

By Calvin Sun

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The technology of the 1980s and 1990s bears almost no resemblance to what we have today. In the same way, our jobs and organizations probably bear little resemblance to that time. Companies reduce their staffs, outsource their operations, rearrange their organizational structure, and upgrade their platforms and tools. Dealing with all of this change can be daunting. Yet being able to do so is vital to your career.

As I began to think about tips I could share on handling change, I realized that reactions to those changes mirror the reactions to the death of a loved one. In particular, I kept thinking about a tragedy that struck a south Texas family I met whose young son Ivan had been killed in an accident, and the amazing way they dealt with it. Their actions helped me put together the following tips on dealing with change. (For the story of Ivan and his resilient and generous family, [see this post in my personal blog](#).)

1 Recognize that change does happen

When we were children, as the saying goes, we thought, acted, and spoke like children. When we became adults, though, we put childish ways behind us. Our own personal lives change as we grow older. Why should our careers and jobs be any different? Denying that change is or will be occurring, and continuing to live in the past (something my daughters allege about me), only makes things more difficult.

When I teach classes on customer service, I emphasize the importance of setting and managing the expectations of the customer. That principle applies to us personally as well. The more we understand that change will happen, the less upset and surprised we will be when we encounter that change.

2 Be aware of your surroundings

In his classic work *The Art of War*, author and military strategist Sun Tzu wrote about the importance of observing signs of the enemy. For example, he wrote that movement among trees in a forest indicated that the enemy is advancing, and that dust that rose in a high column indicated the approach of chariots.

Few armies fight with chariots these days, but the principles Sun Tzu wrote about apply just as much to your job situation. Recognizing that change happens is desirable. It's even better, though, to recognize when change might be occurring in your own specific situation. Keep alert to subtle clues. For example, are you being excluded from important meetings? Does your boss seem more distant? Is the rumor mill engaged?

3 Recognize the stages

Because reactions to organizational change resemble those to the death of a loved one, many studies on change cite the work of psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who identified several specific stages in the latter. The early stages include shock and denial (refusing to believe what has happened and instead believing everything will be all right), guilt (at not having done or said more or for not being the decedent), and anger (at the decedent or at God). Later, one passes through the stages of acceptance (acknowledging what has happened) and moving on.

With respect to organizational change, an additional "negotiations" stage can occur, in which the affected person offers to work harder as a way of preventing or forestalling the change.

All the stages don't necessarily occur. The progression might not be a smooth linear one, and different amounts of time may be involved with the different stages. Regardless, the quicker you get to the acceptance and moving on stages, the better it will be for you.

4 Communicate with others

Communications is always important, but especially so when you face change. A lack of communications from others can have a negative impact, while effective communications can have a positive one. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, you need details about the change, so that you can determine how it affects you. Don't just sit back and wait for things to happen. Talk to your boss, your boss's boss, and your co-workers to get their understanding. When dealing with co-workers, however, be aware that news can be distorted and can be mixed with rumor.

Part of the fear of change involves dealing with the unknown. If possible, try to minimize this factor by talking to others who have undergone such a change. What difficulties did they experience and how did they deal with them? How can you adapt their experiences to your own situation? As the philosopher Santayana said, "Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it."

Your communications should involve more than just people in your own department or company. They should involve people in other companies as well. They might have experienced the same change, so their advice has value. They might also serve as contacts should you decide to change jobs.

5 Do a self assessment

Companies, in planning for the future, often conduct an analysis for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). That type of SWOT analysis can be just as helpful to you. What skills and strengths do you have? Where do you need to improve? By understanding your own strengths and weaknesses, and knowing as much as you can about the new situation, you have a better chance of finding a place to fit in.

6 Be flexible

Change requires flexibility. The better able you are to adapt to change, the greater your chances of being successful. After you complete your self-assessment, take a look at the requirements of the new situation. Maybe your current job doesn't fit exactly into it. However, what skills, from your old role, *can* you apply to the new situation? In other words, instead of focusing on differences, focus on similarities.

Suppose you were a football coach at a university. One day the president told you the football program was going away, and you would either have to coach basketball (something you never did before) or leave the university.

How would you react if you wanted to stay? Football and basketball have important differences, in number of players, size of playing area, and shape of ball. However, they also have similarities. In both sports, you want to outscore the opponent. In both, a coach must motivate players to achieve peak performance and must deal when necessary with discipline issues. In both, strategy, planning, and preparation are vital to success. If you wanted to make this change successful, you would look at the similarities and leverage existing knowledge. You'd then recognize shortcomings (e.g., lack of coaching experience in or knowledge of basketball) and make appropriate plans to address them.

Think in the same way about how you can adapt your own skills to the new environment.

7 Continue to do your work

I've been through reorganizations, and they're no fun. Regardless, resist if you can the temptation to just sit there. It's easy to have that attitude, because you don't know if your work is going to mean anything tomorrow or the next week. Still, you're being paid to work, so try to do so. Furthermore, that attitude could impress a future boss.

8 Be positive in actions and attitude

I don't want to sound like Pollyanna, but keeping a positive attitude can help you deal with the uncertainties of change. For example, instead of worrying about changes you will have to make, focus instead on how you can leverage your existing skills and experience, as in the example of the football-turned-basketball coach. Looking for opportunities in the new organization, and becoming involved, will hasten your adjustment.

9 Maintain your network

Your network of contacts, both inside and outside your company, can serve a valuable function. They can share with you their own experiences of change and tell you of job opportunities. More important, they can be a sounding board for your ideas and share with you their emotions about the change.

Build your network by keeping in touch with school and college classmates, former co-workers, bosses, and subordinates and by meeting colleagues at conferences and conventions.

10 See the big picture


We discussed the example of the football coach who had to become a basketball coach. That person has a better chance of success by looking not at the small picture, i.e., specific differences between the sports, but rather at their similarities as athletic activities.

Change can be frightening, and disruptive. However, with the right attitude and actions, you can find opportunities in that change.



[Calvin Sun](#) works with organizations in the areas of customer service, communications, and leadership. In addition to writing this column, he contributes to TechRepublic's [Help Desk Blog](#). You can contact him at csun@calvinsun.com.

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