What Your Nonprofit Needs to Know about Change



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Years ago, when I was a reporter for a business journal, the editing team met behind closed doors each week to select stories for Page 1.

Then our editor decided to make a change.

She told us the team would gather for a weekly Page 1 meeting. Each reporter would pitch one of their stories for Page 1, and the whole team would vote on which stories to include.

I told my editor competing for the limelight would turn us against each other, make a collegial workplace cutthroat. She listened, then calmly asked me, “Just give it a try.”

At the pitch meeting, my anxiety quickly turned to fascination at my colleagues’ pitches. One colleague skipped his pitch so he could lend support to other people’s stories. The approach I’d feared would divide us had brought us closer.

I didn’t know it then, but my brilliant editor used change management theory to help her team evolve. Every nonprofit will need to do that in order to succeed in 2024.

It’s essential to understand why the world around you is changing so fast, why change is difficult, and how to navigate the sticking points that will naturally arise in any organizational change effort. Here’s a primer that will help.

How Change is Changing

Is your head spinning from all the constant pivots, reinventions, and reimaginations at your nonprofit? Are you and your team hoping change will slow down in 2024?

You may have anticipated this news: The pace of change for nonprofits and the world around us won’t slow down this year. It won’t even stay the same. It will accelerate.

Why does it feel like the world is changing so fast right now? Think of some of the changes we’ve lived through in just the past few years.

- The COVID pandemic changed how we work, how we learn, and how we interact with the world around us
- Climate change has made life on our planet more challenging for humans and every other species on earth
- The rapid evolution of artificial intelligence affects how we work and engage with technology
- Calls for equity in response to systemic racism and bigotry have pressed organizations and leaders to change

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 barrage of sudden, immediate changes, from the grocery store to virtual school to work-from-home (or the front lines.)

In 2020, consultancy Gartner found that the amount of change an average employee could absorb without fatigue had dropped to 50% of pre-pandemic levels. Given the head-spinning pace of the past few years, most people's ability to handle change has probably continued to decrease. Change fatigue presents major risks to the mission of every nonprofit just as change becomes essential and expected in a rapidly evolving world.

The rapid changes happening around us hold upside and downside risks that stretch the limits of our imaginations. The changes taking place in our world right now could crack the foundation of systemic racism and all the other isms for good—or they could set efforts for equality back decades. These waves of change could unleash forces that help your nonprofit deliver its mission in ways you've never dreamed, or they could render your organization obsolete.

That's a lot to wrap our brains around. And it's creating lots of challenges for nonprofit risk leaders. It's essential to understand the factors that drive workplace change and the stages humans go through as we process change.

Deepening your understanding of change, and trying new change management strategies, can feel overwhelming. Your team might not redo how you manage change all at once. That's okay. Every step your nonprofit takes to better navigate change will help you more effectively deliver your mission.

Let's look at how workplace change typically plays out.

Triggers and Types of Workplace Change

Both external and internal factors can drive the need for organizations to change. Here are some of the factors that can prompt a need for workplace change, according to Britain's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development:

- economic conditions
- advances in technology
- client needs
- political change
- government initiatives
- environmental issues
- strategic imperatives

When an organization decides to change, that decision can change many aspects of operations, including:

- processes
- technology used on the job
- organizational systems
- culture
- products or services
- entry to new markets
- layoffs, attrition, or job restructuring

Sometimes, change happens organically, without an imperative from the top of the organization. People simply begin to work differently as the world around them changes. In many other cases, leadership recognizes the need for change and gives the team a road map that communicates how they want change to happen.

The Stages of Workplace Change

When your team knows change is coming and wants to guide that process, it's important to understand the stages of change management.

If you've explored change management before, you might have seen a model called "The Change Curve." This analysis of change in workplaces is attributed to psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, known for her work on the stages of grief. The model outlines seven stages of change, often consolidated into four stages in the study of workplace change.

Stage 1-Status Quo: In the first stage of change, we may react with shock or denial. It's important to communicate the reasons for the change and how it relates to the mission. Make sure people know who to talk to if they have questions. When they do, leaders should invest time to talk through those questions—even if they don't have all the answers. You'll want to go into this stage equipped with an internal communications plan. We have suggestions for how to shape your plan in our accompanying article in this issue, "Build a Communications Plan to Support Change."

Stage 2–Disruption: When the reality of change starts to settle in, we may experience anger or fear. This could prompt us to resist the change or argue against it. On a recent webinar, Paige Heller, organizational management consultant at mental health provider BHS, called stage 2 "the danger zone." The more time people spend fighting change, the more likely it will falter. If leaders give people space to process change, they can progress to step 3.

When you know disruption is coming, you can plan for it. Before you announce your change, anticipate potential problem areas and consider how you might address them. Do what you can to put solutions in place to help make the change go more smoothly for your team. But it's also important to remember that the range of possible reactions to change is as diverse as the people on your team. You can't anticipate everything. No matter how well you think you know your teammates, they may react to change in ways that surprise you—and problems may arise that you didn't anticipate. Listen, allow space for a variety of reactions, and learn from them.

Stage 3 – Exploration: In this stage, we turn our focus from what we've lost to how the changes will impact us. We begin to test and investigate what the changes mean and how we can adapt to them. Allow people time to explore what change means for them at this stage and provide support as they work to figure it out. Make sure to welcome brainstorming, whether team members want to talk through potential solutions with you, each other, or even with clients or constituents. Take time to train your team on new processes and ways of working. If they express a need for additional training as change unfolds, work to make it happen. Overall productivity will likely falter during this stage, but a healthy period of exploration makes it more likely the change will succeed and contribute to productivity for the long term.

Stage 4 – Rebuilding: During this stage, people—individually and as teams—commit to strategies for dealing with the change. This might include rebuilding the way we work. As people adapt to new ways of working, productivity begins to rebound. Invest extra time at this stage to double-check whether all aspects of your organization have caught up with the change, from interdepartmental processes to performance reviews, and make any adjustments needed. This is a great time to talk with your team about what you've learned from your journey and find a way to celebrate your successes.

It's important to note that, just as with the stages of grief, the way people move through the stages of change may not be linear.

Lead Change with Curiosity

Understanding the organizational and psychological factors that play into change management won't keep challenges from arising. But it should help you better understand why change is so difficult for you and your team. Knowing that can help you craft your organization's approach to change. Our accompanying article in this issue, "A Step by Step Guide to Change Management," shares more detail on how to create a comprehensive plan to guide your organization through a specific change.

The moment when you realize your organization can see a change through is beautiful. But maybe even more exciting is the moment when things aren't yet certain, but you realize a change *could* work.

All those years ago, when my editor asked what I thought of the new pitch meeting, I gushed about how much I loved it and how much that surprised me. She smiled, but didn't say "I knew you would"—because she didn't. It could have gone either way.

There are no guarantees about how change will play out or how your team will react to it. But if you understand the stages of change, you can better guide your team members through it—even people as stubborn as I was—and evolve to meet the needs of your mission.

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