How to mentally adjust when your company changes

When your company makes an unexpected change you can do what a lot of employees do: freak out. Or, as psychologist Daryl Conner writes, "You can learn to discipline yourself to use the forces of change to your advantage—like learning to turn into a skid rather than succumbing to the natural tendency to turn away from it when driving on an icy road."

The second approach is often much harder. But it's one worth cultivating because things change frequently in today's workplace. When you fail to adapt, you let stress dictate the cadence of your life, which makes you miserable and, over time, damages your health. (For more, check out our Resilience & Well-Being topic.) And, as difficult as some changes may be, they often present new opportunities to learn and grow.

So how can you gain the self-mastery it takes to get through challenging company changes, and even use them to your advantage? It may start with your mindset. Follow the tips below and use our Reflection guide: My response to a company change to improve your situation.

1. Don't rush to judgment.

Your mind is probably going to mess with you right after you hear about a surprising change. Why? There are a lot of potential reasons—some known and some still buried in the murky science of the human brain. But generally people are uncomfortable with ambiguity, which almost inevitably accompanies change. You may jump to the worst conclusions even if you have only a little bit of information to go on. (For example, you learn your team is merging with another one, and instead of thinking, "This could be a chance to learn more and have a bigger impact," you might think, "I could lose my job.")

Self-awareness can go a long way toward keeping your premature judgments under control. If you know that your initial reaction is likely to be fueled by anxiety, buy yourself some time to process: head to a coffee shop, go for a walk, or even ask to take a day off. And if you're worried about saying something you might regret before you've had time to form a reasonable opinion, prepare a neutral answer for when others ask you what you think of the restructuring, the new CEO, or the company's plans to globalize. Try a simple, *"It's a lot to process, and I'm still thinking it over."*

2. Get support from friends, mentors, and people who adapt well.

You might be tempted to commiserate with your coworkers, but you don't want to get caught up in others' negativity. And given how political some workplaces get during periods of change, your best bet for a sounding board is probably someone unaffiliated with your organization, such as a good friend or family member. A mentor who has gone through similar changes might be able to provide some pointers. For more on finding a mentor, see our article [I can't find or engage a mentor](#).

3. Analyze your personal change preferences and history.

We all have personality traits that influence our responses to change, as well as tangled histories of dealing with it. Yanking this stuff out of yourself and examining it can provide valuable context.

Key factors to probe may include:

- *Your typical approach to change.*Do you have a history of initiating sweeping changes in your professional and personal life (and perhaps getting bored with them soon afterward)? Or are you more likely to make small, incremental changes that don't threaten your routine?
  If you think of these two approaches as extremes on a scale, where would you place yourself? According to management experts Chris Musselwhite and Robyn Ingram, approximately 25 percent of people in the U.S. tend to be change "originators" (the first type), 25 percent lean heavily toward the change "conserver" side (the second type), and 50 percent fall somewhere in the middle (i.e., "pragmatists"). There's no right or wrong mindset—each approach has pros and cons—and the categories aren't meant to indicate your ability to change. But considering your tendencies within this framework may help you make sense of your (and others') perspective on change. For more, see [this article](#) by Chris Musselwhite.
- *The number and scale of other changes you're currently dealing with.* What if a big change at work comes while you're in the middle of a bad breakup, moving into a new neighborhood, or getting to know a new manager—or all of the above? Your tolerance for the next new thing will probably be lower. Change overload is sometimes the culprit when we resist company changes.
- *Your past experiences with company changes.* Past experiences with layoffs, new leadership, strategic shifts and other company changes can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, you can probably apply some lessons you've learned. On the other, it's easy—and potentially destructive—to take the attitude of "Here we go again." Make a list of the organizational changes you've experienced and ask yourself: How might these predispose you to either accept or reject any current initiatives?

After reflecting on your personal views of change, you'll be better equipped to adapt. For example, if you suspect you incline toward the "originator" side of the spectrum (i.e., you often like the big ideas behind changes but sometimes get bored implementing the details), you may need to work harder to stay focused over time. Or if you've been through a poorly handled round of layoffs at a previous company, you can try to keep your cynicism in check.

4. Fill in any information gaps.

Some organizations are better than others at communicating the thinking behind their latest moves. If you're missing vital information, such as why a change is happening or how it's going to affect you, don't stew in silence. Instead, proactively go to your boss and ask questions (nicely). Doing so might even let leaders know that they need to improve how they communicate.

The key is to ask in a genuinely curious, upbeat, and open-minded—rather than confrontational—way.

- Poor:
  "No one's bothered to explain why we came up with a new mission statement. What's the point?"
- Better:
  "I've been thinking about the change to our mission statement. I realized I don't have a good understanding of what led to the decision, and knowing that could help me process it and apply it to my work. Could you tell me a little more about the thinking behind the change?"

If your organization is so large or the change is so complex that you can't get the answers you're seeking, you might need to accept that you'll never know. As experienced manager [Michael Zippiroli](#) explains, "When it comes to high-level strategic changes, you might not have access to all of the people you would need to fill in the gaps in your understanding. And even if you did, you'd have to have a very deep understanding of the markets, the financials, all of the business lines, and all kinds of other data that typically come together to create a big change. Sometimes you just have to trust the organization—and if you don't, then that's probably a whole other issue."

5. Voice any legitimate concerns you have.

You might assume that your job is to accept the change and keep quiet. But if you voice legitimate concerns in a positive, proactive way, one of two things might happen: You could learn something that eases your concerns, allowing you to more fully embrace the change. Or, you might be able to change the change—and potentially save your team (or even your company) from a costly misstep. After all, you have a ground-level perspective that higher-level leaders might appreciate hearing about.

Admittedly, speaking truth to power can be a risky move. If you do it poorly, you can harm your credibility and maybe even jeopardize your employment. So choose your battles—and your words—carefully:

- Poor:
  "It's easy for you to say we need to be more customer-centric, but we customer success reps are already working evenings and weekends to keep up with incoming tickets. How are we supposed to work even more hours?"
- Better:
  "I understand the company's push to become more customer-centric, and I want to do my part. Would you be willing to talk about how I can make sure I'm making the best use of my time?"

6. List what you'll be losing in the change.

When changes hit, there's usually a lot of rhetoric flying around about staying positive and moving forward. Nothing wrong with that. But acknowledging what you're losing is an equally important part of the change process. There are pros and cons to almost every change, and suppressing the cons can cause resentment to build up and potentially turn toxic.

Try listing what the change will force you to let go of. Some of these things might be obvious: a restructuring eliminates a position you were hoping to get promoted to. Others might be more subjective: you might *feel* like your path to a promotion has gotten more difficult. List these subjective items, too, because their emotional impact can be just as powerful.

Review your list closely. Is there anything on there that you want to try to preserve? If so, ask yourself what you might be able to do. And regardless, allow yourself to feel the emotions associated with the loss, knowing that this is part of the change process.

7. Envision your part in the future.

It's one thing to participate in a change; it's another to commit to it. Maybe you've moved to a new building, merged with a new team, or had your first meeting with a new department head. Technically, you've gone through the motions of change. But have you accepted it? Are you going to do your part to make it succeed? Are you hopeful about your company's future and your part in it? If so, your chances of faring well in the new environment will probably go up.

To make that happen, it may help to write down how the change benefits you and refer back to this list in moments of doubt. Additionally, plotting a course that will get you from where you are now to a place where you'd like to be in the new environment may provide both peace of mind and confidence that the change is worth making.

8. If you can't accept the change, make a change of your own.

If you pretend everything's OK but refuse to adapt, you're what change experts call a "covert resister." It's an unhealthy and unproductive position to take for you and for your organization.

You don't have to let things get to that point. The truth is you're never powerless in the face of a company change, even when it isn't one of your own making. Why? Because you can always make a change of your own.

If, after making a genuine effort to understand a company change and its implications, you decide that it's truly misaligned with your goals and values, it might be better to pursue your career elsewhere. Before you make such an important decision, ask yourself: *Am I likely to encounter this at another organization, too?* If so, leaving might be the wrong choice—you could very well encounter a similar situation at your next job.