Helping Yourself Deal with Change

By Michael L. Bell

Change is the only constant we can depend upon during the rest of this decade. It will also be our prime source of stress. The writer W.H. Auden said, “We would rather be ruined than changed, than climb the cross of the moment and see our illusions die.” Facing change can often be one of the most difficult tasks we have today.

What are the two main reasons we resist change? The first is the security we find by staying in our “comfort zones.” The second is the numerous fears we have of leaving these zones. If you think change is easy then instead of taking a shower tomorrow, take a bath. And try this: pick up a pen and sign your name. Now sign your name with your other hand. How did that feel? There is an old saying that only a wet baby likes change.

Often we become frustrated with others when they won’t change. This can include bosses, co-workers and family members. Before we complain too much about other’s resistance to change, we first need to look at ourselves and realize that many times it is difficult for us to accept change in our lives.

Let’s now take a look at techniques you can use to make change easier.

1. Be willing to change and accept the discomfort that a change can create.
2. Envision the good that will come from change.
3. Know your change style and the styles of those around you.

There are different styles, or personality types, as it relates to change. By observing people in your organization, you can readily spot these various styles. The first one is the “mule” which is very stubborn and resists change. This person is traditional, prefers the status quo, and is very skeptical of most changes. Many times they see no reason to change, and they tend to be very vulnerable to obsolescence. Archie Bunker was a mule. Norman Lear, the creator of “All in the Family,” said this about Archie: “Archie was a guy who couldn’t stop the world from changing; he could only fume at it.”

The second style is the “sentinel.” These folks are receptive to change only as long as someone else can prove to them that it is worthwhile. In essence they say, “I’m from Missouri. Prove it.”

And finally, the third type is the “trailblazer.” These are the people who actively seek change. They are the change agents in business. They are risk takers and often propose very radical ideas. Sometimes they change just for the sake of change.

As you can imagine, conflicts can arise when these different styles are involved in changes within your firm.

4. Change is more acceptable when:
   * The reason for change is understood.
   * Those affected by the change have had input in the process.
   * The change has been planned and is expected rather than when it happens suddenly.
   * The entire organization is built upon the philosophy that we must change to achieve continuous improvement.

If these principles are not taken into consideration, the “three Rs” may appear: resistance, resentment and revenge. This means that people may first resist the change, and then resent it, and if the resentment is great enough, they may get revenge by sabotaging the change process.


There are times when we must react to our changing environment because it is thrust upon us. For all practical purposes it is out of our control.

More times than not we can assume a proactive posture and anticipate change. So give these techniques a try.

About the Author:
Mike Bell is a principal in The Construction Group, a Denver-based management consulting and training firm specializing in the construction industry. He provides services in innovating and managing change.

There are three different . . . personality types . . . as it relates to change: the “mule,” the “sentinel,” and the “trailblazer.” Which one are you?