



## **Five Stages to Empowering Your People and Successfully Implementing Change**

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Stop for a moment and ask yourself: What significant changes are you and your team facing this season – perhaps a company or department merger, leader or employee development, or a new marketing approach? You probably have all the means – the site, the people, resources, even the blueprints for change – but do you have the ways? Do your people have the skills, knowledge, and experience to avoid lost time, lost tempers, and lost revenue? Can you grow your people and grow your organization, while also experiencing major change?

To successfully navigate and implement a merger or any major change effort, you will need to move your people into, through, and beyond the *status quo*. This means getting and keeping their buy-in and follow-through based on real trust and shared values. Can you help yourself while also helping them? Yes, it is possible, if you don't mind putting yourself in what may become a highly political or vulnerable position. Mergers, for instance, induce some significant growing pains. They often lead to the loss of key staff and resources, as well as precious time and money. You may well be able to do it yourself, but keep this fact in mind: Do-it-yourself-ers are one of the main reasons 80% of all mergers fail, *and fail miserably, at that*. Is *this* what you want for your people (and your own sanity)?

You have some options. Remember the old adage, knowledge is power? Well, in this case this saying still rings true. Becoming knowledgeable about change can make the difference. The building blocks of change are: Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance. Knowing these five distinct stages of change and how to guide your staff through these stages will build a safety net around your staff and make them more productive sooner. Knowing the stages of change will make a real difference when you are seeking to keep rather than lose key people, maintain calm rather than suffer chaos, and know success rather than endure failure.

Helping your people anticipate and become comfortable with each next step, each natural and normal stage in a change process, will build their capacity as individuals and successful team players. This knowledge will have positive long-term, as well as short-term results.

Regardless of which stage a person is in, to get maximum results, it is essential to *do the right thing at the right time* within that stage. As leaders, we must have the foresight to recognize that each stage is equally important. Skipping or rushing through a stage would be misguided, because it would likely backfire and only slow down the process of productive change. Therefore, it is wise to learn how to slow down and take the time that is needed. In order to get it done faster, you must start slowly.

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## **Five Stages of Change:**

**Pre-contemplation.** In this initial stage, individuals may be outwardly unaware of their problems or be in denial. Either way, they definitely do not want to appear *broken or damaged*. As a general rule, “Pre-contemplators” often wish *other* people would change, as in: “How can I get my superior to quit bothering me about my poor people skills? That’s just who I am.” or “Things will change during the next quarter when I get through this especially tough assignment.”

**Contemplation.** Contemplators are aware that they face problems and are seriously thinking about grappling with these problems *sometime within the next six months*.

**Preparation.** Individuals and organizations at this stage intend to take action within the next month. These individuals have taken personal responsibility for causing or contributing the need for change. In addition, these individuals have set a *personalized measurable goal* – a change that is under one’s own control, rather than dependent on someone else’s behavior.

**Action.** In this stage, individuals and organizations are taking concrete steps to change their behavior, experiences, or environment, in order to overcome their problems. Because action often brings up feelings of guilt, failure, coercion, and yearning to resume old familiar behaviors, individuals and organizations typically need a lot of support during this period. A sobering statistic: at any given time, only 10-15 percent of individuals or organizations in the process of change are engaged in the action stage.

**Maintenance.** During this stage, individuals and organizations work to consolidate their gains and prevent relapse. It is important that individuals and organizations remember that all merger experiences are different. Assuming a one-size-fits-all approach will not work! Instead, assess the group as individuals, to determine their stage of change. *Go slowly*. Anticipate backsliding. While the term “stages of change” suggests that change marches forward in a step-by-step, linear fashion, it actually occurs in a spiral pattern, meaning change comes in both forward and backward movement. *This is normal and to be expected*. Good leaders should educate their staff and clients about the inevitable spiraling nature of change to help counteract doubt, shame, and frustration about regressing to earlier stages.

All major change efforts have the probability of providing great opportunities for financial, organizational, and interpersonal growth. Designing the plan for change is the easy part. Implementing the plan *effectively* and gaining buy-in from all participants is where most leaders fall short. Take the time to assess your people as individuals, as well as in their teams. Know what to look for in advance. Understand the five stages of change and improve your odds of being successful.

Let Internal Business Solutions help you “slow down to speed up.” Let us help you empower your people, so they can empower your organization.