

Pace of Change Worn You Out? You're Not Alone



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I led dozens of change management initiatives in my years running a newsroom.

But the toughest professional change I ever faced came when I unexpectedly got a new boss.

That's a common reaction, according to [an article from consultancy Gartner](#). Changes that affect someone's daily work life, like an assignment to a new boss or new team, impact employees much more than major organizational changes like mergers.

Gartner [found in 2020](#) that employees' ability to cope with change had dropped to 50% of pre-pandemic levels. Change fatigue presents major risks to the mission of every nonprofit just as change becomes more essential than ever in a rapidly evolving world. A worn-out staff will turn over faster and struggle to meet clients' current needs, let alone their future needs. But a few best practices can help nonprofit teams navigate change and continue to improve their service to the community.

One executive director NRMC recently interviewed calls the 2022 iteration of change fatigue "COVID brain." Most of the time, humans can rely on "surge capacity" to cope with sudden, immediate changes, [writes Sara Antliff of software developer Atlassian](#). But our surge capacities got tapped out from a two-year fusillade of sudden, immediate changes, from the grocery store to virtual school to work-from-home (or the front lines.) We can't control all the change that comes at us in work or life, especially now. But as leaders, we can use proven tools and approaches to help our teams cope with change at work. Here are a few.

Share the reasons for change.

Leaders love to talk about their visions of change, but they often forget to explain why the change is needed, [Matt Mead of SPR Consulting tells technology publication CIO](#). Tell employees how a change will affect the mission, and help them understand how it relates to what drives them personally. I invested more time later in my management career to learn what drove the team members I supervised, which allowed me to help them navigate how they related to change.

Let team members grieve.

Your Great New Thing is the end of someone else's Great New Thing. Change management efforts that don't acknowledge this will wither. Your nonprofit's efficient new plan to cover key duties could also mean some of

your team members spend less time on the parts of their jobs they enjoy most. Give your team members space to voice their worries and fears about change, and make them part of creating the solution for how to navigate the New Thing. [Gartner found](#) that employees who believe others in the organization trust them have more than twice the capacity to handle change as employees who perceive low trust. On stressful days, you might be tempted to brush off tough questions from your team about change. But not acknowledging those issues leads to resentment, Tony Kopetchny of digital transformation firm ParsonsTKO writes in “[Overcoming Change Fatigue In The Mission-Driven Sector.](#)”

Audit and solve for equity in change.

Race Forward, which catalyzes movement building for racial justice, advocates for [racial equity impact assessments](#) to identify who a proposed change might affect and how. Michele K. Synegal of Management Dynamics Inc. shares an example on the [American Camp Association website](#) of a change that would have had inequitable impact. A company that needed to cut operating costs planned to lay off 20% of its most recent hires – just as its efforts to recruit diverse employees had begun to bear fruit. Management Dynamics used change management theory to help the company reach an equitable approach: tapping performance-based metrics to decrease the firm’s staff by 20 percent.

Communicate priorities about change efforts.

Make an effort not to load all the big changes onto employees at once. Explain what changes need to take priority and what employees can tackle later. But don’t move too slowly, either. When I managed a newsroom, we tried an experiment with how we presented our news. Our effort got strong response from our audience, but didn’t move the needle on the audience metrics our organization prioritized most. And though our staff believed in the experiment, the work exhausted them. I heard a sigh of relief (even over Zoom!) when I shared that we would end the experiment. I’d hesitated to admit that we’d done our best, learned a lot, but needed to move on—and my hesitation prolonged the team’s stress.

You may grow impatient as employees struggle with change. You might also grow impatient with yourself as you struggle with change. You might feel stuck amid all the issues that come up. But the messiness of change creates a paradox. The more room your team can make to normalize and acknowledge a wide variety of reactions to change, the more adept you will become at navigating it.

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