Navigating workplace change
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Foreword

“Even in a racing, rushing river, there are pockets of calm, behind rocks usually, where the river is actually flowing upstream. And you can pull into those eddies once you learn how to do it, and you can actually sit still while the river is racing downstream all around you. And by using a series of eddies, you can move into one eddy, look downstream, then go down to the next eddy and then go down to the next, making your way in a sort of slow and orderly process through an extraordinarily chaotic environment. And in our work life, we see the same type of thing where we feel like we’re faced with a racing, rushing river that we cannot control. And yes, you cannot control the river, but you can control your progress through it.”

—Gregory Shea and Robert Gunther, Navigating Workplace Change CD
The changing world of work

“At this point, it doesn’t matter what you were hired to do, you have one real job: change. How can you do this job well?”

The organization where you work is going through change—like every organization today. It may be growing, downsizing, restructur- ing, transforming. It may have merged recently or been acquired by another company. Perhaps your industry has changed so much that the job you were doing five or ten years ago is now obsolete. Or your department or team has gone through a restructuring and your job description includes skills you only learned six months ago.

Whatever the changes may be, you’re likely feeling the effects. You may be adjusting to a new manager, new co-workers, or new processes and ways of working. You’re doing your best and working hard to keep up with the latest technology at work, and then the company switches to new software or combines work units and you find yourself with a whole new set of co-workers. This can feel invigorating—you’re always learning and you like that—but it can also feel challenging and stressful at times.

Workplace change isn’t easy. But it’s here to stay. And experts agree that job success in the 21st century rests on the ability to adapt to and make the most of change. Whether your work is in sales, banking, manufacturing, or high tech, whether you work in a large or small firm, learning to thrive through change is an essential job skill. It’s your primary job. It’s the skill you’ll need to meet whatever challenges may come your way throughout your career.

In their excellent book *Your Job Survival Guide: A Manual for Thriving in Change*, Gregory Shea and Robert Gunther describe today’s constantly changing workplace as a “permanent whitewater world.” The term “permanent whitewater” was first coined more than
two decades ago by Peter Vaill, a professor of management, to
describe the turbulence of the workplace. Shea and Gunther explain
in their book how to navigate the whitewaters and master the skills
needed to thrive through change. We’ll share some of their tips here,
along with advice from other experts.

To successfully navigate change, most experts agree that you must
understand and accept the following three realities:

- **We are in a world of constant change.** It’s permanent. It’s accelerating,
  And it’s not going to let up or go away.

- **Change is the one constant across all jobs and industries.** It may be more
  pronounced in some fields or industries, but employees everywhere
  are feeling it and will continue to feel it.

- **Your fundamental task is to learn to handle change.** It’s part of your job
  description, no matter where you work or what you were hired to do.

**How change makes us feel**

So you’re working for a company that is expanding or merging, or
you’re moving to new workspace or going virtual, or you’re facing
some other kind of change. Even if you’re someone who generally
embraces and looks forward to change, adjusting to such new realities
day after day can prove stressful. The first thing to remember about
workplace change is that if you are feeling worried or stressed about
it, you are not alone.
One key to coping with change is to remember that with resources and support, most people adapt well to change. They grow from it. They land in a different but comparable or even better place.

Here is what experts know about workplace change:

- **Even positive and resilient people find workplace change challenging.** We tend to find comfort in the familiar—in co-workers and supervisors we know, in familiar work routines we’ve mastered. When we’re faced with change and need to adjust to a new manager or work routines, or when we simply don’t yet know how a change will affect us personally, it’s natural to feel vulnerable and hence worried, disoriented, or insecure.

“When we talked to executives in executive education programs, we asked them, ‘How many of you in the past year have had 10 percent more work than you used to have and no increase in staff? How many have 10 percent fewer resources and the same amount of work? How many have taken on new geographic or functional responsibilities?’ And inevitably, no matter what the industry, 50 to 70 percent of the hands go up. They’ve all had at least one of these four things happen. This is a sign of the growing velocity of change in organizations today. People are expected to do more with less, and they need to find a way to manage the change that’s coming at them, as opposed to just thinking that it’s something off to the side of their main job.”

—Gregory Shea and Robert Gunther, *Navigating Workplace Change* CD
• Change involves loss and feelings of sadness. If you and your co-workers feel sad and distracted because valued colleagues are gone following a reorganization, it’s important to take the time to acknowledge the loss that you feel and not to pretend that you aren’t sad. Doing so can help to mark your reactions in some way before you move on. For example, meeting with departing co-workers to say goodbye or even just sending a letter or email can help both them and you, especially if you’re able to express what you’re feeling or what the individuals mean to you. Even positive change involves loss. A growing business leaves behind the smaller group it once was.

• Change can be physically, mentally, and emotionally stressful, affecting each of us differently. While some people thrive on change and view it as positive, as an opportunity for growth and new challenges, most people feel the stress of it but adapt and come to see the benefits of change over time. As a rule, the bigger the change, the more stress you may experience, but big for one person may not be so big for another. Understand and honor an individual’s response, including your own.

• One of the byproducts of a rapidly changing workplace is more stress and overload for everyone. You may have little down time to pull back and take a break from work. Staffing and organizational changes, as well as cost-cutting measures, may have had an impact on your workload. Many employees today are working harder and longer. According to a study by Families and Work Institute, more than one-third of all U.S. employees report being chronically overworked. Feeling overworked results in more mistakes at work, higher levels of stress and depression, and feelings of resentment toward one’s employer and co-workers.
• Some people find it difficult to cope with change. They may react to it by feeling anxious and overwhelmed. They may have negative reactions when they first hear that they’ll be facing a big change. Or they may think, “It isn’t fair,” “I’ll never be able to handle this,” or “I’m too old to learn a new way of doing things.”

• Talking with a professional helps if you are having difficulty coping with change. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Even strong people need support and guidance when faced with tough circumstances. Your employee assistance program (EAP) or the program that provided this publication can provide you with resources and support.

Thriving in permanent whitewater

Permanent whitewater, or a constantly changing environment like today’s workplace, can challenge and exhaust even those who are well prepared for it. However, with the right skills, we all have a much greater chance not just of surviving change, but of thriving in it. To thrive in permanent whitewater, you will want to:

• Protect yourself. That means taking care of yourself, which you’ll read more about later on in this booklet.

• Gather information. The most stressful thing about change may be the uncertainty it brings. To ease your anxieties and boost your confidence, you’ll want to learn as much as you can about the changes you’re facing. Do research online or at the library. Talk with friends and trusted co-workers who’ve faced the same kind of changes you’re facing and ask what helped them the most.
• **Ask questions.** Your typical day is probably full of opportunities to learn something new—especially during times of change—and asking questions is the way to learn. In addition, asking questions shows others that you’re really paying attention and thinking about what’s going on, rather than being a passive observer. Being actively involved shows you are working to help solve a problem or reach a common goal. That’s good for the team, and it’s good for you and your career.

• **Upgrade your skills to increase your value to the organization.** By continuously learning new information and skills that you can apply at work, you will be able to see new opportunities for innovations and improvements that will make work more efficient and effective. Your manager, co-workers, and customers will appreciate this added value you bring to the workplace, especially if your workplace is undergoing reorganization or another big change. Learning new skills may also open the door to new opportunities at work. Keep on learning so you’re adept in the latest technology, systems, and work processes. Keeping your skills sharp and current is also an effective way to maintain your personal competitiveness in the job market.

• **Above all, be proactive.** You may not have created this river of change, but you do control whether and how you paddle down it. Paddling influences the nature of your journey and alters how it feels to travel the river.

“Whenever we change towards something, we leave something behind. Allow yourself to grieve. That’s OK. In fact, it’s important. Grieving is an important part of change.”

—Gregory Shea and Robert Gunther, *Navigating Workplace Change CD*
Ten tools for mastering change

“The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

—Winston Churchill
We can all develop skills for mastering change and for taking advantage of the opportunities change brings. Following are 10 tools for mastering change.

1 **Be in charge of your attitudes and actions.**

While you can’t choose what happens to you or what organizational changes your employer may make, you do have a choice in how you handle the changes.

- **Take responsibility for your actions and don’t blame your circumstances.** At the end of the day, the person who must manage the challenges you are facing is you. It’s your job to take control and take responsibility.

- **Let go of your anger and fear.** A difficult challenge or change can cause us to feel angry and anxious. These feelings are normal, but they won’t help you move forward. Work through your anger or fear by writing about it or talking about it with a trusted friend. Try to let go of negative feelings. It’s not easy to do. It takes practice and work. But try. You’ll be amazed at the results.

- **Set aside a time for worrying or complaining.** If you are especially frustrated or worried, set aside a short time each day or week to vent your concerns with a trusted co-worker. Or make a daily or weekly entry into a complaint file. Many people find that a scheduled venting time like this frees them to move forward with their work.

- **Learn optimism.** Take a course or buy Martin Seligman’s *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life.* Learn the discipline of “arguing with one’s self” when pessimistic in order to change how you think and thereby to change how you feel.
Focus on the things that are within your control.

During times of change, it’s more important than ever to understand what you can and cannot control and to focus on the things that are within your control. You can’t control the decisions of top management, for example, but you can choose how you react to the changes and decisions and how you carry on with your job.

- **Focus on your job and the tasks at hand, on the things over which you have control.** The simple act of getting things done will make you feel better and make challenges feel less overwhelming. Focusing on your performance also provides a chance for you to secure your reputation as an adaptable, productive contributor.

- **Don’t waste time second-guessing those above you or wishing your coworkers would behave differently.** Focus on your own actions, over which you do have control.

- **Instead of wasting energy thinking about what’s uncertain or unclear, focus on what’s clear and on what you can do.** This is a powerful and simple model for coping with uncertainty and change.

- **Focus on solutions, not problems.** Instead of focusing on what you feel you may be losing, consider what you may gain because of the change. For example, if your job responsibilities are changing, this may be the ideal opportunity to reassess your work, find a new direction, or form new work relations.

- **Start with a single step.** If you are faced with a challenge that feels big or overwhelming, start with the simplest thing you can do that takes you in the direction you want to go. Ask yourself, “What’s the smallest thing I can do to get started?” Once you’ve thought about it, do it. Take control.
3 Take care of yourself.

Permanent whitewater and constant change can take a toll on physical and emotional health. It’s important to pay extra attention to taking care of yourself in challenging times. Simply stated, you will need good health. Studies show that we run a greater risk of getting sick during stressful life events such as a separation, the death of a relative or friend, or turbulent times like a job change. The stronger and fitter you are physically, the more energy and reserve you will have to face the challenges ahead.

- **Schedule a checkup if you have not seen your health care provider within the last year.**

- **Practice healthy habits.** The more you do for yourself, the more resilient you’ll feel during times of change.

- **Get plenty of sleep.** Sleep deprivation can reduce your resilience and ability to cope with change. It also lowers your overall intelligence and particularly your creativity. Many people find that trading off TV viewing for even a half hour of extra sleep significantly changes how they feel the next day. Limiting caffeine can help reduce the body’s reactions to stress and improve sleep quality, too.

- **Eat well.** If you’re well-nourished you’ll have more energy to meet the challenges of change. At work, try to make time to eat away from your work area, in a lunch area with co-workers you enjoy being with. Bring or buy a meal that is a healthy balance of foods so that you have the energy and stamina to feel good throughout the afternoon. Eat a good breakfast. The very act of taking control of your diet can help you feel empowered.
• Take mini-breaks at work. You might take stretch breaks in your work area to build energy and boost your mood.

• Get regular exercise. Exercise relieves stress, makes sleep easier and more efficient, and produces endorphins (our own “feel good” drug).

• Limit how much caffeine and alcohol you drink. Such self-medication increases the difficulty in monitoring and managing yourself.

• Make time for things you find enjoyable with friends or family. Recharge by doing what you love and by being with those you love. You’ll feel better physically and mentally.

4 Manage feelings of stress.

It’s especially important to be aware of signs of stress in yourself during times of change and to learn to manage them. Job uncertainty and change at work can cause physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms of stress. It’s important for you to recognize the physical and mental symptoms of stress. They include the following:

• trouble falling asleep or going back to sleep once awakened

• fatigue

• depression

• feeling nervous, anxious, irritable, or on edge

• trouble concentrating

• overeating, or having no appetite

• withdrawing from family or friends
• tearfulness or frequent crying
• tense muscles
• stomach pain, upset stomach, or headache
• drug or alcohol abuse
• lower productivity at work

Here are some tips on managing stress:

• If you are experiencing any of the above symptoms, be sure to talk with your health care provider. Or talk with a counselor or therapist about ways to cope with stress.

• Seek support from friends, family, and your partner. Sometimes venting and expressing how you are feeling about the pressure and strain is enough of an emotional release to get you through a challenging time at work. Perhaps your partner could do more than usual at home during this difficult time, so that you don’t feel overloaded there as well.

We all have our own ways of unwinding. Some people take walks to reduce stress. Others pursue a hobby or interest. Some simply spend time alone, or with friends. Cultivate interests outside work. And find ways to unwind and take a step back from work and give yourself a break.
• Find ways to restore yourself. You might try taking naps. Or try meditating for five or ten minutes in the morning, at lunch, or in the evening. No matter what activity you find restores you—cooking, reading, walking, listening to your favorite music, reading aloud to your children—make it a consistent part of your life. Treat yourself as if your well-being matters . . . because it does.

• Learn some relaxation techniques. You might find it helpful to take a yoga class or to practice deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation. You can teach yourself some ways to relax and relieve stress. Some methods, such as taking a few minutes to just sit quietly, are very simple; others may require instruction and practice. Again, just the act of treating your well-being as important has value in and of itself.

• Treat yourself to a massage. The therapeutic benefits are real. A good massage can release and help our bodies remove toxins stored during demanding times.

• Take advantage of the programs and benefits your company offers to help you reduce stress.

• If won’t do it for yourself, then do it for your children. The stress you bring home affects your children. A recent study showed that work is a somewhat or very significant source of stress. While 69 percent of parents said that this stress had little or no impact on their children, only 14 percent of children reported not being bothered by their parents’ stress.
5 Protect yourself from feelings of overload and burnout.

Burnout is one of the chief hazards of constant workplace change. That’s why it’s important to learn to recognize the warning signs of burnout and overload in yourself and the people you care about. Authors Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee describe a set of signs to look for in their book *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others*. These include:

- working harder with less result
- getting home later or leaving home earlier each day
- feeling tired even after sleeping
- having trouble falling asleep or waking up in the middle of the night
- finding less time or no time at all for the things that used to be enjoyable
- being able to really relax only with alcohol
- not being able to remember the last time you had a long conversation with a trusted friend or relative
- having frequent headaches, backaches, or pain
- routinely taking over-the-counter antacids or painkillers
- feeling too overwhelmed to seek new experiences, ideas, or ways of doing things
Here are ways to protect yourself from feelings of overload and burnout:

- **Be attentive to how you are feeling, to your quality of life.** One of the challenges of stress, burnout, and overload is that oftentimes, you aren’t even aware that you’re experiencing it. You’re exhausted, but you’re not aware of it. You’re irritable, but don’t see it. So the first tip is to be attentive to the warning signs of overload and burnout. Listen to your body. Don’t ignore physical symptoms like heart palpitations, high blood pressure, or insomnia.

- **Maintain a sane pace at work and in your personal life.** Take vacation time, especially time without work or contact with the workplace. Be sure to take a lunch break. Take something off your to-do list to enforce a calmer pace. Be sure there’s downtime in your day every day. Make time for activities you enjoy outside work. Whatever tools you use, pacing needs to be something you take seriously.

- **Know your limits.** Some people thrive on a heavy workload, while others feel stressed by small increases in their responsibilities. If you get a project that you know will be very challenging, find out up front if you can have help with it or take steps on your own to make it easier. Start looking for solutions before you feel overwhelmed by a task.

“Learn to listen to your body so you can tell how you’re doing before you have more serious manifestations. Listen to your heart. Know what it is that you love. Know who you love. Know what gives your life meaning. And finally, don’t swim alone. It’s very important that you maintain relationships with others. Explore, maintain, and develop relationships so you are not out on this river alone.”

—Gregory Shea and Robert Gunther, *Navigating Workplace Change* CD
• Explore solutions to personal concerns that are contributing to the pressures you face. If you have a partner, get his or her ideas on this. Could you hire housecleaning services from time to time so you could use more of your time at home for relaxation? Could your partner take over some of your household chores for a while? If you are caring for an aging parent, would it make sense to look into short-term respite care that could give you occasional relief from caregiving responsibilities? Initiate your own changes to deal with the changes initiated by others.

• Cut back on other commitments until your workload eases. When you’re overloaded, a good rule of thumb is: When you take on a new commitment, drop an old one.

• Set priorities. Decide which tasks you need to do now and which ones can wait. If you aren’t sure which tasks are most important, ask your manager, “Should I be spending time on this? Are there more important things I should be doing?” This will help you see if you need to drop some projects or hand them off to someone else.

• Ask your manager for ideas on how to manage workload and overload. Schedule a meeting with your manager if you can’t find a way to manage your workload on your own. Tell your manager if you feel overloaded or if there is a chance that you may miss a deadline. Propose solutions instead of complaining. Let your manager know if you would like help with learning time-management techniques or a new software program that could make your job less stressful. Sometimes solutions will include swapping responsibilities that you find exhausting with someone else who thrives on that kind of assignment. You could offer to pick up other department duties that appeal to you more than to others. Again, be proactive.
• *Manage your email, voice mail, and other messages.* Too much information can make you feel overwhelmed. Try to answer voice mail, email, and paper mail the same day. But don’t feel you have to respond to all email messages the instant you get them. This can distract you from more important tasks, decrease efficiency, and decrease your sense of control. Instead, check your email at set times, perhaps no more than once an hour.

• *Cut down on distractions and interruptions.* Try closing your door for a short time, angling your desk or workstation so you’ll have more privacy, or simply telling people you are busy and suggesting a time to talk later. Negotiate focus or quiet time for all, scheduled or accepted, by placing a sign or signal that indicates “Not now.” Have your calls go into your voice mail when you need to focus on a project. Continually stopping and starting work can affect your concentration and productivity. Even if being available to other people is an important part of your job, you may be able to carve out uninterrupted time in 15- or 20-minute units.

University of California, Irvine professor Gloria Mark and other researchers have found that office workers change tasks on average every three minutes throughout the day. They’re interrupted by an email, an instant message, a phone call, a co-worker’s question, or another interruption. Once interrupted, it takes nearly 25 minutes to return to an original task.
• **Cut down on multitasking and racing to get things done.** Try to focus on one thing at a time. Research shows that multitasking erodes productivity and increases errors and that the brain can effectively perform only one difficult task at a time.

• **Don’t worry excessively about catching up.** Concentrate on getting the most important work done. In today’s work environment, very few people ever get to catch up, and when they do, it doesn’t last long. It’s about getting the right work done when you are surrounded by the whitewater of change, not about getting all of your work done.

• **Focus on stopping work on time.** If you are in the habit of staying late, start with just one day a week of leaving on time. If you have to, make an actual appointment or have someone pick you up to make sure you do it. You may find that a little less time at work leads to a lot more productivity, achieved through increased focus and energy while you’re at work.

• **Set aside time each day to do something you enjoy.** It’s one of the best antidotes to overload and burnout.

“Failure is not tragedy. Failure is a fact of life in turbulent environments. Get used to it, minimize the risks, and develop strategies to recover quickly.”

6 Learn from failure and mistakes and move on.

Change means having to wing it sometimes. It means not always knowing what you’re doing or exactly where you’re headed. It means trying new things and sometimes failing or making mistakes. Failure is part of the change process, write Shea and Gunther in Your Job Survival Guide.

- **Recognize that you’re not going to be perfect, much or even any of the time.** No one is and we all make mistakes on occasion, especially in a fast-moving work environment. We press “Save” or “Send” before we’ve had a chance to catch the typos in a spreadsheet or an email. We disconnect an important client on a call. We choose not to loop back one more time to a key co-worker or other stakeholder “just to be sure” before proceeding. Reduced resources and constant change means everyone is stretched and more pressured on the job—and therefore more vulnerable than usual to making mistakes. Experts agree that how you handle a mistake matters far more than the mistake itself. Even big mistakes won’t necessarily jeopardize your job or damage your reputation at work, just as long as you own up to what went wrong and handle the matter like a professional.

- **Recover quickly from failures and mistakes.** Don’t dwell on mistakes and disappointments. Recognize that often it’s not about you or your work. It’s the nature of the job or circumstances beyond your control.

- **Find the lesson in your mistake.** If fatigue played a role in your mistake, be proactive about getting the sleep you need so you can be at peak performance at work. If the mistake was due to your being distracted, limit distractions and multitasking at work. If it was a result of your having to rush through the job, work on your time-management skills so you have time to complete tasks well. If you
made a mistake because you lack the skills or knowledge necessary to
do the job well, talk with your manager about getting the coaching
and training you need to succeed.

- Learn from the mistakes, try not to make the same mistake twice, and
  then move on. As in kayaking, it matters far less whether you flip over
  amidst whitewater than whether you can quickly roll back upright.

7 Remind yourself that work isn’t your life.

Many of us think of work as important and personal goals as
something to be fit in when work is finished. Try to create new
standards for yourself in which your spiritual, social, and physical
needs count for as much as your job. This will help you keep the
changes and challenges you’re facing in perspective.

- Make time for fun and play at work and outside work. That’s part of
  the skill of surviving and of thriving in a changing work environ-
  ment. Spend time outdoors. Studies show the benefits of even brief
  exposure to outdoor, nature, and park settings on mental functioning.
  Spend time with co-workers, friends, and family.

- Volunteer. Giving back makes you see how much you have to be
  grateful for, and the act of giving makes us feel better—again, it’s a
  chemical reality.

- Maintain friendships outside of work. Spending time with people you
  like can help you relax, remind you of your value, and keep
  workplace issues in perspective.
- **Focus on the positive things in your life that aren’t changing as much—and about which you feel certain and secure.** This could be your relationship with your children, a friendship, or work with a religious or community group.

- **Take vacations.** Getting away provides more than a way to relax and unwind. It also gives you psychological distance from your workplace. This can help you recharge your batteries and return to your job with a new view of it. One-fourth of all workers don’t take all the vacation they have earned, according to Families and Work Institute. And employees who don’t take vacations because of work pressures feel even more overworked and become less effective.

8 **Seek and offer support.**

Friendship and connecting with others takes the pressure off and helps us through challenging times.

- **Make connecting with others a priority.** You’ll realize that you are not alone. Many people are dealing with workplace change; find others with whom you can share ideas, feelings, and support.

- **Find a supportive person to talk to who has adapted well to a significant change at work, inside or outside your organization.** Ask for advice on how he or she got through it. You might talk with an older relative, a peer at work, a mentor, or a friend. It can be reassuring to hear how others have managed to stay productive and confident during times of change.
9 Be ready for and open to change.

Being open to change means many things. It means welcoming new co-workers, new management, new priorities or assignments, the move to a new workspace—often with little notice.

• Try not to fear loss. “What we know from when people lose their jobs,” says Gregory Shea, “is as often as not when you go back to those people five or ten years later, they’ll talk about the benefits that came from that time, because they had to revisit what it is that they most wanted to do, what was most important to them. It was a time for reorientation and reenergizing and in many ways a turning point for something better.”

• Focus on the things you might gain. Experts agree that change almost always leads to positive things like personal growth, inner awareness, and deeper connections with others. Focus on the things you are gaining, and have to gain, when times are tough.

“Do not trust that the world will provide a sane pace for your life, for your work. Trust that you will have to make it happen.”

—Gregory Shea and Robert Gunther, Navigating Workplace Change CD
10 Stay positive.

There are many things over which you have no control—for example, whether the company gets sold and and your division is merged with another or you move to a different department. But you can choose how you respond to these changes.

- **Choose to have a positive attitude.** Learn optimism.
- **Avoid spending time with consistently negative people.** Grumbling and complaining are natural and healthy. And it’s important to share frustrations with co-workers. But too much negativity can affect your morale and is also contagious. So steer clear of people who continually engage in negative conversation and gripe sessions. Try to limit your discussion of work problems to one or two trusted co-workers who, like you, are trying to make the best of things.
- **Count your blessings every day.** Try to appreciate the day-to-day good things in your life now. The more time you spend doing that, the more energy you will have to deal with challenges at work. Being grateful for one’s blessings is a key ingredient of happiness. People who practice gratitude feel better about their lives. They are more optimistic, more likely to achieve their goals, and happier overall.
Communicating through change

“We immediately become more effective when we decide to change ourselves rather than asking things to change for us.”

—Stephen Covey
Communicating well is always a challenge. During changing times, it’s an even greater challenge. We tend to feel less sure and to be less trusting of others when the environment around us is turbulent. Following are tips on communicating well through change.

**Take time to connect with others at work**

You’ll better adapt to the changes around you at work if you connect with trusted co-workers, your manager, and professionals through your EAP or work-life program if you need support.

- **Share stories, feelings, questions, and concerns with co-workers you trust.** Having conversations will help you through the change.

- **Work to build positive relationships with co-workers.** Good relationships with co-workers can help build trust and friendships that will see you through times of change. Pick up the phone to chat. Make time for coffee or lunch with co-workers, even if it’s a virtual coffee break by phone.

- **Praise a job well done.** We all need to feel valued and to know that we are doing good work. This is more important than ever during times of change. When you notice a job well done, tell your co-worker: “That was great. You did a really good job.” Even managers appreciate positive feedback.

- **If you have questions or concerns about the work changes you’re facing, raise these with your manager.** One of the chief reasons we resist change at work is because we don’t know how it will affect our jobs
and careers. In the absence of information, we may become apprehensive and jump to conclusions like:
- “With the reorganization, I’ll have to do more work.”
- “I’ll never learn the new procedures.”
- “I’ll never be able to do this and my old job.”

If you are a boss, then dedicate extra time to walking the line, to being with your direct reports in particular. People find the presence of authority figures reassuring in times of ambiguity, flux, and change.

**Avoid the rumor mill**

Change can leave us feeling in the dark. Sometimes, such as when a company is being sold or acquired, management may be limited in what can be discussed with employees. When things are unclear, people tend to read into the situation and make up stories. They attribute meaning in order to create meaning and limit ambiguity. However, they also project their fears onto others, thereby easily distorting the message of others.

Rumors start to spread. Some of the rumors often heard during times of workplace change include:

- “We’re going to lose our jobs.”
- “The company’s going bankrupt.”
- “The plant’s going to close.”
- “They’re bringing in new management and firing all of us.”
Rumors take up a lot of energy. It’s important not to let them derail you or become your major source of information. If you have heard a rumor or news about the company that worries you, go to your manager or someone reliable who has access to the right information and confirm what’s true and what isn’t. And before spreading information you’ve heard, ask yourself, “Is there a reason to pass on this information?”

Ask for support if you need it

Remember to ask for and seek support when you need it.

- Don’t be afraid to ask for additional support or training from your manager to keep up with changes. Even the most capable employees need additional training and help to meet new job demands and learn new systems and procedures.

- Stay connected to valued work colleagues. Don’t try to make sense of the world in isolation.

Talk with your manager about what the change will mean for you and how it will affect your job. The sooner you can find out from your manager how your job will be affected, the less uncertainty you’ll feel and the easier it will be for you to accept the change. Although your manager may not have all the answers to your questions, it’s important to let him or her know your concerns.
• **Turn to family and friends for support.** We often withdraw during times of crisis and change, when what we should be doing is staying connected with the people we care about and trust. Be open with your partner about what you’re going through. Don’t cut yourself off from friends and co-workers who could offer you the support you need. Most people are eager to help; sometimes they just need to know you would welcome their support.

• **Contact your EAP or work-life program for support.**

**Handling communication problems**

During times of change, when the pace at work may be hurried and people may be feeling uncertain, we often have shorter fuses. We can become less civil. We can forget to update each other. Poor communication can result in misunderstandings and strained relationships. Keeping one’s cool will help everyone, and regaining your cool is the next best thing.

Here are some strategies to help you handle communication problems at work:

• **Resolve problems as soon as you can.** While it’s hard to talk about difficult issues, the longer you avoid communication and hold in negative feelings, the worse things become. Try to address problems when they come up, before they get too big to fix.

• **Pinpoint what the problem is.** Are you angry because your new boss doesn’t seem to treat you with respect? Or has a different style of managing than your old one did? Are you frustrated because your
workload is heavier than it was? Identify what’s bothering you. Writing it down may help you clarify what you think.

- **Set up a time to talk about the problem.** This should be a planned meeting, not a quick talk in the hallway. You might say to your manager, “I’d like to discuss an issue that’s worrying me. Could we arrange a time to sit down and talk?”

- **Plan ahead what you are going to say.** You want the conversation to stay controlled and focused. This is not a time to vent everything. So prioritize and limit what you hope to cover in the conversation. It helps to write down what you are going to say. Then practice it ahead of time. Reality test your perceptions and/or role play the meeting with a trusted adviser.

- **Make it clear from the start that your goal is to build a strong working relationship.** You could begin by saying, “I’m glad we’re talking, because I want to try to solve this problem that’s been interfering with my work.”

- **Describe the problem.** Be as specific as you can. Try to talk about the impact of the problem and to put it in a business context. For example, “My workload has really increased since Jay left. I’m concerned I won’t be able to satisfy all the customer requests.”

- **Make an effort to stay calm and not to sound argumentative during the discussion.** When you keep cool and calm, you’re in control and open to what others are saying.

- **Listen actively.** Read an article on active listening and follow its advice. Above all, don’t assume that you understand another’s intended meaning. Ask questions to clarify the person’s point of view and to demonstrate your interest in getting his or her meaning right.
• **Offer solutions and suggestions for fixing what’s wrong.** Go into the meeting with ideas written down. That way you’ll be prepared to brainstorm and to work together to come up with solutions.

• **Use direct channels of communication.** If you’re angry with a co-worker, talk to her, not to all your co-workers behind her back. Try to have important conversations face to face and not to use email or voice mail. You might begin the conversation by saying, “I’m having trouble with what happened yesterday. Is there a time when we can talk?” If the problem is bigger than you can handle yourself, one trusted co-worker who is familiar with the situation might be able to give you valuable feedback. You could also find out how your company’s human resources (HR) department might help.

• **If you say something at work that you later wish you hadn’t, it’s a good idea to follow up with a personal response.** Maybe you lashed out in anger at a peer, overreacted at a meeting, or criticized a co-worker too harshly. An apology is in order. It’s best to offer it in private and in person. “I’m sorry I lost my temper yesterday. You deserve better from me.”

Be a careful listener. Careful listening is important whether you are handling a problem with a co-worker, having a discussion with your manager, or talking with a family member or friend.
• **Let others know if they have offended you.** If a co-worker who is also under stress from workplace change has been rude to you or impatient, let him know that this bothered you, preferably soon after the event and in private. You might start the conversation with, “I know none of us has been acting like ourselves lately, but . . .”

• **Ask for a break if you think you are going to lose your patience or composure.** It’s all right to say, “I need a break” or “I’ll need some time to think about this.”

• **If a bad situation at work persists, find someone to help you.** It may be someone from your company’s HR department or EAP. It may be a knowledgeable co-worker in another part of the organization. Or it may be someone from outside the company. But some situations are too difficult to take on alone. If your communication problem is with someone critical to your success at work and after repeated attempts you do not find the help and support you need, you may need to look for a different position in the company.
Resilience, optimism, and change

“Handle the challenge of change well, and you can prosper greatly.”

—John Kotter, Our Iceberg Is Melting
“Recognizing the world as a permanent whitewater world has a number of implications,” write Shea and Gunther in Your Job Survival Guide, “not the least of which is that more than ever, you lead yourself. The sun may not shine on you. You may be wet and miserable. You may be battered and beaten. . . . But this is no excuse for not being optimistic. Ask yourself: Are you having fun yet?” With the right mindset, we can all learn to embrace change.

**Take advantage of the opportunities in change**

People often adopt a wait-and-see attitude during times of change. But it will give you a greater sense of control, and will be more fun, if you actively look for the opportunities in change.

- **Build your skills so that you are able to work successfully with others**—with groups and teams on shared projects, tasks, and goals. Regardless of where you are in the organization today, increasingly your job depends on your ability to work with others. The more new skills you learn, the more valuable you will be to your employer.

- **Network.** Connect with others to learn more about your field, your company, your customers, and your industry in general. This knowledge makes you more valuable to any employer, current or future. If you make a point of meeting people who do work similar to yours at other companies, you can bring new ideas to your workplace. Join a professional group and attend talks and seminars. This kind of networking can help you keep your skills current. It also gives you access to information about opportunities outside your company—if you should decide to move on—and to people with skills your company needs. On a more personal level, it’s helpful to have people
with whom you can discuss career expectations and frustrations, and who have gone through similar stages in their careers. These people don't necessarily have to be co-workers, but they should be people you trust and who listen well.

- **Seek out opportunities to work with and learn from people of all ages.** Sometimes the most valuable learning comes from the interactions we have with people across the generations. Volunteer for cross-functional projects or invite someone from another generation to serve on your project team.

- **Understand what it is that you contribute to the organization.** Ask yourself, “What are the one or two things that I do that provide most of my value to the organization?” Then concentrate on those things. Not the little things. If you don’t know what value you bring to work, then ask someone. Peers can help. Ideally your supervisor can help as well.

- **Make yourself valuable by doing the work that’s most valuable.** Ask yourself or someone else, “What needs doing around here?” Ask co-workers. Ask people who may be of higher rank as well. Then do the things that need doing.

- **Practice being flexible.** Sometimes the answer is to paddle as fast as you can. Other times, what you want to do is go with the flow. Be willing to use both strategies. Ask yourself, “When would I do this? When would I do that? When would I do something else?” Think in terms of flexibility.

*Stay on task. Permanent whitewater times are not the times to be badmouthing others or the organization. They’re the times to give it your best.*
Manage your career

Managing your career is an ongoing job, like paying attention to your health or keeping your home in good repair. It’s part of the job description in today’s changing world of work.

- **Recognize that your career needs and goals are ever changing.** If you are raising young children or taking care of older relatives, for example, a flexible schedule may be most important to you. During another phase of life, flexibility may not matter as much.

- **Be open to new possibilities.** Avoid limiting yourself to a strict career path or thinking only in terms like, “In three years I want to run my division; in six I want to be a vice president; in ten I want to be president.” Over the course of your work life, you may discover strengths and areas of interest that you didn’t know you had. If you remain aware of your own needs and desires and of how they change over time, you’ll keep your options open and take best advantage of your own growth and individuality.

- **Update your resume and keep your personnel file updated.** Revise your resume once a year to include new accomplishments, skills, and responsibilities, even if you aren’t looking for other work. This will help you see your progress, focus on your goals, and be ready for change. If you do something well, ask the person you did it for to write a short note so that it goes in your file. Save all positive feedback you receive so that you have it on file when you need it for a performance review or job prospect.
Keep learning. Keep your skills current and learn new ones by taking advantage of any training programs your employer offers, including cross-training for other jobs. Learn everything you can about your company, your customers, and your industry. If your company is going through a merger, find out as much as you can about the other company and about the goals for the combined company after the merger. Make a point of meeting people in other departments to get a broader view of the company. Learn what they do. Volunteering for committee work—a charity appeal or planning a company recreational event—gives you the opportunity to meet people from other divisions of the company and find out what they do. Ask questions, watch closely, listen carefully.

Maintain a positive attitude

Change is challenging and it can be wearing, just like everything else in life that makes you grow. Use it to your advantage—to expand your skills and talents, your goals and aspirations.

• Keep a positive attitude. It will help you through even the most challenging times.

“Meeting a turbulent environment with optimism and a sense of play can make the difference between a frightening ride and a fully engaging adventure.”

• Limit negative thoughts. Thoughts like “This change is terrible and I can’t do anything about it” or “This is never going to get better” wear down your resilience and your ability to thrive through change. Instead, ask yourself, “What would make things better? What can I do today to improve my outlook? What’s my first step?” Focus on the positive.

• Look back to how you successfully handled other setbacks and challenges. Ask yourself, “How did I get through it? How can that knowledge help me now?” Don’t dwell on past mistakes and disappointments.

• Discover what you love to do—and do it. If that can be included in work, great. If not, make sure that it happens outside work. Look for activities that bring you a sense of personal achievement, satisfaction, or fulfillment. Those activities can sustain you, especially during periods when your work may not feel as fulfilling or satisfying as you might like.

• Use humor to help you see the positive. Laugh more. Spend time with funny people. At lunch with co-workers, try to keep topics light, fun, and upbeat. Even when things seem to be falling apart around you, try to find time to smile and laugh. Physiologically, we benefit from both smiling and laughing. These actions literally affect us neurologically and chemically in positive ways. It’s very healing, and it will help you forget your worries for a few moments.

• Gravitate toward upbeat people. Scientists have found that we “mirror” or copy the physical gestures of others without realizing it. When co-workers adopt stiff, negative postures, for example, we unconsciously imitate them. We also copy body language that’s more relaxed and optimistic. When we’re with upbeat, optimistic people, we don’t just
relax mentally—we relax physically, too. Spend time whenever you can with positive people. Plan to take breaks and eat lunch with them and watch for opportunities where you can work most closely with people you enjoy being with.

- *Bring a positive mood and frame of mind to work.* Studies show that moods can have a strong effect on performance. Research has also shown that moods are contagious—people can “catch” moods from each other. It will be easier to do your best at work—especially in challenging times—if you are aware of your moods and know how to control them. One upbeat, enthusiastic person can help energize the whole group. Be that person for your team.

**Looking forward**

Every life change brings opportunities for learning and growth. Although that may not be what you want to hear on a day when you’ve had all the upheaval you can take, it’s true. Adversities such as a major illness, a painful breakup, a job loss, or a stressful reorganization at work force you to re-examine your values and think more deeply about your priorities, relationships, and future. It’s like a second chance to learn and grow. You’re being offered new experiences and opportunities and the chance for greater knowledge. You’ll meet new people along the way. You’ll get good at new things. And you’ll look back months from now and feel a sense of accomplishment. So go for it. You can do it. Good luck.
Two exercises

Exercise 1: Have a conversation about change with someone you trust

Hearing the experiences and suggestions of others who have successfully navigated workplace change can be helpful. Take a moment to think about two or three people you might talk with about the changes you're facing at work. What questions do you have? Write down names and questions here. Then schedule a time to have those change conversations.
Exercise 2: Find a “change mentor”

Learning from someone who is accomplished and experienced in an area you want to excel in—like networking—will help you get through this period and clarify and reach your career goals. Think of someone who could be your “change mentor.” He or she might be older or younger than you, in your department or in another area of the company. To whom might you turn for guidance, direction, and support? Write down your questions here. Then schedule a time to talk with your change mentor.

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Resources

Bouncing Back: Staying Resilient Through the Challenges of Life. Minneapolis: Ceridian U.S. 2010. Available free of charge to employees as part of Ceridian’s LifeWorks/LifeBalance employee support program. Check with your HR department to see if you have access to Ceridian’s services and publications.


Navigating Workplace Change CD. Minneapolis: Ceridian U.S. 2009. Available free of charge to employees as part of Ceridian’s LifeWorks/LifeBalance employee support program. Check with your HR department to see if you have access to Ceridian’s services and publications.


We'd like to hear any suggestions or ideas you have on this topic. Please write to us at publications@ceridian.com. Be sure to include the title of the booklet in your message.

Thank you.