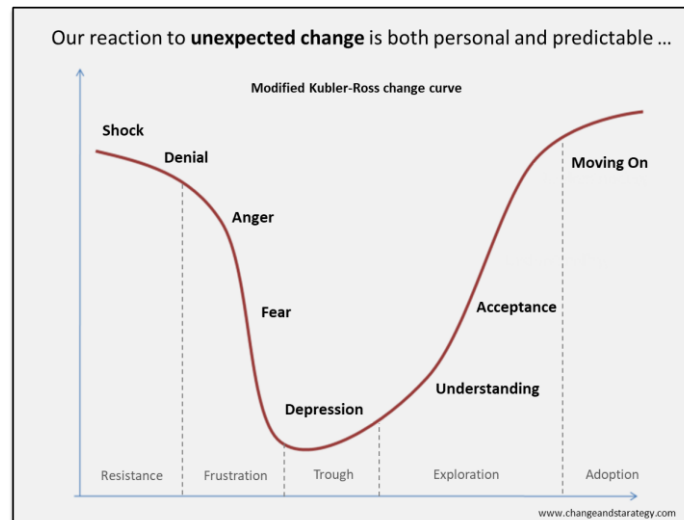


The Burning Platform Change Curve Exercise: Our emotional reactions to big change that is done to us



Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist (1926-2004) who worked with terminally-ill patients, observed the emotional states experienced by people who were dying as published in her first and seminal book, *“On Death and Dying”* (Simon & Schuster, 1969). Her work was expanded and refined in dozens of following books, including *“On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss”* (Scribner 2005) with grief expert, David Kessler.

The Kubler Ross Model has since become known as The Grief Curve or The Change Curve.

The Burning Platform Change Curve is an adapted version of her work. It identifies five stages – and even more sub-stages - that most people through in response to change that is imposed on us.

These emotional reactions to change are predictable, powerful and completely normal.

Successful change requires leaders to support and assist their people during the change process – to help them navigate the Burning Platform Change Curve.

Stage 1: Resistance - Shock and Denial

Shock is often the first reaction to big change that is forced upon us. It can give rise to feelings of being overwhelmed, an inability to reason, understand or plan. When we are in a state of shock, we aren't listening. We are frozen, like a rabbit caught in the headlights.

When people are faced with news of organisational change, they often find others to discuss the changes with – they meet at the coffee machine, in the canteen or in the smoking area to discuss the change, check out common understanding and to share information. After the initial shock they may minimise the change, seeing it as trivial “Yes, there are a few minor problems ... but we don't need to change.” This is a mild form of denial.

Then comes Denial where we refuse to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that a change is or will be taking place. This can provide time for a temporary retreat from reality whilst we build up internal strength. For as Kubler-Ross herself said: *“Denial helps us to pace our feelings of grief. There is a grace in denial. It is nature's way of letting in only as much as we can handle.”*

Questions:

- How do deal with /assist people who are experiencing shock?
- How do you help people to accept that the changes really are going to happen?

Stage 2: Frustration - Anger, Blame, Fear and Bargaining

Anger is commonly the next reaction once the full realities of the situation sink in. This is the first time we begin to admit that things are changing/have changed.

Anger is often accompanied by fear of the future and our role in it. This is a time when it is difficult to know how to cope with problems, changes and life in general. And the feelings can be extreme. Obviously, our performance levels drop through the floor.

Bargaining may also take place to try to avoid the change. We may suggest a deal to try to prevent the change. ("What if I go to 3 days week?", "What if we altered the planned structure ...?") If that doesn't work, we are likely to do one of three things: increase our resistance to change, leave or enter the trough of depression.

Questions:

- *How do you deal with people venting their anger, or being resentful and their performance decreases?*
- *How do you manage people who are anxious and fearful of the change?*
- *How do you engage with people who want bargain?*

Stage 3: The Trough of Depression

The Trough can be shallow and long, short and sweet or very deep indeed. It is also necessary; a time to grieve. Self-confidence is low and performance is poor. It is a dangerous time for organisations for if the best performers lose heart, they will look for new opportunities elsewhere.

While time in the Trough may be cathartic, wallowing in this state for too long is unhelpful. The Trough is where victims live. Victimhood can be weirdly seductive but it is insidious and offers cold comfort. Victims not only blame others for their current situation but they can also convince

themselves that responsibility for getting out of the Trough is also someone else's. It isn't. The responsibility is theirs; the choice to act is theirs. As a leader, your job is to help your people to want to take control - and give them the assistance they need to act.

Questions:

- *What do you do with people who are feeling helpless or depressed?*
- *How will you manage your best performers who feel demotivated?*
- *How can you help your people to want to change?*

Stage 4: Exploration - Understanding & Acceptance

As they emerge from the Trough, our brains start to understand that the change is actually happening, opportunities exist and we have the power to make good things happen. We start to take control of the future. We begin to explore different options for the future - with great bursts of energy and fluctuating optimism.

Then the heart kicks in and we start to Accept and genuinely believe in the future. We are now looking at the present reality and future possibilities rather than lamenting about the past. Once the new situation is accepted, our self-confidence rises and once more optimism becomes possible. Our performance begins to rise.

Question: *How do you support people during this stage?*

Stage 5: Adoption - Moving On

Now we start to integrate the changes; tackle the new challenges; adopt the new behaviours; adopt the new ways of working. Our commitment increases and performance starts to rise.

But the Change Curve is rarely a one-way street. The forces against sustainable change are too strong. At the first major setback, it can be easy to lose confidence and slip back down the curve. The Change Curve is not a one-off; it is a part of life.

Question: *How will you help your people to sustain the new behaviours; to thrive in the new world?*