

# How to manage your reaction to a change

Wait — we're doing *what*?!



You're bound to have strong reactions to organizational changes. The merger announcement, the strategic shift, the new software system — any change might leave you confused, excited, sad, or shocked. That's normal.

But letting your reaction drive your response could lead to trouble: You might overreact, underreact, or simply fail to see the full picture. To respond in a constructive, healthy way, engage the rational part of your brain by following the process below.

## 1. Label what you're feeling — without judgment.

Responding rationally doesn't mean ignoring your emotions — quite the opposite. It's hard to think clearly without acknowledging the feelings that the change has stirred up. The mental exercise of putting concrete, descriptive labels on your emotions requires that you pause and analyze your experience. For example, *When I heard about the merger, my reaction was worry about losing my job.*

You may want to record your observations in writing. Be specific and honest. What reactions are at the forefront for you — confusion? excitement? anger? relief? You may be feeling multiple things at once.

As you articulate your feelings, don't judge them. It's not "bad" to be resistant to the company rolling out new software. Your resistance could be alerting you to legitimate concerns regarding the functionality you need, etc. You just don't want pessimism to keep you from giving your all to making the transition succeed. Likewise, feeling optimistic about a corporate merger isn't necessarily "good." It might help you keep your spirits up when things get rocky, but you don't want your enthusiasm to keep you from seeing real risks or pitfalls.

Keep in mind that whatever you're feeling won't last forever. Changes are complicated, so your response will probably be, too. Be prepared to cycle through a range of reactions as you work your way through the change.

## 2. Question your first impression of the change.

**FranklinCovey change expert Curt Garbett on handling negative feelings about change:** "We want to move beyond just reacting ..." ([transcript](#))

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It's important to acknowledge your initial reactions, but they're just a first impression and invariably offer an incomplete picture of what the change might bring.

To open yourself to other possibilities, ask yourself: *What don't I know? What am I missing? What could I be misunderstanding?*

For example, let's say you're feeling worried and frustrated about a merger with a former competitor. Your negative emotions could be clouding your view of potential opportunities, like an innovation of theirs or learning from talented new colleagues.

Also, consider the flip side of a positive reaction, where your optimism might be keeping you from addressing a problem. If you think the merger is going to be a piece of cake to implement and bring only great things for your organization, you might not want to hear about a potential trouble spot.

Our [Change Worksheet](#) can help you get a more complete understanding of a change you're facing.

*When you first learn about a change, you'll have a reaction. But that doesn't have to determine how you respond. FranklinCovey consultant Marché Barney offers four questions to ask yourself to figure out what else you need to know and what to do next.*

### **3. Talk to others, especially those with differing views.**

Questioning yourself is a start. Then proactively seek out other perspectives to become aware of facets of the change you otherwise may not notice.

You might start with your manager. They probably have additional context and may have a different view. Then, expand your circle beyond those likely to bolster your opinions or who are similarly affected by the change. If you work in the engineering department, how are folks in sales or finance affected? What about colleagues you don't know quite as well, or even frequently disagree with?

Frame your conversations to draw out perspectives that differ from yours. If you're feeling mostly negative, specifically ask colleagues for positives (e.g., *"I'm trying to get my head around this change, and I don't want to lose sight of the upside. What do you think the biggest benefits are?"*). If you're mostly positive, mention that you'd like to hear any concerns or potential pitfalls (e.g., *"I'm excited about the merger, but I know sometimes my enthusiasm can get the better of me. What am I missing? Do you see anything we should keep an eye on?"*).

### **4. Cultivate both short- and long-term perspectives.**

When higher-ups launch a big organizational change, they're often driven by a long-term vision of a better future — like a bigger or more efficient company. But when workers at the team level deal with change, they often need to work out the details in the short-term, figuring out the glitch in the new software that crashed the company website or completely redesigning sales presentations to reflect the new brand positioning.

What timeline is driving your reaction? Do you have a vision of ultimate success that could cause you to downplay short-term obstacles — like a software glitch? Or are you so caught up in the immediate problems — how are we going to fix this glitch? — that you lose sight of the vision?

Would taking *both* short- and long-term views change how you feel? Consider asking yourself (and then others) questions like:

- What are the short-term problems I'm facing because of the change? What about short-term benefits?
- What are the ultimate goals of the change — what are the potential benefits? What are some long-term risks? How do these goals and risks align with my personal goals?

## **5. Seek more information to clarify what the change could mean for you personally.**

Figuring out how the change affects you helps you identify potential opportunities to seize, problems to avoid, and what action you want to take next. If your company is headed in a new strategic direction, how could your role change? Your performance goals?

What do you stand to gain from the change? Are there skills you may build? Peers you'll collaborate with for the first time? New paths toward a promotion? And what do you stand to lose? Will you have to stop doing something you love? Or stop working with peers you enjoy? Acknowledging the loss that change can bring can make it possible let go of resentment and enable you to focus on the positive.

If you need help to find these answers, schedule time with your manager or peers who can provide context and direction. Focus on what you can personally start, stop, and keep doing to better enact the change — not on what you can't (like reversing a frustrating decision that has already been made).

In your conversations, stay curious and open-minded. You'll be more likely to get helpful information that way (e.g., *"I'm trying to think through what the change means for me and my work. Can we talk through which projects of mine might be less important in light of the change? And what kind of opportunities the change might present for me?"*).

## **6. Pick one action to take to begin enacting the change.**

**FranklinCovey change expert Curt Garbett on why and how to get good at change:** "This is reality. We *need* to get good at change ..." ([transcript](#))

“Change can feel really large and overwhelming,” says FranklinCovey change expert Curtis Bateman. “You can be a little bit paralyzed. But the minute you start to dig into the details and take one actionable step, you realize you have a little more control. And you start to make progress by chipping away at it.”

So where do you start?

There’s no need to come up with a master plan, or even “the best” first step. Pick one small action that seems doable and potentially constructive based your current situation. If you’re still trying to figure out why the change is happening or what it means to you, you probably need to gather more information, perhaps by meeting with your manager or a peer (see No. 5).

If you see the potential in the change but aren’t sure how to start making it happen, you might want to seek ideas from your manager or your team.

If you have a vision of how you can implement the change, take the first step. View it as an experiment, an opportunity to learn. If you make a misstep, you won’t be the only one — missteps are inevitable when taking on a change. Based on what you learn from your experience, adjust and try again.