

# 7 Supporting emotional transitioning

Everyone reacts differently to a particular change. Some people may embrace change and be excited, hopeful, and enthusiastic. Others may fear change, be confused, angry, or not quite know what to feel. As change leaders, we need to recognize that everyone takes their own personal journey through the emotions of change and that they take this journey at their own pace. Spending time on the emotional aspects of change and helping people transition is critical for successfully cultivating change in our organizations. Although there is no easy recipe, this chapter offers many approaches for helping people make the transition through the emotions of change more easily and more successfully. By helping people work through their emotions, we create a better platform for current changes and improve receptivity to future changes.

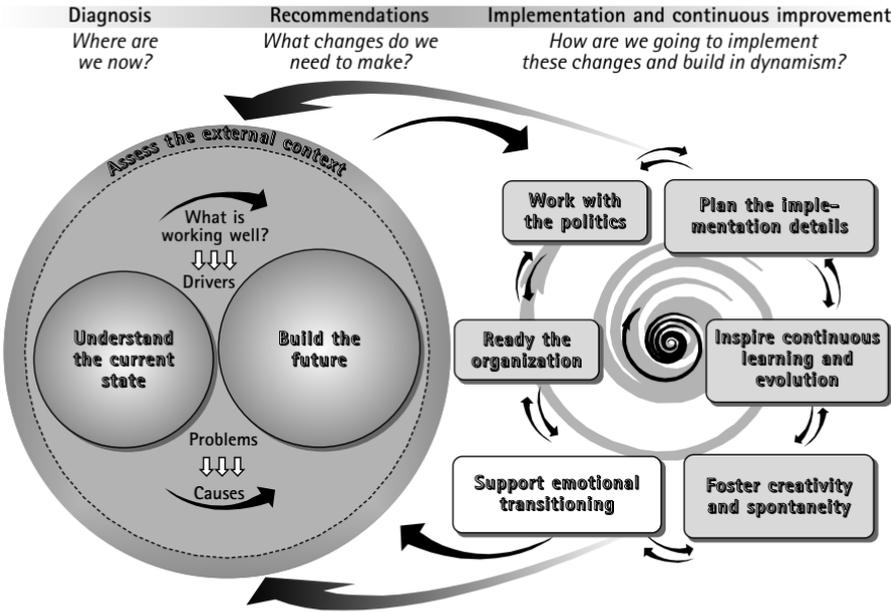


Figure 7.1 The SOC framework: supporting emotional transitioning

## **At a Glance**

### ***Supporting Emotional Transitioning***

- The emotional journey of change
- People start at many different places on their journey
- Figuring out where people need to be for change to succeed
- Understanding the "Why?" underneath emotions
- Exploring action steps to support transitioning

## **THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY OF CHANGE**

Throughout this chapter, we will picture ourselves in the role of VP of the small business lending division at One-Bank. Top management has recently announced that our bank is merging with another large bank to form a new entity called Two-Banks. Some folks in our organization are thrilled with this merger because they believe it will open up new career opportunities, wake up the organization, and enable it to better compete in the industry. Others are petrified because they are worried that they will lose their jobs, or that they will have to work with new people and lose the good working relationships they currently enjoy. Many may be feeling overwhelmed or simply confused about what exactly the merger will entail in the months to come, and some are just plain angry that life in the future won't look like it does today. With every change comes emotion, and a merger of two banks is certainly no exception. At its core, change is about people making a transition from where they are now to something new or different. For some people, this transition from the old to the new is relatively easy, while for others, letting go of the way things are currently done to move towards the unknown and reinvest in a new reality is a scary proposition.

## **Heads up**

*Beware of some common myths about emotions*

Some change leaders view emotions as "noise," or see emotions as being irrational and so choose to ignore them. In contrast, enlightened change leaders assume that emotions are important and should be validated. These people recognize that attempting to sweep emotions under the rug will only backfire. They also know that emotional reactions are grounded in rational thinking, and that it is essential to support those that are fearful, concerned, or worried about change in order for people to be willing to reinvest in a new reality and for change to effectively move forward.

## **Ahead of the curve**

*When to devote extra attention to supporting emotional transitions*

Although supporting emotional transitions is critical for all change capable organizations, it is especially beneficial when:

- we feel like we haven't got a good understanding of how folks in our organization are reacting to change
- we sense a wide range of emotions emanating from the change but don't know how to deal with all of them
- we sense that many people in our organization are experiencing negative emotions such as fear, worry, stress, anger, and anxiety about moving from the current state to the future
- we personally are experiencing negative emotions about a change and wish to better understand those emotions and how we might work through them.

## **PEOPLE START AT MANY DIFFERENT PLACES ON THEIR JOURNEY**

People's immediate reactions upon finding out about an impending change can vary quite dramatically. Usually a combination of factors such as their role in the change, the likely consequences of the change, the sentiments of their peers towards change, and other personal factors will play a role. For example, a VP at One-Bank might have heard the following range of comments around the water cooler during the afternoon that the merger was announced:

- "This company needs a shake-up and I, for one, can't wait to see how things unfold!"
- "I don't know what to think."
- "I've been through a merger before and, trust me, this is going to be nothing but bad news."

The first reaction noted above appears to be from a person who sees the change as a necessity and is eager for the merger to occur. This individual seems to easily see the benefits of the merger, and overall emanates a "You betcha!" type of attitude towards the change.

The second reaction comes from someone who is obviously reticent about expressing positive emotions about the change. This person might agree in principle, seeing benefits to the merger, but may be hesitant about having to give up personal comfort zones and not be ready to take the leap into action. He or she might be hesitant about the change because he or

she needs more information, or is concerned about how the change will impact him or her directly. A phrase that seems to fit the emotion here is “Do we have to?”

The third initial reaction to the merger expresses an overall “Not a chance” type of attitude. This individual appears to be reluctant to engage or take action. This reluctance may stem from emotions such as denial, shock, fear, anger, and confusion. Understanding the reasons why this person feels the way he or she does, and supporting this person and others who feel similarly, will be particularly critical for the change to be successful.

### **Ahead of the curve**

*Political interests often align with emotions and vice versa*

In the last chapter, the politics of change were explored. Not surprisingly, emotional reactions to change often align pretty closely with political reactions. So, those folks that have a “You betcha” attitude towards a change tend to be the early adopters in a change, whereas those folks who have a “Not a chance” attitude tend to be the laggards. And finally, those with a “Do we have to?” attitude tend to be swayed by the most influential interest groups.

While we don’t discount the complexity and range of emotions, to gain insight into the emotions that people within our organization may be experiencing, it can be helpful to try to identify where specific individuals are emotionally across these three categories. Are they at “You betcha!,” “Do we have to?” or “Not a chance”? Without some sort of classification, the web of emotions that arise from organizational members may limit our ability to move the change forward. From there, we may want to figure out where they need to be for the change to be successful. Then we will want to work with them to understand why they feel the way they do, and determine how the organization might be able to best support them during the change. We may also want to note other key factors that may be impacting them emotionally. For example, maybe the reason someone is having difficulties coping with a new change is because he or she has recently gone through a divorce and therefore finds it difficult to cope with any other changes in their life at that time.

### **Heads up**

*Don't assume*

Making assumptions about how people are feeling about a change can lead to misunderstandings. Check with people directly to see how they are

feeling. Exploring why they feel the way they do about the change will help us develop possible action steps that may help them cope with, or even become enthusiastic about, the change.

This process will allow us to understand the dynamics of emotions within our organization, and enable us to discern the best approaches for helping people within our organization make the transition towards change. Note that throughout the process of working with emotions, our focus should be on individuals, to understand why they feel the way they do and to help them become more at ease with moving forward with the change.

### **Ahead of the curve**

*The change process impacts emotional transitioning*

While this chapter focuses exclusively on the emotions of change, actions stemming from the other chapters in this book may also positively impact folks' emotional reactions to change. By taking steps such as including folks in the process, maintaining open communication, underscoring the drivers of change, and reducing political conflict, we create a positive climate for change, which can serve to lessen the negative emotions people feel towards a particular change challenge.

### **Ahead of the curve**

*We can't do it all*

We may not be able to help everyone in our organization transition through the emotions of change. We might not have enough time, some people might not open up to us, or we might find it difficult to relate to someone interpersonally. What we can try if we are short on time is to work with our direct reports to help them make the transition through the emotions they are experiencing about the change, then train them to work with their direct reports, and so on.

If we are not sure that we have the skill to help people make the transition emotionally, we might try simply acting as a sounding board, or we might try finding someone else on our team who can help people process the emotions associated with a change. These types of approaches ensure that everyone in our organization receives some support in moving through their emotional journey.

For those folks that are at the “You betcha!” stage of their emotional journey through change, our role as change leader is to keep them positive and enthusiastic. Since we are not going to need to spend a lot of time helping them make the transition through the emotions of change, look at Chapter 6 for ideas on how to best leverage their optimistic attitudes towards the change. However, we will need to support those folks that express “Not a chance” or “Do we have to?” types of emotion, as they work through their reactions. This emotional support will make an important contribution to the success of a given change challenge, and will also make future changes progress more smoothly.

## **FIGURING OUT WHERE PEOPLE NEED TO BE FOR CHANGE TO SUCCEED**

While we might like everyone in our organization to be at “You betcha!”, the reality is that not everyone needs to be extremely positive and enthusiastic about a change in order for the change to be successful. In fact, it might be enough for certain people to simply be aware of the changes, and be sufficiently positive that they won’t interfere. Knowing where different people in our organization need to be on their emotional journey for a change to be successful can often be a very useful step in supporting folks in their transitioning. Once we have a pretty good sense of where they need to be for change to move forward, we will want to strive to provide the support they need to help them get there.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE “WHY?” UNDERNEATH EMOTIONS**

To support the transition of those “Not a chance” and “Do we have to?” folks in our organization towards change, we will need to start by acknowledging that feeling a range of emotions throughout the change process is normal. A wide variety of emotions are to be expected, and we will need to convey to people that it is okay to be experiencing the emotions they are feeling. This step serves to open up the lines of communication with the people in our organization. They may be more likely to openly express their feelings because we have validated that the emotional dimension of change exists and is significant.

### **Heads up**

#### *Beware of email*

Email communication, while efficient, can easily be misinterpreted and does not allow for monitoring reactions or for two-way exchange. Therefore, we might find that good old-fashioned face-to-face interaction is the best route when we are trying to support people in our organization so that they can make the transition through the emotions of change.

Being patient, accessible, and approachable to the people in our organization throughout a change process is also very important, and can encourage the free and open dialogue that will enable them to more easily make the transition towards a new future. As change leaders, we need to ensure that our actions send the right message. For instance, we might try spending time walking around and talking with the people in our organization about the change, and when we do need to be in our office, consider leaving the door open. An open door sends a strong message that we are available to help people process what the change means for them. This type of openness not only enables us to help people transition through the emotions of change, but will also help us uncover insights and action steps that can dramatically improve a change process.

However, to really work with the emotional dimension of change, we have to delve deeper than acknowledging people's emotions and opening the lines of communication. To be able to provide the support needed to help folks in our organization feel more positively about a change, we will need to uncover why people feel the way they do. Typical reasons that people experience negative emotions about a change include not understanding the change or the drivers for the change; fearing job loss, loss of status, or lack of skills; doubts about the abilities and motives of the change agents; lingering negative effects from previous poor change experiences; and questions about whether the proposed change is sound. Each of these is discussed below. Additional detail on both fear factors and possible actions steps are provided and summarized in Table 7.1.

## **EXPLORING ACTION STEPS TO SUPPORT TRANSITIONING**

In this section, each of these typical concerns is discussed in more depth and possible action steps to address each concern are highlighted. By understanding the reasons behind people's emotions, we will be better equipped to support them in making the transition to where they need to be for change to be successful.

### **Overcoming lack of understanding for the need for change**

One of the most common reasons people experience negative emotions about a change is that they don't understand the need for change, or haven't been convinced that the change is a good idea for their company.

For example, a VP at One-Bank might hear people in the small business lending division say things like, "I'm really confused, I don't understand why this merger is a good thing for One-Bank", or "I'm personally content with what we're doing in the company right now." Comments like these

**Table 7.1** Fear factors and possible action steps

<b>Understand “Why?”</b>	<b>Possible action steps</b>
“I don’t understand this change.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• why it is happening</li><li>• what it is</li><li>• how it will transpire.</li></ul>	Communicate the external and internal drivers for change. Involve folks in the “What?” and the “How?”
“I’m worried I don’t have the skills required.”	Provide training. Establish ongoing feedback loops.
“I’m not sure the people running this change know what they’re doing.”	Build credibility with past successes, add “power” to the team, involve skeptics Reassess whether criticisms hold merit.
“This change is too risky and too costly.”	Demonstrate the long-run benefits associated with the change. Explore whether there are ways to minimize risk and reduce cost.
“Change never works in this place, what makes this one any different?”	Disassociate this change with previous changes by emphasizing differences in the nature of change, who’s leading the change, the process of change, etc.
“I’ve worked hard to get where I am, and this change is going to mess this all up.”	Dig deeper on what they think is going to be messed up. Underscore the positive of “what is in it for them.” If there is uncertainty, be open and transparent about it.
“My team works well and I’m afraid these changes will disrupt that.”	Try to keep high-performing teams intact (what is working well).
“This will take forever.”	Provide short-term milestones to help punctuate the change process with tangible endpoints along the way that can be celebrated.
“Nobody’s asking me what I think.”	Be accessible, approachable, and seek input to create ownership and commitment.
“Why would they start this now at the busiest time of our year?”	Carefully consider the timing of specific change actions and their impact.
“This’ll lead to our best year ever? Yeah right.”	Be realistic about projections, and don’t oversell or over-commit.
“Can you believe how they told us about all this?” “Everyday somebody tells us something new about what we need to do.”	Be sensitive to the emotional impact of communications about change. Customize and tailor communications to the emotional needs of those involved. Communicate through multiple methods and with honesty and integrity. Streamline communications. (For more on this, see Chapter 8)

indicate that not enough work has been done on sharing the rationale for change. Here's where some of the information we put together in Chapter 5 may be useful again. By referring to the business case for change that we have developed, we can help people understand the drivers behind a specific change. By sharing those worst-case and best-case scenarios, we can paint a vivid picture of the future for the people who currently aren't convinced of the need for change. We will find that helping people in our organization understand not only what change is occurring, but also why the change is occurring, is critical in helping people make the transition through the emotions of change.

### **Getting past personal “fear factors”**

For other people, the reason they are less than enthusiastic about a change may have to do with personal fears about it. For instance, a director at One-Bank might state to the VP, “I've worked hard to get where I am in the company and this change is going to mess all of that up.” If we dig a little deeper and have a conversation with this person to try to understand more about why she feels this way, we might find that the underlying reason for her negativity about the impending merger is a fear of losing power, a fear of losing status, and a fear of losing her job. Another employee might explain, “I've heard that this merger is going to mean a complete overhaul of our current systems.” Probing this further, we may find that he has a fear of new technology and is afraid he won't have the skills needed to succeed in the new Two-Banks environment.

Someone else in our group might say something like, “The people I work with are my friends and my colleagues. We know each other well and work effectively together as a team.” For this person, negativity about the merger might really be about a fear that the merger will disrupt personal relationships and team performance.

Working with people in our organization to uncover any underlying fears is imperative if we want to be able to alleviate those fears and help people make the transition to the future. Then, if possible, we should solicit ideas about how their fears might be overcome. For example, running a session on career paths at the post-merger Two-Banks to address the fear of a loss of status in the new organization might be helpful for those with fears about their careers. For those who are concerned about new technology, we might find out what type of training and development programs could be provided to help them improve their skills. For those worried about disruptions in personal relationships, we could explore whether there are some paths for retaining some continuity of working relationships – at least in the short run. If, however, the fact is that there is quite a bit of uncertainty about what is going to happen in a particular business unit, then the best we may be able to do is to demonstrate

integrity by openly legitimizing their concerns and communicating where we are equally uncertain about the future.

## **Heads up**

*Where there's smoke – there's fire*

Often many people share similar fears. Indeed, since emotions are often socially shaped, looking beyond individuals towards patterns in the emotional landscape of our organization may be beneficial. If we find that one person is afraid of a particular aspect of the change, then there are likely others who share this fear. That only one person has articulated his or her fear doesn't mean there aren't plenty of others in our organization feeling the same way.

## **Working through doubts about change agents**

Another common reason that people experience negative emotions about a change is that they are concerned about who is leading the change. For example, at One-Bank, some people in the division might question the experience, character, or skill of the top management team that decided to move forward with the merger.

If concerns about the change agents involved seem to be at the root of people's negative emotions, there are a few approaches that can be helpful. If possible, we can work to establish and reinforce the credibility of the change agents. For instance, we could have them talk with the group and include a discussion of their credentials, past successes, and integrity. As well, we could work with them to ensure that their communications are transparent, honest, and straightforward. We might also explore the possibility that the change agents chosen aren't ideal, and consider adding others to the team to help bolster the skill set of the leadership team. Getting those who are concerned about the process more involved in what is happening is often a very useful approach, so we might even consider adding these folks to the team. These people will not only have the comfort of knowing their input will be considered, but will also move out of the role of being skeptics on the periphery towards being more positively involved with the change. Some executives may worry that pulling people onto the team as the change progresses may be perceived by others as an admittance of poor decision making of the initial composition of the team. However, the acknowledgement of other perspectives in a dramatic and emotionally charged change can actually reverse many of the negative emotions associated with senior management's actions, and lead to increased credibility and respect.

## **Respecting the history of change**

Previous change experiences can have a dramatic impact on how people feel about the change they are currently facing. If people in our division at One-Bank have experienced a multitude of failed changes over the past year, they are more likely to be negative about the merger. If this is the case and the history of change is quite negative in our organization, it is important to help people consider the current change initiative on its own merits. We may need to disassociate this change from past change efforts, and underscore how the current change is different. Undoubtedly the content of the change will be different, but usually there are other differences as well. These might include the person who is leading the change, the approach to change that is being used, the timeframe of the change, the degree of transparency, and the criticality of the change.

If past changes have failed, we may also need to provide some tangible “wins” early on in the current change process. Most major strategic changes take time. By breaking down a change into smaller, more manageable components, we can create small wins, which build momentum for bigger successes down the road. Although strong proponents for a change may be willing to stay the course for long periods of time, most people need convincing proof that their efforts are paying off. Punctuating a large strategic change with a series of small wins lets people celebrate successes and see for themselves that results are being achieved and recognized. All of this builds further credibility for the change process.

If, on the other hand, recent change initiatives have gone well, we may want to point to these successes to help alleviate people’s negativity about the present change process. We also may want to piggyback on those successes and draw parallels to those change initiatives whenever possible.

### **Heads up**

*Timing can be everything*

The timing of any change can be critical. If a huge change initiative has just been undertaken and the organization is burned out on change, then the timing is probably not good to introduce another large change initiative. Similarly, if a particular time of year is hectic for our business, then we may want to explore whether there is flexibility to embark upon change initiatives during calmer periods.

### **Ahead of the curve**

*Start from what is working well*

If the change we are embarking on is one that does springboard off from what is already working well, then let people know this. By underscoring

that the future is actually about accentuating parts of the past, we can give people confidence that the future is not so uncertain, and indeed will capture the past. For example, perhaps a change we are pursuing now actually aligns perfectly with a well-respected founder of our company's original vision. Making those connections transparent to people in our organization may help them be more receptive to the changes we are proposing.

### **People's emotions may indicate a need to change the change**

While emotions can often be worked through, we also want to leave open the possibility that the negative emotions being expressed by people in our organization are actually indicative of a problem with the change that is being pursued. For example, if people in our organization come up with well-articulated arguments against a change, and we know that these arguments have never been considered, we will definitely want to learn from these people rather than simply try to work with their emotions. In these instances, where people's reactions do in fact indicate that something important has been overlooked or needs to be rethought, we may need to go back to the drawing board in answering the question, "What changes do we need to make?" or "How are we going to implement these changes and build in dynamism?" In doing so, we may want to consider involving more people in our organization – especially those who have been particularly negative. Working with these people to come up with alternative recommended changes may not only lead to better decisions about what to do and how to do it, but may also lead to creating ownership and commitment from people who have previously been very negative. This, in turn, will result in a greater likelihood of sustainable success.

## Key takeaways for Chapter 7

- Appreciate that everyone will react differently to a particular change, and that everyone travels through a personal emotional journey at his or her own pace.
- Try to understand how different people are feeling about a change, and validate their emotions.
- Keep communication channels open.
- Determine where folks need to be for change to be successful, rather than try to get everyone to "You betcha."
- Explore why people are experiencing negative emotions about a change. Common reasons include:
  - not understanding the change or the drivers for the change
  - fearing job loss, loss of status, or lack of skills
  - doubting the abilities and motives of the change agents
  - viewing the current change in light of past change failures
  - questioning whether the proposed change is sound.
- Once we understand why people feel the way they do, we need to explore action steps that will help support their transition to the future.
- How emotions are supported affects not only the success of this change but also receptivity to future changes.

**Tools**

***Supporting emotional transitioning tool***

**Step 1:** Note how each of our direct reports currently seem to be feeling about the change, using the continuum of “Not a chance” to “You betcha.”

**Step 2:** Note where we think each of these individuals needs to be for change to be successful.

Individual	“Not a chance” → “Do we have to?” → “You betcha”
Bill	

▲ = How an individual is currently feeling about the change

★ = Where we think they need to be for change to be successful

*Supporting emotional transitioning*

**Step 3:** Talk with each individual to figure out why they feel the way they do and explore possible action steps that might be taken to help them feel more positively about the change.

Name and role in change	Where s/he is now?	Why?	Where does s/he need to be for change to be successful?	Other relevant issues	Possible action steps to support emotional transitioning
<p>Bill</p> <p>Well-connected supervisor in the bank</p> <p>Key leader of various aspects of implementation</p>	<p>“Not a chance”</p>	<p>Fears it will disrupt his working relationships</p> <p>Not sure the change agent is a good choice</p> <p>Got moved in the last change</p>	<p>“You betcha”</p>	<p>His team loves working with him and his emotions affect others</p> <p>His 9 year old son has a number of ongoing health issues</p>	<p>Talk with him about who is important to work with and align him and those people</p> <p>See if others feel the same way about the folks leading the change</p> <p>Underscore how this change is different from the last and the benefits</p> <p>See if he needs some support or resources to help with his son</p>