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Embedding Psychological health and wellbeing at work

A brief guide to the Psychology of
Change at work

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Discussion

Change is a constant feature in our lives. Psychologically we cope with change according to our personality type, and the processes of change that take place. Change is about uncertainty over the future, and our need to survive in the face of uncertainty. Different personality types deal with uncertainty in different ways. Some can cope well with degrees of uncertainty whilst others find it difficult to be uncertain about routine events of the day, such as meal times, or how long it takes to get from A to B.

Those responsible for changes in our working lives need to appreciate the differences in people and their ability to adapt to uncertainty. This is the essence of sustaining Psychological health and wellbeing at work throughout a changing situation.

Brief guidance

1. It is useful to understand different personality types before embarking on a planned change at work. One assessment tool that provides insight is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator that shows the preferences that individuals have for uncertainty – the P and J indicators, for example. Greater concern for those with a J preference is indicated, as they appreciate planning in advance whilst Ps can respond flexibly to last minute change.
 2. Change produces tension. A purpose of a change strategy is to reduce tension. There are two broad strategies that may help – a) a strategy of imposition and b) a strategy of conviction. Imposition is unlikely to reduce tension to the extent of conviction. People like to be convinced that change is necessary, and various sub-strategies can be adopted to convince people for the need for change, for example a demonstration that a changed situation works well somewhere else, or an argument that uses evidence that a proposed change will be of benefit to the individual.
 3. As change involves tension, those managing change require considerable energy to see change through to completion. There are, in general, five different roles in a change process – a steering agent (a leader who initiates the change), a change agent (a person who identifies the tension and offers solutions for reducing it), a catalyst (a person who absorbs the tensions arising from change and who facilitates change in its early stages), a pacemaker (someone who has the energy to maintain the momentum of change), and a diffusion agent (someone who takes on the role of expanding the process of change to a wider audience if required).
 4. Each of the roles has greatest impact at different times in the change process. There are, in general, three phases – the pioneer phase that relates to the initiation of change, the differential phase when the greatest resistance to change will be experienced and the integration phase when most people come together in pursuit of the proposed change.
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Our role

- We provide consultancy advice and support in the management of change
- We provide an assessment service for individuals and groups