

# 7 reasons why individuals struggle with change

By Stephen Morris, Founder and Director, Open Square

## Introduction

We've been sharing our experiences of change and some tips on how to lead teams through it, culminating in our eBook, *Changing IT Up* (available FREE from our website). In this short article, we'll share some of the key reasons why individuals struggle with change and some things to look out for.

For the purposes of this article, change refers to an intentional project / transition to achieve a goal, not organic or continuous improvement within a team.

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I often hear issues with change being lumped into the category of '*people are resistant to change*', but it's not that simple. Sure, there are people that do resist change (they act to prevent change, or they might fight to bring back the old regime), but alongside them we see many other behaviours. Some of these are people that are apathetic (unengaged, don't see a direct impact on them, easier to not think about it), stragglers (waiting to be convinced, but continue for now in the current mould) or people that are enthusiastic, but don't have the skill to adopt the change.

In other words, it's first very important to recognise that the opposite of people *adopting* change is not people *resisting* change. It is simply people not adopting change, and here are some of the reasons:

### 1. Fear of loss of status / job security

If we have a situation where an individual's current working situation is perceived to be threatened, there's a high chance that the uncertainty will be perceived as a threat, and the response will be avoidance and anxiety.

There's much research on the impact of loss in cognitive psychology, with much concluding that the threat of loss is hardwired to create more pressure on us than any opportunity for gain. The work on loss aversion by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman is one such, and neural studies have followed up research on how the brain acts when predicting a loss. What appears to be common is that the limbic system – the oldest evolutionary part of our brains (our lizard brain), and specifically the amygdala – fires off fear, anxiety and avoidance responses.

This effect is magnified when change happens without warning. I've witnessed first-hand changes like this, and you can clearly see fear/anxiety in body language.

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## 2. Previous (bad) experiences

If an individual has lived through poorly executed or stressful change previously, there could well be bias that affects how more change is perceived. For example, the availability bias (availability heuristic) is a cognitive 'shortcut' the brain uses to evaluate the current situation with available examples.

In the case of change, this could be an experience (the last changes were bad; therefore, all change is bad), but we can also pick up on other people here with an anchoring bias (Bob says change is bad; therefore, all change is bad).

Regardless of the origin of the belief, attempting to make changes when individuals begin with a negative mindset will hold them back.

## 3. Inertia

Even if a person doesn't perceive a threat of loss from a change, there is current operating model. Concepts like 'that's just how we do things around here!' or 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' can be very powerful beliefs that take energy to get past. In the adoption/innovation curve, this is likely to be the later groups – people that will continue with the status quo until they must – and it's important not to underestimate this.

## 4. Culture of mistrust

This is like 'previous (bad) experiences', however here I'm referring to something more systemic. If you were releasing a new product to market, the initial ramp where you rely on innovators and early adopters is a risky place to be. With an innovative product, those early adopters face bugs, immature support or even product cancellation, so it takes some patience, inspiration and energy for that initial group to stick with it. That's very much the case with change too, but if the consequences are punitive (fear of blame or loss of face) it's going to be difficult to motivate people to take any risks and get involved in the first place.

## 5. The politics of being human

It could be the very best idea you're implementing – and everyone agrees – but progress gets beaten back by the interpersonal relationships of those making, or those sponsoring the change. Linked to inertia, mistrust and fear, if the team seen leading the change are unpopular and aren't doing anything to assuage those concerns, a war of attrition can ensue. (btw that's not to say that everyone leading a change should be liked and respected, but it helps!)

These issues could manifest from perceived or actual discontentment or disagreement with a leadership group (especially if they are seen to be distant), an external consultant stepping in and on toes, or from a non-respected peer who has stepped into a change role.

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## 6. I don't know how to

Sometimes it's the simplest things that prevent change from sticking, and one of those is a situation where individuals don't know how to change. An individual could be enthusiastic about a new system, structure or way of working, but without the appropriate guidance and support can't operate in the 'new' world. There are likely to be three scenarios – 1) they don't know they need help, 2) they know they need help but are embarrassed to ask or 3) they've sought help but it's not working.

## 7. Bad planning

Changes that are badly planned can lead to all the struggles in this article, but planning exists here in its own right, and there are two real planning concerns I hold in relation to change: no planning at all, and a fixed/waterfall plan.

Given that change is inherently about helping humans to adopt different ways of working, having no plan at all leaves you wide open to the issues described here. With something lower risk (like trying a new type of post-its), it might be ok, but from my experience assumptions always bite.

The opposite, having a very detailed and fixed plan makes assumptions about teams and individuals. It's great to have a clear end in mind and route from a start point, but you must provide space to change when assumptions fall. "No plan survives contact with the enemy" — Erwin Rommel

To close off, if you're leading or part of change, remember that while these struggles exist, the opportunity to awaken energy, talent, ideas and potential in people that change brings can play a massive part in moving business to be great and work through difficult periods.

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### About Open Square

We develop IT leaders who want to grow, build amazing teams and deliver better results. We provide skills workshops, coaching and a unique leadership development programme designed specifically for leaders in IT: The Open Leader Method™.

If you would like to find out how we can help you build teams that take more ownership and deliver when everything around them is changing, give us a call or drop us an email for a no-obligation discussion.