

GROUP LIFE  
& HEALTH

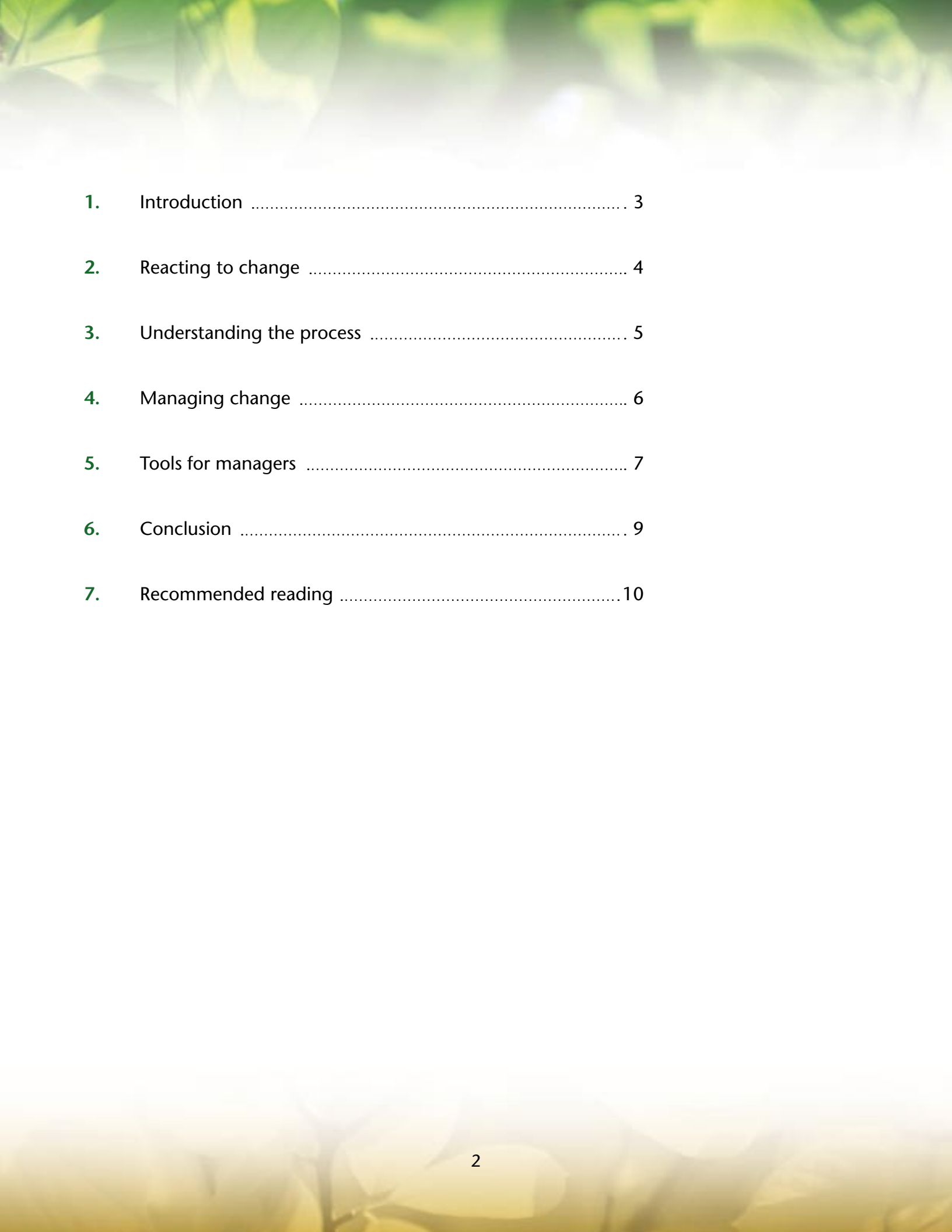
ONLINE EDUCATIONAL BOOKLET

MANAGING CHANGE

*Well.*  
And well worth it.



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## Introduction

To keep the competitive edge finely honed, successful organizations must constantly adapt and change. New technologies, new processes, new personnel, new products and new strategies are constantly being introduced. It's enough to make the most flexible employee dizzy. But organizations that aren't constantly evolving seldom survive, so it's important for managers and staff alike to be able to embrace, not resist, change.

Embracing change is not always an easy task. Over the last two decades, the nature of business has been completely transformed. Partly due to technology, partly due to globalization, partly due to the nature of business itself, we've witnessed the demise of certain job functions, takeovers, downsizing and the steady increase of work loads. The result is an often fearful, distrustful and anxious workforce.

So when a company restructures or merges, the resulting anxiety can have a devastating effect on both employees and productivity. Managing rather than reacting to change will reduce fear and anxiety and make the transition from the old way of doing things to the new order that is much smoother. Survival depends on your skill as a manager to create a workplace where change is anticipated, exploited and successfully implemented.

***More information and assistance is available through Expert-Aide, a service that offers professional coaching and consultation for managers to help them deal with employees who are having difficulties. Orientation sessions and online booklets are also available, as are referral services for employees who are facing difficulties that affect, or could affect, their job performance. Contact Expert-Aide at 1 866 314-9533 (English service) or 1 866 314-9534 (service en français).***

## Reacting to change

How people perceive change will dictate their reaction to change. They can perceive a company restructuring, for example, as an opportunity or as a threat. If an employee views the change as an opportunity, then he or she will support the process. If an individual believes the outcome will be negative, he or she will resist. The more of a perceived threat, the greater the resistance.

For managers, the first component in a change initiative is to know and understand their people. Every individual is different, so every reaction will be different. Those who have difficulty coping with lack of structure usually have difficulty coping with change. Those who possess high stress thresholds and low requirements for structure usually enjoy the process.

Change means the unknown and most of us fear the unknown. That fear triggers many reactions, including anxiety, panic, depression and anger. These are normal responses – and so are the negative behaviours that often accompany those responses, behaviour such as:

- acting like a victim
- giving in to negativity
- detaching from the job
- venting anger
- expecting someone to take care of them
- focusing only on their area of concern

Therefore, managing emotions is the second critical component to managing a change initiative. And the first place to start is with your own reactions to the situation. It's important to lead by example.

## Resiliency

The key characteristics of people who thrive in changing environments are flexibility and resiliency. These are especially important characteristics for managers. Resilient people view change as a challenge. They analyze change and develop solutions. They bounce back from adversity and are positive, curious and creative. Therefore, choose resilient staff members if you need to create a team or teams to lead aspects of the transitional process.

## Understanding the process

Many people describe the transition from their old familiar workplace to the new, unfamiliar one as an experience akin to white water rafting: you never know what's around the next bend! It's exciting, scary, sometimes dangerous and an experience for which you are usually unprepared and ill equipped to handle. Preparing yourself – and your staff – will make the journey less scary and an opportunity to reach new horizons.

Change is not a series of isolated events. It's a process, and as with every process, it takes time. That process has three distinct phases.

### Ending --- Transition – Beginning

Simply put, a new beginning cannot start until something has ended. Everyone involved must recognize that the old way of doing things is gone and grieve that loss. Since each and every one of us deals with grief differently, expect different reactions. Often, people will deny the loss then, when they realize that change is inevitable, bargain for more time or seek special accommodations that will slow its progress. Eventually, they will reluctantly move into acceptance mode.

The transition process is the most difficult phase to manage because it's unpredictable and often turbulent. Remember that white water rafting analogy? This is when you often hit the rapids and end up hanging on for dear life.

Whether the transition is rocky or smooth depends on how those involved react to change and how well the process is handled by management. Your role as a manager is to bring closure and ease your workforce into the new future. Support and reassurance, openness and honesty, clarity and discussion will make the process smoother and ensure commitment to the initiative from your staff.

Timing the transition period is tricky however. Extend it unnecessarily and the results can be costly and disruptive. End it too soon and resistance to change will continue. Again, knowing your people and understanding their reactions will help you gauge when to end the transition period.

## Managing change

In today's business climate, if you are not managing change and transition, you are not managing. Small, frequent changes that gently challenge the status quo keep your department moving forward and help people become more flexible when major changes occur. An organization that is constantly changing becomes future oriented, not stuck in past.

While people will embrace small, incremental modifications, they need time to shift their mind set when big changes loom. The bigger the change, the more notice people require. Seamless transitions require detailed preparation, planning and evaluation.

### Communication

Perhaps the single most important element in a transition process is a well-planned, well-executed communication plan. Incomplete or poor communication raises suspicions that management is hiding something. Poor or delayed communication also causes the rumour mill to go into overdrive and it becomes harder for managers to undo the misconceptions and regain control over the communication process.

Evidence suggests that less than 50 percent of managers successfully communicate information to their teams regarding change, or adequately discuss the impact of a change on their team. Not communicating properly is the worst mistake an organization, or a manager, can make. Communication should:

- not be delayed
- be brief and focus only on the facts
- be tailored and targeted
- be truthful

People don't need to know every element in the process, just the goals, rationale and the changes affecting them directly. Too much information promotes speculation and gossip. When change is imminent, you need to ask yourself:

- who needs to know what?
- when will they need to know?
- how will they find out?

Once you've answered those questions, you and your team are ready to establish a communication plan.

### The Communication Plan

A communication plan should include the following:

- the goals of the change initiative
- rationale and importance of the change
- role of that group in the change process
- the personal impact of the change on team members
- what resources will be allocated to the change

Ideally, announcements and briefings should be conducted on a face-to-face basis, and then followed up in written form to confirm the information and reduce the potential for distortion.

Finally, keep the information flowing quickly and accurately to those directly affected by the change.

### Look and Listen

Ask your staff for their opinions and feedback regarding the change initiative. Don't disregard objections, resistance or feelings – you'll only drive them underground which will lead to unproductive behaviour ranging from indirect grumbling and complaining to outright sabotage. Those openly resisting the change are calling for your help. Be there to listen and lend your support.

Walk around the office, engage in discussion and share as much information as necessary. Be patient with people. Give them time to come around to the new structure or process.

# Tools for managers

## 1. Provide Direction

- Define your own critical success factors. What has to happen to your area if this transition is to be a success?
- Focus your people on short-term objectives, deadlines and assignments. Long term strategies can come later.
- Aim high and challenge your staff. Turn that anxiety and stress into productive energy.
- This is your chance as a manager to inspire. Be a key role model.

## 2. Expect change

- Expect a drop in productivity and an increase in stress levels during the transitional process.
- Prepare staff for change and transition. They want things to get better as a result of the reorganization or merger.
- Expect a certain amount of resistance. Without resistance you have a lethargic, complacent organization. Tell staff why they are going through this process.
- Expect power struggles by people underneath you in the company. These may be significantly more intense than in the past.

## 3. Be Positive

- Rise above the confusion. Empower yourself. Be upbeat and enthusiastic.
- Develop a high tolerance for ambiguity. Be flexible.
- Keep a sense of humour. Try to introduce a sense of fun and play into the process.
- Keep a sense of balance and perspective. Don't let yourself get overwhelmed by transitional issues.

## 4. Clarify and Manage the Issues

- Separate the urgent from the important. Avoid being side-tracked by low priority issues. Make sure your priorities are clear.
- Make sure you have a clear understanding of the problems that need to be handled.

## 5. Inform Yourself

- Take time to understand the psychological changes involved in the process. Show empathy and understanding to your staff.
- Ask people's opinions. Single out individuals and publicly praise their positive behaviours.
- Get out and walk around. Visit every nook and cranny. Talk and listen to as many people as you can.
- Invite bad news. Don't tolerate those who tell you what they think you will want to hear.

## 6. Inform Your Staff

- Set out to quickly clear up any distortions or rumours. Be candid and specific.
- Give staff the bad news as well as the good. Don't assume people only want to hear the good news. Level with people by telling them the truth.
- Be available and visible to staff. Be prepared to discuss concerns.
- Give staff the chance to vent.

## 7. Get Your Staff On Board

- Be honest. Don't make promises you can't keep. Build, or rebuild your credibility. Assume your staff is looking for ways to distrust you.
- If you are a new boss to your group, remember that your staff will need some time to decide if they want to work for you.
- Give staff lots of reasons to believe that the transition is being well-managed. After all, it's their future too.

## 8. Build Your Team

- Meet with your staff. Make sure everybody knows the report relationships and performance expectations. Clarify roles and responsibilities often.
- Build confidence in your team. Success restores momentum and creative energy.

## 9. Let the Staff Work Their Way Through the Transition

- Encourage initiative and risk taking. Try to shape behaviour and not judge mistakes. Expect mistakes. Be a good coach, not just the boss.
- Don't try to come up with all the answers all the time. If you don't know, say so.
- Delegate. Spread the energy around. Look after yourself first, then others.

## 10. Just Get On With It

- Be action oriented. Focus on the transition process and get on with things.
- Move resolutely ahead. Your staff will thank you for it later.
- Create some positive improvements and high profile successes early in the game.
- Be prepared to make the tough decisions in order to minimize unhealthy political behaviour. Be tough when necessary.

## Conclusion

Change is inevitable and unending. Some people thrive on change, others are fearful – and fear triggers anxiety, resistance and a range of unproductive behaviours. This applies to both managers and staff.

Managers, however, must focus on the change process and keep a grip on their personal reactions so they can steer their teams through the often uncertain waters of organizational change. If you do not personally agree with the change, you must deal with the issue openly and quickly before your team members pick up on your cues. When this happens, resistance spreads quickly. Effective leaders embrace change positively and work diligently to lessen any negative effects on their staff.

Selling the change is crucial. Outline the benefits, the opportunities to learn new skills and the potential for personal growth or increased job security. Focus on the positive but don't oversell or distort the truth.

Managing change is a challenge, but it's also an opportunity and an adventure – for everyone.

*For assistance with, or more information on, change management, contact Expert-Aide at 1 866 314-9533 (English service) or 1 866 314-9534 (service en français).*

## Recommended reading

***Managing Change and Transition***

by Harvard Business School Press

***Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change***

by William Bridges

***Essential Managers Managing Change***

by Robert Heller

***Quick Skills: Managing Change***

by South Western Publishers

***Managing the Aftermath of Radical Corporate Change:***

*Reengineering, Restructuring & Reinvention*

by Eliezer Geisler

***Managing In Times Of Change***

by Michael Maginn

***Managing Business Change For Dummies***

by Beth L. Evard

***Leading Change***

by John P. Kotter



Keeping our word is standard

