIP FOR THE BOSS: *Let people go away and take it in. They need to sleep on things, discuss with spouses and find out any facts that they need to know. When delivering bad news, set up a meeting to discuss it further so that they have a milestone to come back to; unconsciously, their thoughts will assemble themselves in time for the deadline and decisions will be made in a considered way.*

If you are announcing widespread change, ensure that no-one is left wondering what will happen to him. Give people a timetable so they know when they will find out.

Stage 2: Denial

People are still reeling from the shock of the unwelcome news, whether a change in reporting lines, a new and unwelcome boss, or worst fears being realised and redundancy happens. At this stage, the pending change takes up most of their focus and energy; conversations circle around the coming event, what it will be like and what it will mean to everyone.

If change is widespread across the whole organisation, very little can be achieved during this period. There is likely to be a sharp drop in motivation for all concerned, less loyalty and less diligence in performance.

TIP FOR THE BOSS: *Give people the chance to air their anxieties; while not comforting them with false hope, take as positive a slant as possible, highlighting the advantages the change might bring.*

Stage 3: Anger

People feel anger at themselves for allowing the situation to happen, perhaps seeing a desired promotion go to a rival or failing to keep their jobs during mass redundancies. Greater anger may be felt against the organisation, a sense of unfairness and 'why me?' Focus and energy still revolve around the pending change.

TIP FOR THE BOSS: *While empathising with the dilemma and being sensitive to people's uncertainty and fear, it is important to hold people responsible for their reactions; work must not be allowed to slip and a clear expectation of professional standards should be demonstrated.*

Point out that, even if someone is losing a job, nothing can be gained by a dip in performance and, indeed, much may be lost in terms of possible recommendations and testimonials. This should be done with kindness and in a supportive way.

It is very important at this time to model the behaviour you wish to see in others.

Stage 4: Letting go

As the realisation that change is inevitable sets in, people start to let go of the old regime and think more towards the future; eventually, they have no choice because change is to be upon them.

It is necessary to lose old habits and develop new ones and this can be the most challenging time as habits are powerful regulators and want everything to stay as it is, unchallenged and within the comfort zone.

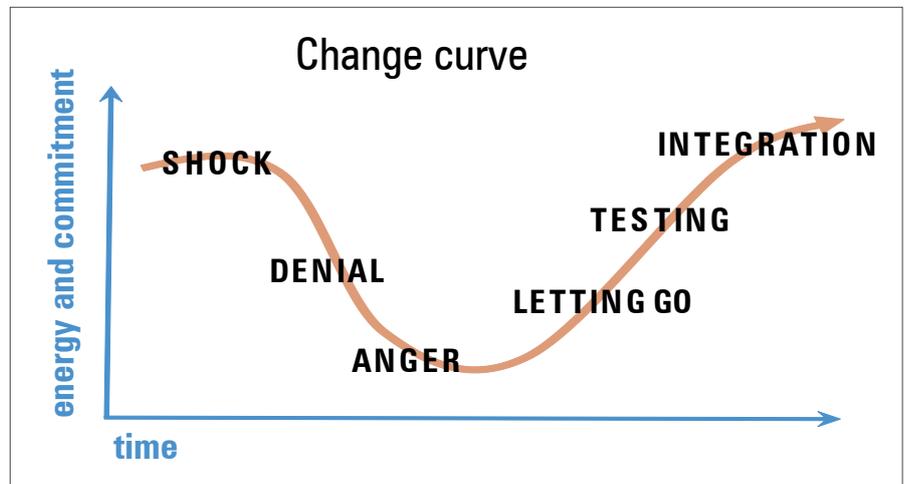
Changing a deep-seated habit is akin to breaking an addiction; many aspects come into play depending on the situation – psychological, relationship-wise and even physical, if someone has to change the location or routine of their work.

TIP FOR THE BOSS: *Time spent listening to people and supporting them will be well invested now. Do not underestimate the discomfort they are experiencing, even if you would not feel the same if it happened to you; honour people's own reactions, values and experiences as being different from your own, and put your focus on trying to understand their needs, rather than bending them to your own. Remind them that everything passes and this also will pass.*

Stage 5: Testing

Given support and a decision to choose to make the best of the situation, people step forward, warily at first, and give themselves permission to believe that there may be some advantages in their new situation; they may even find they like the new ways better than the old.

TIP FOR THE BOSS: *Validate every positive remark, attitude or step forward that people take. This is not a time for seeing things done exactly as you want them and there will be far more advantages to you in being flexible and letting people handle new situations and tasks in their own way. The fact that they want to take action at all under the new regime is a major win.*



Stage 6: Integration

The old situation no longer exists, nor is it thought about much; the new regime is established and supporting the workforce, and performance and energy are high.

TIP FOR THE BOSS: *Reward everyone who made it this far. Show how much you understand what they have been through and that you admire them for creating the current situation. This is a time for thanks and recognition.*

One of Kubler Ross' contentions was that the key element needed to deal with change is time; managers today rarely have that luxury.

I recently worked with 20 managers from a major financial institution who, on being asked where they were on the Change Curve, said that they went through the whole curve every day and expected to continue that way for the next two years.

Looking at the model can alleviate some of the stress when people realise that the sometimes intense emotions of anger and despair that they are feeling are normal human reactions, that they are not alone in these feelings and that there is hope that in time, they will grow into a more positive state of mind.

The coach can contribute, firstly, by asking clients to consider whereabouts they are in the five stages

and, secondly, by asking where they would like to be. This will create new perspectives and give people the realisation that they have a choice, if not in the situation itself, at least about their own reaction to it. This will, in turn, give them a sense of control, raising their energy and shrinking problems.

Elisabeth Kubler was born in Switzerland and studied at Zurich University. She married fellow medical student, American Emanuel Ross, in 1958 and travelled with him to America.

Working in major hospitals in New York, Colorado and Chicago, she was distressed by the way dying people were treated, without dignity or respect, and began a series of lecture tours to change matters.

The publication of her book *On Death and Dying* brought her theories to the attention of a much wider audience and it has since been translated into 30 languages.

Elisabeth Kubler Ross (www.elisabethkublerross.com) died in 2004. ■

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