

# Managing the Cycle of Change

Resisting change is normal, but it is problematic for organizations looking to make changes or implement new technologies.

**Kevin Craine**

**I**t is common to take great care in selecting and implementating new technology. Interactions between hardware and software are cautiously investigated; operating systems and network connections are carefully tested, and uptime on critical systems is painstakingly protected. But one very influential factor that is often overlooked in action plans and contingency scenarios is the natural and emotional reactions of people when things change. If individuals resist change, find ways to sabotage efforts, or become angry or withdrawn, it is unlikely that even the best technology strategies will be successful.

Resistance to change is often a more troubling problem than even the most complicated tangle of technology. To make matters worse, rapid innovation in technology is forcing people to face change at an ever-quickening pace. This rapidity, coupled with the apparently inevitable and chronic “technical difficulties” associated with high-tech change, has given rise to a pattern of resistance that has become a norm of corporate culture. Because people often automatically resist change, it is imperative to mitigate the negative effects of people’s reactions while implementing changes in technology, processes, and workflow.

## Resisting Change Is Natural

Perhaps creative thinker and author Roger Von Oech said it best: “There are two basic rules of life: Change is inevitable, and everybody resists change.” Resisting change is as congenital as being frightened of the dark, having a crush at age 16, or laughing at the Three Stooges. Little can be done to avoid these reactions. They are natural, emotional, and inevitable. This

## At the Core

### This article

- ▶ Examines the natural reaction of resisting change
- ▶ Introduces the change cycle, or stages people go through when faced with change
- ▶ Discusses how to help individuals in the various stages of change

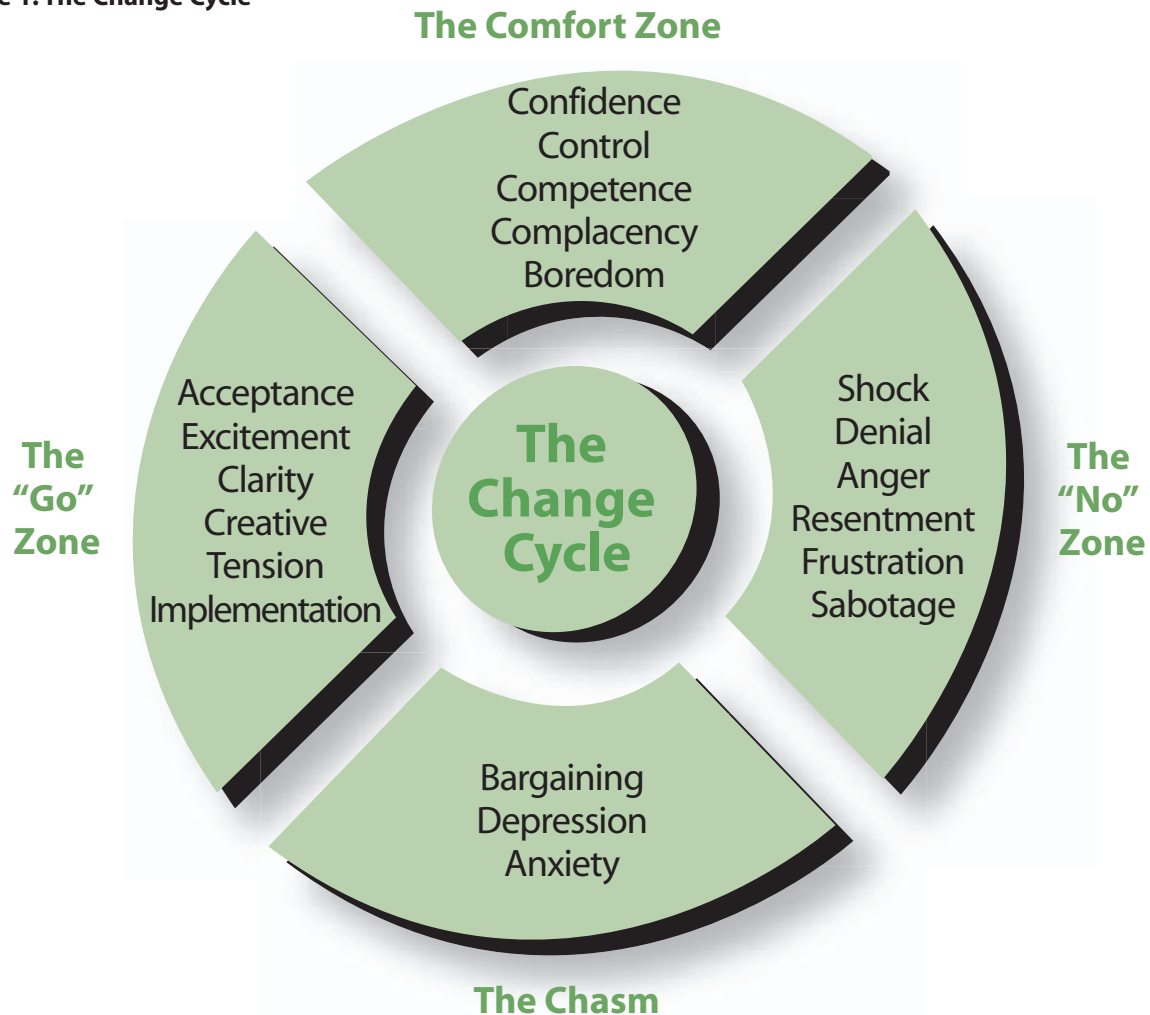
innate resistance to change occurs because most people like things to be comfortable and familiar. They like to feel capable and confident in their work. Change affects people’s ability to feel comfortable, capable, and confident because it means that they must learn new systems, work in new ways, and accept new responsibilities.

People facing change often go through a cycle of emotions similar to those experienced when faced with the death of a loved one. Thus, by understanding the “grieving” process people use to deal with change, it may be possible to reduce some of the potentially damaging consequences. “The change cycle” is a four-step cycle of emotions that individuals are likely to experience when faced with change. (See Figure 1.)

## The Comfort Zone

The “comfort zone” is where people reside emotionally before dramatic change occurs. When people are in their comfort zones, they feel in control of their lives and work. Generally, they are happy and comfortable with the way things are. They are confident in their abilities and feel capable of handling whatever situations arise. When people are asked to use new processes or perform new duties, their comfort zones and routines are disrupted, and they may feel that their control over their work is diminished. They might lose confidence when “the way we’ve always done it” gives way to something new and unknown. These people are not necessarily laggards who are unwilling to join the causes of improvement and innovation. However, most people would rather feel a little bit stagnant, complacent, and bored than face the possibility of stepping out of their comfort zones.

**Figure 1: The Change Cycle**



Source: *Designing a Document Strategy*. Used with permission.

**To Assist Yourself in the Comfort Zone:**

- Notice the situations in which you experience ease and comfort.
- Notice the situations in which you experience stagnation and a lack of growth.
- Create a development plan for the situations you want to change.

**To Assist Others in the Comfort Zone:**

- Encourage creativity and cross-functional innovation.
- Acknowledge, celebrate, and reward success.
- Plan for future changes.

**The 'No' Zone**

"No!" is the common reaction of people who are being forced from their comfort zones. The "no zone" is the beginning of the end of the way things have always been and is characterized by several forms of reaction:

- *Shock:* Like deer frozen in the headlights of an oncoming vehicle, people often become psychologically paralyzed at the news of change in their work lives. Their shock immediately affects their performance. Although they finish their basic tasks, people tend to shut down and often require someone or something to break their trance-like stare into the onrushing headlights of change. When people are physically in shock, medical experts cover them with a warm blanket. What people need now, in psychological terms, is also a "warm blanket." Now is not the time to reason with them about all the ways change is good. Now is the time for emotional first aid – listening and understanding "where it hurts" will help mitigate the trauma of change.
- *Denial:* After their initial shock, people may enter a stage of denial. This defense mechanism acts as a buffer and allows people to collect themselves. It is not uncommon to hear comments like: "This won't affect our department" or "I give it six months and it'll pass." At times, denial can take form in

extensive rituals. For example, a person may ardently dispute the findings of a report and claim that the data must be in error – or insist that endless meetings be held (and then not show up). Some people, like patients unhappy with their doctor’s diagnosis, will shop around with other managers or sponsors until they find someone with a more reassuring second opinion.

- *Anger*: When they can no longer deny the inevitable, people often become angry. Anger is difficult to manage because it can be channeled in so many different directions and thrust into the workplace almost at random. In contrast to denial, which is for the most part internalized to an individual, a person who is angry affects everyone around him or her. One way to cope is by stepping into the shoes of that angry person and asking where the anger comes from. People who are respected and understood soon lower their voices and reduce their angry demands.
- *Resentment, Frustration, and Sabotage*: Some of the anger people feel may manifest as resentment, frustration, or sabotage. People may resent change agents for upsetting their comfort zone. They may secretly envy those in charge and feel frustrated that their control has been eroded. They may become passive-aggressive and subtly sabotage efforts by doing nothing, hoarding information, or providing erroneous information. If the actions of management have been ineffective in the past, people may truly hold in contempt those in authority based on their experience.

The “no zone” is an emotional phase. It is difficult and delicate for everyone involved. Resistance to change is at its peak. Those who are the targets of change will not be willing to plan for the future. A dialogue must take place before planning, but only when people are ready to face it.

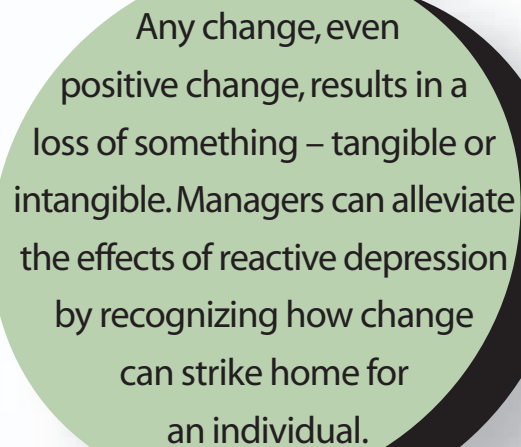
It is equally important, however, that resistive people not hold the project hostage. If managers believe their motives are sound and their solutions are viable, it is more important now than ever to hold the course.

#### ***To Assist Yourself in the No Zone:***

- Identify the reality of the current circumstances.
- Acknowledge the losses you are experiencing.
- Identify your feelings about the situation.
- Reframe “danger” into “opportunity.”

#### ***To Assist Others in the No Zone:***

- Give information about the purpose for the change.
- Provide a picture of the expected outcome.
- Provide clear, specific expectations.
- Provide a historical context.
- Be there for others in small, supportive ways.
- Listen to worries and fears.



Any change, even positive change, results in a loss of something – tangible or intangible. Managers can alleviate the effects of reactive depression by recognizing how change can strike home for an individual.

#### **The Chasm**

People in “the chasm” are in limbo. They know they cannot go back, but each wonders: “How do I fit in this picture?” They must be allowed to reflect and discover their own view about their roles. Foster this process by helping people understand their roles in the change and how they can make it successful. Do this with education, training, and by planning people-specific roles.

It is imperative that a vision for the future is put in place while in the gap. Then, enact specific tactics to achieve that vision. A clear plan is critical because people in the gap are sitting on the fence. They are not necessarily resisting change, but they have not given their complete commitment either. Now is the best opportunity to bring fence-sitters through the gap to acceptance. Without an understanding about where events are going and how everyone will get there, the opportunity to build employee commitment and acceptance will be lost.

#### **Bargaining**

Some people accept change quickly. Others figure that because denial and anger did not work, they can succeed in entering into some sort of agreement that will postpone the inevitable. For example, if a four-year-old does not get his way, he will stomp his foot and go sulk in his room. He will not accept “no” when he wants ice cream for breakfast. Soon, he’ll have second thoughts and put on extra-good behavior. “If I pick up all my toys, then can I have ice cream?” he’ll eventually ask. Adults will bargain, too. They will bargain for ways to get back to their comfort zone.

#### **Depression**

People in the gap also experience depression. It is important to draw a distinction between reactive and preparatory depression, because each is different in nature and should be dealt with quite differently.

*Reactive depression* happens when people react to, and become depressed by, the things that are taking place. They are worried about how change will affect basics like money, job, and family. The “downside” of change – reassignment, retraining, and reengineering – is evident, but even the “upside” has drawbacks. For instance, a golden opportunity presented to one lucky overachiever may actually result in a loss of precious family time at home. While the new job may look good on paper, this change represents a potentially disruptive force on a personal level. Any change, even positive change, results in a loss of something – tangible or intangible. Managers can alleviate the effects of reactive depression by recognizing how change can strike home for an individual.

*Preparatory depression*, on the other hand, does not occur as a result of what is presently happening, but rather, as the emotional process of preparing for what lies ahead. If managers allow people to grieve for the old ways, they will find acceptance of the new much easier. Preparatory depression is necessary for people to get ready for the impending change, yet the typical reaction to sad people is to try to cheer them up. “Look on the bright side” can be a useful approach when dealing with reactive depression, but when the depression is helping to prepare a person for impending change, cheery words are not meaningful. To look only at the sunny side of things means people are not allowed to contemplate how they fit in the picture of impending change.

### **Anxiety**

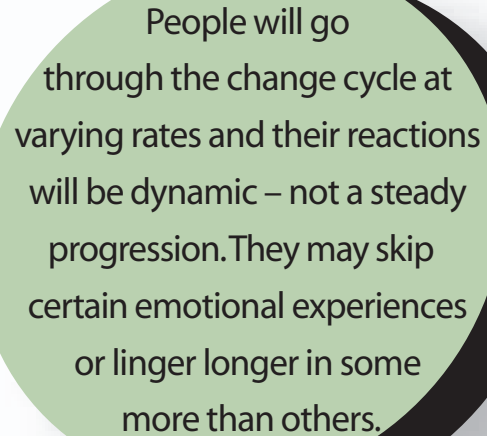
By now, people recognize that things are not going to be the way they were, but they don’t yet know the shape of the future. They are anxiously torn; part hanging on to the old, while part is accepting the new. When people feel anxious about their jobs, uncertain about where to place their trust, and unclear about the future, a dose of honest communication is critical. Managers must have the courage to describe reality as closely as possible to what they know reality to be. People need to know how change will affect their lives. If people are afraid of the dark, give them a flashlight and assure them there are no monsters hiding under the bed.

### **To Assist Yourself in the Chasm:**

- Discover what you want for the future.
- Get necessary information and support.
- Don’t let the naysayers drag you down.

### **To Assist Others in the Chasm:**

- Create “rites of passage.”
- Create temporary procedures.
- Create new ways for people to communicate and share information and feelings.



People will go through the change cycle at varying rates and their reactions will be dynamic – not a steady progression. They may skip certain emotional experiences or linger longer in some more than others.

### **The Go Zone**

The organization enters the “go zone” when everyone is truly on board and ready to go.

### **Acceptance**

If people have enough time and are given some help in working through the previous stages, they eventually come to a feeling of acceptance with a certain degree of expectation. Implementing some “rites of passage” at this point can be beneficial as a way to provide closure of the past and momentum toward the future. For example, one company took a displaced printer to the parking lot and allowed people to take turns whacking it with a sledgehammer. Another held a pizza party in an empty production facility before it was refitted for new office space. A third took a photo of the “old gang” and put the image on coffee mugs inscribed with “RIP” – rest in peace.

Some people never reach the necessary stage of acceptance, however. They fight to the end and struggle with every step. It is imperative that those who have been sitting on the fence and unwilling or unable to get enrolled in the change to either get on board or get out. They must be pressed to make a decision as they present a risk of undermining the commitment of those who have already come to accept change. Make expectations clear, set time limits, and take corrective action, including termination, if necessary. Acutely resistive people need to understand what they need to do to support the change and what will happen if they do not.

### **Excitement, Clarity, and Implementation**

In the go zone, the ship is pointed north, the winds are at our backs, and all hands are on deck. People have become excited

about the possibilities and are clear about their place in the paradigm. Now is the time to establish action items and cross-functional teams. Now is the time for technology implementation and project management. Now is the time for communication, collaboration, and clarity of expectations.

#### ***To Assist Yourself in the Go Zone:***

- Take action on issues within your area of control.
- Let go of what you cannot control.
- Visualize yourself (positively) in the new paradigm.

#### ***To Assist Others in the Go Zone:***

- Clarify purpose and desired outcomes (again).
- Involve the people affected by the change in planning and implementation.
- Celebrate small successes; publicly recognize new ideas and how they have been implemented.
- Provide ongoing feedback, training, and information.

People will go through the change cycle at varying rates and their reactions will be dynamic – not a steady progression. They may skip certain emotional experiences or linger longer in some more than others. Those who recognize and understand the emotional implications of change, as well as the technological hurdles that must be overcome, will more likely bring about meaningful and beneficial change in their organizations. ■

**Kevin Craine** is the author of *Designing a Document Strategy*, a book sold in 30 countries worldwide. He has worked in the field of information technology for 25 years and is an authority on document strategy design, process improvement, and business technology. He received his bachelor's degree in organizational communications and his master of business administration in the management of science and technology. He may be contacted at [Kevin@document-strategy.com](mailto:Kevin@document-strategy.com).

#### **References**

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