

Exposing Fear Of Change

Great article written for Change-Management-Coach

Fear of change is subtle. It operates under the radar convincing you that it's there to protect you and keep you safe.

In reality, fear of change is one of the most common reasons for resistance to change because it stops you taking any action at all.

Earlier this year I met with a client who was losing her job after working in the same business (a bank) for 30 years. She was terrified by the prospect of being forced to think beyond what she had known for 30 years. It made it hard for her to think clearly.



A coaching client has many brilliant ideas for his future but is frustrated because he can't get started with any of his plans.

In both of these cases fear of change holds them back.

It cannot be seen and convinces people to strongly deny that it's there at all.

Fear of change works hard to convince you that change is bad for you. I often hear its attempts to convince people that they will not cope with change.

This page is an attempt to expose fear of change and give you insight into how it may work in your life, or in the lives of people or groups at work.

In most cases it is the reason for any resistance to change you experience.

Effects of Fear of Change

In most cases fear of change stops us from taking action. It often works with anxiety, self-doubt and guilt to help it to do this.

Anxiety: Some stress can be good because it gets us to do something. But there are times when feeling anxious about something new can really limit us.

This often happens if we are not certain about the future.

High levels of anxiety are often brought about by:

- rumours about change,
- self doubt,
- not knowing what to expect,
- not feeling our concerns are heard

...and this can be crippling.

When you notice and address these issues people feel less anxious.

Often a good reality check can be very helpful too. Take time to find out if the rumours you've heard are true as this can make you feel less anxious as well.

Anxiety and Fear of Change work together

Feeling anxious can stop us trying something new and makes us resist change by stirring up fears of what is not known.

In such cases we'll choose to stick with what we know rather than face an uncertain future.

There are a number of common fears that can be mistaken for resistance to change. Be aware of them and deal with the actual fear rather than calling all fears 'resistance'.

Here are some examples of fears that look like resistance:

Fear of the unknown

Not knowing what to expect occurs when we don't have enough information about the change and we're expected to take a 'leap of faith'. This can result in a lot of anxious feelings.

Fear of failure

This fear works closely with the need for perfection and makes us worry about not getting things right. It makes sense that the best way to avoid the pain of failing is not to do anything at all.

Yet failure is the only way to succeed.

Think of the number of failed light bulb's before Edison found the one that worked. Successful people often have a list of failed attempts behind them. It's the way we learn.

John Maxwell calls it '[Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success](#)'. If you worry about failure this book might help you think differently about trying something new.

Fear of success

Marianne Williamson has written that "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?"

It's as if we don't believe we deserve success.

Concern about success can lead to feeling anxious. We have beliefs about what successful people are like and we fear that we might become like them if we are successful. We believe that we might lose friends or exploit others, for example.

To reduce this fear of change we need to know our [values](#) and remain true to them.

Fear of loss

Loss is often a part of change. Change can mean that we lose friends, our salary, or even our parking space! Other losses are not as obvious such as the the loss of known routines or the things that define who we are (like a job title, or a position).

Fear of upsetting others

Life coaches are taught to explore the impact of change on other people close to their client. This is because change can have a ripple effect on others.

Of course, the change can be positive. But the fear of upsetting others can really limit what we do. I've known clients who have refused promotions rather than deal with ill feelings from others.

Fear of leaving a comfort zone

Like it or not we are creatures of habit. We like our routines and don't like to be faced with the unknown.

Comfort zones may be safe but we can't grow or experience anything new, as one of the characters in '[Who Moved My Cheese?](#)' discovered (I love the lessons about change in this book and tell everyone about it).

Self-doubt

Self-doubt expresses itself in phrases like "I'm...not good enough", "...not clever enough", "...not qualified enough", or "I'm stupid".

Not only do we start believing this about ourselves but we fear that others might see this too. Resisting change helps us to avoid dealing with self doubt.

Putting ourselves down in this way stems from a lack of confidence and a fear of change that stops us taking any action. It literally stops us getting ahead in life.

Building self-esteem and self-confidence can counter the effects of anxiety and get rid of fear of change.

Guilt

People that put others' needs ahead of their own are likely to feel guilt if they feel the change they need to make will affect others.

You'll hear guilt in action in the words people use. They use the words "should", "must", and "have to" often. So they'll say, "I really should do xyz", or "I have to attend the meeting". Maybe you do this?

There's a lovely story [Stephen Covey](#) tells in his 7 Habits CD set about a student excusing himself from a lecture. When Covey asked why he couldn't attend the lecture the student answered "it's because I have to attend tennis practice" (or some similar reason).

Stephen Covey asked him what would happen if he didn't go to tennis practice and the student said he'd be dropped from the team. "So you choose to go to tennis training rather than attend my lecture", observed Covey.

Stephen Covey makes the point that we need to be aware of our language, and change our "I have to's" into "I choose to", or our "I should's" into "I want to" or "I would like to...".

Focus on the individual

The fear of change can be one of the biggest barriers to change at work or in your personal life.

While a [force field analysis](#) can assess the broader situation the time spent really understanding people's reactions allows you to intervene where they are at.

Encouraging the involvement of employees early in the change process and allowing them to be part of the process also leads to lower levels of resistance to change and higher acceptance and engagement in the change.

As successful change management is defined by the ability of people to move towards, and accept, the vision for change it is essential to support the process by focusing on the individual.

Resistance to change is normal. When you are aware of someone's fear of change your change management planning can support them to make the change.