

## Developing Personal Flexibility: Positive Attitudes Toward Change



### In a Nutshell

Stretch! That word best summarizes my advice to people who want to become more flexible and respond to change more positively. What I mean is that the more we stretch ourselves and take on new challenges that require new skills, the more flexible we'll become. Certainly there are other habits and attitudes that we can develop to assist us in our efforts to become more flexible. I also recommend learning how to overcome irrational fears of change, boosting self-confidence, becoming proactive and involved during change processes, setting new goals, and anticipating change. But stretching is crucial.

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### Why We Don't Like Change

Being flexible in the face of change can be very difficult; we get committed to our plans, we want to be perceived as consistent and uncertainty bothers us. So, sometimes we're too rigid during times of transition.

***We like our current plans.*** One of the reasons we aren't always as flexible as we could be is that we like the plans we've already made and don't want to change them. We get committed to our goals and plans, and can become very focused on them. Sometimes we visualize ourselves realizing those goals, and imagine how satisfying that will be. In many ways, this commitment to goals is beneficial. It helps us stay productive in the midst of distractions. However, when changes occur that hurt our chances of realizing our goals, we're predisposed to disliking them. Change may mean that we'll have to do more work than what we had planned, get retrained, lose relationships, have to develop new relationships, lose status, or get fewer or less attractive rewards. Losing something is a rational reason to dislike change. But, what's interesting is that we often dislike change even when it isn't causing us to lose more than we'll gain.

***We distrust flighty people.*** Irrespective of whether a change will result in a net gain or loss for us, we dislike change partly because we like people who are consistent. I want to be known as someone who sticks to his commitments. When I tell you that I'm going to do something, I want you to believe that I'll follow through and do it. You'll trust and respect me more if I stick to my commitments, right? So, it's not just that I like my current plans for their own sake--I also resist change because I want you to see me as consistent. This kind of commitment can cause me to continue a course of action despite objective evidence that change is justified.

***We're risk averse, and we fear the unknown.*** Have you ever known kids who have to sleep with the lights on in their bedroom at night because they're afraid of monsters under the bed? There aren't any monsters in their bedrooms, but with the lights off the kids can't verify that. They fear the unknown. Adults are also bothered by uncertainty and risk. Uncertainty often accompanies change. We can't always know whether a change will

result in a gain or loss for us. Sometimes trying to convince adults that a particular change will benefit them looks a lot like a parent trying to convince a child that there's no monster under the bed--it's very difficult to persuade them. Yet most of us realize that an unwillingness to flexibly respond to change would be very costly for us in our careers.

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### Expect Less Stability and More Change in Your Career

Although personal flexibility can be difficult, it will probably be a major determinant of how much we'll achieve in our careers. By most indications, the rate of change that we face in the various facets of our careers is continually increasing. Jobs, organizational structures and industries were much more stable decades ago than they are now. The environment in which businesses now operate is much more turbulent than it used to be. Factors such as increasing international competition and advances in technology are forcing organizations to change in order to adapt and survive. Consequently, members of those organizations are regularly being asked to learn new work methods and being assigned new duties to perform. It's becoming more difficult to settle into a "comfort zone" in one's work situation.

Being an effective manager in the new millennium, or more broadly having a successful career, will require the ability to accept change. I don't mean to imply that all change is inherently good. But, the habit of resisting any change simply because it gets us out of our comfort zones is a habit that will impede career success. Developing the personal flexibility to cope with change can promote personal success and one's effectiveness as a leader.

### Developing Personal Flexibility

I recommend several strategies for becoming more receptive to change; overcoming irrational fears, boosting self-confidence, getting involved in change processes, setting new goals, anticipating change and stretching yourself through new challenges.

**Overcome irrational fears.** When encountering change in the workplace, many people automatically fear that the change will not benefit them, even without any concrete reason for that fear. We're probably all guilty of doing that to a certain degree. Each of us has a certain amount of fear of the unknown. However, this problem is particularly pronounced in people with the personality traits of *low tolerance of ambiguity* and *high neuroticism*. Such people find ambiguous situations stressful and psychologically uncomfortable. They're inclined to feel anxious and assume the worst when change occurs. For these people, and any of us struggling with anxieties associated with a particular change, overcoming irrational fears might help us become more receptive to change.

Extensive research has shown that one of the best ways to overcome irrational fears is through positive "self-talk." Albert Ellis theorized that our worries and fears are the consequence of the interaction of our actual experiences with our beliefs. He argued that neuroticism is the result of a pattern of irrational beliefs that "catastrophize" or "horribilize" the events that a person experiences or anticipates. The fears of highly neurotic people have more to do with their irrational beliefs than with actual circumstances. The research of Ellis and others has found that through self-talk, individuals can change their beliefs and thereby manage their emotional reactions to events. I strongly recommend and have successfully used these techniques. I have listed three books below that I recommend to anyone interested in learning to use self-talk to become more optimistic and develop a more positive outlook on change.

**Boost your self-confidence.** One of the major reasons why people fear change is their worry that they won't be able to cope with the change; hence, boosting self-confidence can mitigate fears of change. One of the most effective ways to boost self-confidence is through [mental rehearsal](#). A mental rehearsal technique, presented in *Mastering Self-Leadership* by Charles Manz and Christopher Neck, was outlined in an earlier *LeaderLetter*.

**Get involved in the change process.** A simpler way to enhance one's receptiveness to change is developing the habit of proactively getting involved in change processes. To do this, one only needs to recognize the feelings of trepidation during change and respond by taking action. On the most basic level, asking questions and finding out as much as possible about a change will alleviate irrational fears. Moreover, replacing ambiguity with information helps people who are particularly uncomfortable with ambiguity.

In many cases, it's possible to participate in a change process. Being involved in a change process is far

more empowering than resisting it or sitting idly by and just reacting to it. Participating in a change process allows you to have firsthand information about it and possibly influence the process in a way that benefits you.

**Set new goals.** Goal setting can also be an effective way to deal with change and uncertainty. As I mentioned above, goal setting helps us get focused and be productive. During times of worry and uncertainty, setting a short-term goal that's compatible with the change we're dealing with helps shift our attention away from our worries and onto that goal. People often say that they deal with times of transition (termination, reassignment, etc.) by "taking it day by day." Setting goals for what we want to accomplish by the end of the day, or making a "to do" list can get us focused on manageable pieces of the change. If we focus on all the possible implications of a significant change, we can feel overwhelmed and spend too much time fretting. Focusing on the big picture can cause inertia, but focusing on one piece can facilitate action. In addition, by setting and achieving short-term goals, we can build our self-confidence by developing a sense of accomplishment and progress.

**Anticipate change.** Change is easier to handle when you aren't surprised by it. Monitor trends that pertain to your job and your employer. That information is available from newspapers, trade publications, professional associations, company newsletters, etc.

**Stretch yourself.** The people who I see having the most trouble coping with change are those who have settled into a comfortable routine and haven't changed much. I think that's partly due to the fact that adapting and developing professionally can be a habit, and not stretching yourself creates rigidity.

With a good understanding of which trends are likely to affect you, you can innovate or develop new skills in a way that puts you "ahead of the curve." Make some changes even before you have to in order to challenge yourself. The more practice you get in coping with ambiguity, the more flexible you'll become.

If you do nothing else, I recommend that you regularly stretch yourself. The other strategies listed above will increase your likelihood of successfully dealing with a change. But a person who keeps challenging his- or herself is going to find strategies for coping with change anyway.

### **In Summary ...**

We can all expect less stability and more change in our careers. To survive and thrive, we will need to be flexible. The best way to fight off rigidity is by continually stretching yourself by taking on new challenges. I also recommend learning how to overcome irrational fears of change, boosting self-confidence, becoming proactive and involved during change processes, setting new goals and anticipating change.

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### **Recommended Reading**

- Ellis, A. & Harper, R. A. (1975). *A new guide to rational living*. N. Hollywood, CA: Wilshire Book Co.  
 Manz, C. C., & Neck, C. P. (1999). *Mastering self-leadership: Empowering yourself for personal excellence*, (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.  
 Seligman, M. E. P. (1991). *Learned optimism*. New York: Knopf.

### **Additional Source**

Johnson, S. (1998). *Who moved my cheese?: An a-mazing way to deal with change in your work and in your life*. New York: Putnam.

### **About the Photo**

South American champion Paraguay's Olimpia captain Julio Cesar Enciso (R) stretches as Miguel Angel Benetiez (L) assists during a practice session for the World Club Championships final at Yokohama International Stadium December 2, 2002. European champion Real Madrid and South American champion Olimpia will face off in the champions final on Tuesday. (REUTERS/Kimimasa Mayama: E-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*, [www.news.yahoo.com](http://www.news.yahoo.com)).

### **About the Newsletter and Subscriptions**

*LeaderLetter* is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sojn College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to

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### E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

### A Good, Clean Joke

Tony comes up to the Mexican border on his bicycle. He's got two large bags over his shoulders. Joe, the border guard, stops him and says, "What's in the bags?"

"Sand," answers Tony.

Joe says, "We'll just see about that. Get off the bike." Joe takes the bags and rips them apart; he empties them out and finds nothing in them but sand. He detains Tony overnight and has the sand analyzed, only to discover that there is nothing but pure sand in the bags.

Joe releases Tony, puts the sand into new bags, hefts them onto the man's shoulders, and lets him cross the border.

The next day, the same thing happens. Joe asks, "What have you got?"

"Sand," says Tony.

Joe does his thorough examination and discovers that the bags contain nothing but sand. He gives the sand back to Tony, and Tony crosses the border on his bicycle.

This sequence of events is repeated every day for three years. Then Joe runs across Tony one day in a cantina in Mexico.

"Hey, buddy," says Joe, "I know you are smuggling something. It's driving me crazy. It's all I think about ... I can't sleep. Just between you and me, what are you smuggling?"

Tony sips his beer and says, "Bicycles."

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