

## Achieving The Balance During Change By Creating Pockets Of Certainty

When “change” occurs, it creates an environment of uncertainty. Most of us can instantly relate to the down side of uncertainty:

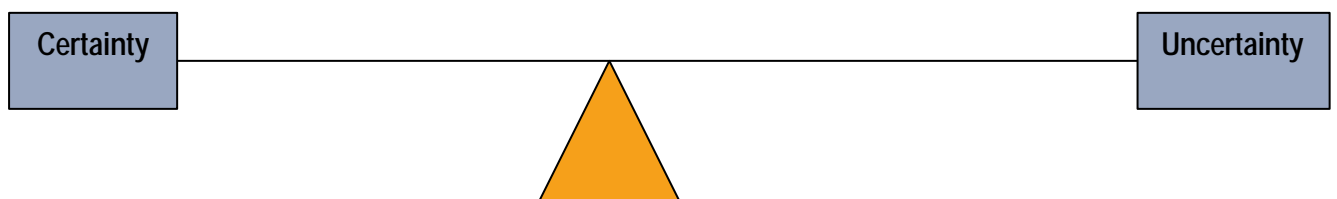
- Confusion
- Doubt
- Anger / frustration
- Unknown future
- No structure
- Feeling vulnerable.

Sometimes the work place can appear to be consumed with the negative impact of change. As HR professionals, we are required to “manage” the change or the “fallout” of an organisational intervention or are required to simply work with daily change issues that are part of life / work progression.

As part of managing the uncertainty of change, have you considered working with individuals or groups to identify the up-side of uncertainty? (Or reframing the word “change” to uncertainty, or learning?) Upsides may include:

- A challenge
- The innovation
- Growth
- Creating new ideas
- Excitement
- Possibility
- Paradigm shifts.

The dynamics of the change process (like nature) is such that when there is no balance between certainty and uncertainty (such as a departmental restructure). We crave the opposite (in this case stability).



This lack of balance for team members can produce statements such as “why do we have to change?” “What’s wrong with the old way?” “It will never work!” or “Management around here have no idea of the impact of this.”

Behaviours stemming from this feeling of uncertainty include apathy, frustration, aggression, absenteeism, “work to rule”, lack of decision making or an over dependence on the supervisor or manager to provide direction. The group / team attitude will often be negative and look like “gossip”, which will spiral individuals down to experience change as loss.

This loss has a similar impact to grief and there is usually no time or space for mourning within organisations. So, the spiral continues to move down and behaviours, attitudes and commitment take a dive for the worse. We attempt to manage the pieces with the individuals, but at some stage we start to feel within ourselves that this is a helpless situation. It feels too big and too hard to handle.

If any of these ring true for you, then take a step back from the changes you are working within and manage the behaviours, emotions and attitudes at a higher level.

### **So, how do we do this?**

We need individuals to manage themselves and provide an environment that has a balance between uncertainty and certainty. The strategy that can achieve this during times of great uncertainty is what we call “creating pockets of certainty” (obviously the opposite would be required if any one within the organisation was experiencing too much certainty, e.g. boredom, unchallenged, etc.).

### **Tangible examples of creating pockets of certainty**

When communicating “the change” e.g. restructure, new processes, new staff, redundancy, etc., communicate what you know as well as the uncertain components, and stress the aspects that will remain the same. Sometimes this will require a re-think in the way we notice what continues to be certain. For example, “We will be keeping the following departments the same...” or “ We will continue with regular performance feedback, goal setting and appraisal systems. Other strategies include:

- What do you know now? Tell your team (avoid waiting until all details are known);
- Create short term goals and objectives for each team member and the group;
- Give more feedback, more often;
- Create stability from successful daily /weekly performance;

- Remind the team and individuals what is working / what is going well;
- Highlight areas or departments that are not changing, and communicate this;
- Confirm the parts of the business / organisation that will remain the same;
- State what part of each person's / department's role will continue in a similar way as before;
- Create an environment that welcomes new learning, new ways, more efficiency, less stress, etc.
- Praise continuous learning, reaffirm this is a constant for the future
- Link to past - systems, methods, etc. that worked and still continue to work successfully (avoid the "everything in the past is 'bad' mentality)
- Use supportive metaphors (e.g. this re-structure is like a software upgrade or new software, new recipe, etc.)
- Set or continue on with career plans / succession planning in place, and communicate this
- Continue and make more time for recognition of individuals, teams and the organisation
- Talk about the part of the future that is known or agreed (i.e. corporate goals / mission, customer needs, etc.)
- Tell your team first - in person (avoid grapevine, newspaper or unions sending the message).

The aim is to find pockets of certainty where for periods of time individuals and /or the team can have a sense of stability, clarity, routine, and discover what is known to have it acknowledged.

Apart from actions you or other managers can take, we need to create and encourage environments where individuals can provide their own pockets of certainty. Some roles, by their very nature, will always have high levels of uncertainty. To avoid burnout or job dissatisfaction, assisting individuals to create certainty in their personal life will maintain the balance (self management). For example:

- Gym or physical activity, scheduled regularly
- Sporting events
- Hobbies
- Reflection or tranquil time
- Personal space
- Meditation
- A regular evening out with spouse
- Same venue, or time for lunch
- Regular days off (or at least one that is constant / known)
- Family events held regularly and with purpose
- Social committees within work.

So, if you are embarking on a change process where the balance will be tipped towards even greater uncertainty, what strategies will you be putting in place to provide the balance? How will you assist the organisation manage individuals to find and create pockets of certainty, in order to allow the maximum benefit of the exciting and challenging energy of uncertainty?

### **Case Study**

One organisation, as part of its change management process in a major restructure, and as part of their follow up strategy, conducted monthly “briefing” sessions facilitated by the CEO. Six half hour identical sessions were held over a two day period, at various times throughout the day to allow anyone on the shift to attend, hear about the latest developments, achievements, successes and goals, and to ask any questions (a video was also available). After the first year of these sessions (and other strategies), an employee survey revealed that 93% of staff felt highly satisfied with how they were being communicated with. Expressions such as “I felt listened to”, “I have a vital role in this company”, etc. emphasise the success of this and other strategies in place. However, this story has a sad ending. After a change in CEO (who could see no need for the sessions), the organisation experienced a 120% turnover 9 months later!

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