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Coping With Workplace Change (3 min read)

Change evokes fear in most people because of the uncertainty it presents. People wonder: Will I be adequate for this new position? Will I be able to get along with my new boss? Will the corporation my company is merging with allow me to keep my job?

"Major changes, such as new management, downsizing or a company buyout, can result in a feeling of panic," says Susan Starr, a human resource consultant and owner of H2O Marks, a Dallas-based marketing company.

Understanding change

When you have a routine, you know what to expect, and even if it's difficult or boring, it's consistent and reliable. You have learned how to do your work and deal with the people who work with you. But when something changes, suddenly your routine is broken and you no longer know what to expect.

Even if the change is for the better, the transformation can be difficult. For example, when one company installed a new phone system, a frustrated employee exclaimed, "I know it will be so much better once I get used to it, but right now the phones are driving me crazy."

"It is the same with any kind of change," says Ms. Starr. "There is a period of adjustment until you feel the consistency that builds trust and confidence. During this time, you may feel disoriented, frustrated, angry and powerless."

The best time to prepare for any change is when things are running smoothly. That way, you'll have time to plan ahead.

One way to do so is to practice the following four A's of coping with change:

Awareness

Since uncertainty about the future creates the most fear and stress during a change, try to find as much information as you can about your situation. Whom can you ask? What can you learn? What research can you do? The more you learn, the less uncertainty you'll experience. Behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed will help you cope with change.

Acceptance

You may not like the change, but if you accept the fact that it is the way it is, instead of fighting it or complaining about it, you'll feel less frustrated.

"It's important to accept transformations with grace and a sense of looking forward to a new experience," says Ms. Starr.

Attitude

Are you being fearful or are you thinking about the possibilities for improvement change might bring? To focus on the positive aspects of your change, write a list of all the possible positive outcomes.

Even though minor changes can cause stress and frustration, the good news is that any change can be an opportunity for something positive to happen. What's more, when you learn how to cope effectively with minor changes at work, you'll develop the skills and positive outlook necessary to help you deal with a major change.

Action

This is where you do have some control over the situation. It's how you prepare and respond to change.

The following positive actions can help you cope.

- Develop a network. Always keep in contact with your managers and fellow employees from former jobs. Your network will be a valuable resource in times of change.
- Learn new skills. Learn a new computer program. Take a class in communication skills. Learn to make presentations. Ongoing training will add skills to your professional tool kit.
- Change your surroundings. Do what you can to make your work area pleasant and comfortable.
- Ask action questions. Whom can you talk to if a situation is getting more difficult to cope with? How can you get to know a new boss or coworker? What ideas can you present to your company that will help with the change?

"The key to coping with change is resilience," says Ms. Starr. "Resilience means knowing how to survive and making the best of change in spite of setbacks, barriers or limited resources."

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