

## feature

# Eliminating the fear factor

Staff often feel nervous when big changes occur in an organisation. In the second of a five-part series on change, *Becky Hall* looks at how to reduce these anxieties

DO YOU find change easy? I don't. And many people we work with also find it tough. It does not matter whether you agree with the reasons for change or not. Change breeds uncertainty and, for many, this is hard to cope with.

The first thing that needs to happen when big changes occur is for staff to acknowledge that it is not easy. Without a degree of openness, staff can feel isolated, insecure and anxious – and worst of all, have no space to talk about these feelings with colleagues.

If this happens, then change will lead to an increase in stress, inertia, low morale and disillusionment, which in turn may well show a rise in absenteeism and productivity. So when big changes are announced, it is imperative that time and space is given for teams and colleagues to talk and discuss their attitudes to it.

## Key questions

Beyond acknowledging the change process, staff need to understand the change fully. For example: What is it? Why is it happening? What will it mean for me? Where do I fit in? These questions are not always easy to answer, and often managers will not know the answers themselves. But it helps if staff can discuss these issues with colleagues and managers, and the more open and honest managers can be, the more likely it is that staff will feel less anxious and support the process.

Communication is key to making change easier to cope with. Clarity about the reasons, vision and direction of the changes needs to be backed up with as much detail as possible from managers about the impact and implications of change. Communication is also vital between colleagues – both formally and informally. It is important to discuss change in teams both to help clarify and connect with the vision and to assess the impact of change collectively.



If change involves staff restructures, new partnerships or mergers, then it is also important to meet, network and communicate with new colleagues. All this can be addressed by setting up a forum to discuss the changes with new colleagues and partners across teams and services. Planning time to discuss shared feelings about change in a structured way with new colleagues, even if you do not work with them directly, can be a really helpful way to allay fears about change, while networking and getting to know new colleagues. In our experience, the more time you can give to this, the more confident staff will feel about the changes.

## Mentoring schemes

As well as making time for discussion sessions, try establishing structures to allow colleagues to really get to know what each other does. Work shadowing, colleague buddying and mentoring schemes are all very productive ways of facilitating staff to get to know their new colleagues, and their roles. This will lead to better professional collaborations and partnerships and, hopefully, staff will feel less anxious and more positive about imminent changes.

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## Change models

**There are several models of change. Many people find these helpful in providing a framework for what they are feeling about change:**

- **Denial:** "It can't be true!" or "I don't believe it!"
- **Blaming others:** "They should not have done that" or "It's their fault"
- **Blaming self:** "I should have known" or "It's my fault"
- **Accepting the new situation:** "It's happened and I/we must go on from here"
- **Commitment to change:** "I'm going to do something about this!"
- **Creative problem solving:** "What can I/we do about it? What are our/my options?"
- **Perseverance:** overcoming obstacles through persistence and more creative problem solving

## Change sessions

**Topics to discuss:**

- **Share your hopes and fears about the changes. Discussing the future in this way can also help you find a shared vision**
- **Make a list of questions. Communicate those that you think can be answered by a manager or ask for a session to receive feedback and responses**
- **"A day in my life". Tell colleagues what you do – this will be useful in forming new partnerships and will help to create trust in new teams**