

Managing Change in a school Community.

“Change unless it is your change can be seen as bad change”.



Introduction

Change is happening; it is all around us and comes in many forms. Change in a classroom, change in staffing, changes in curriculum, changes to buildings, changes to school population, changes to funding and changes politically. Some change is good and some change is not but what is it that makes any change painful to bare?

When change happens it is often difficult for people to deal with and to understand. I am going to talk about two reasons why. These reasons help explain why change is hard and provide clues to help make any change less fraught.



Habit:

Most of what we do every day is a habit – a set of repeated behaviours that occur without any great thought or consideration. The way we organise our day, communicate with others and go about our lives are largely interwoven habits. This is why we can drive all the way to work and not remember how we got there. Our body is responding to a habit so our thinking brain can – plan the day, go over a conversation or take time out and listen to a piece of music. Originally habits developed so that we as humans didn't have to use our brain repeatedly. Our brain requires a large amount of fuel (nourishment) to keep it working well and the short story is that in order to survive those early ancestors who used their brain less (by creating a habit) survived.

Technically a habit is a recurrent, often unconscious, pattern of behaviour that is acquired through frequent repetition. There is a three step loop that occurs to develop the habit – 1. cue, 2. routine and 3. reward. Frequently, we do not remember what the events were that created the habit but once they exist, these habits influence how we act, often, without us even being aware.

To create a habit we need 90 repetitions to create enough myelin to surround the synapse in order to safeguard a habit or said in another way to create a neural pathway, or learning!

Any change to a habit requires a decision (conscious or not) to change and then effort and time to create the new neural pathway. If we had not made the decision to change ourselves, we therefore do not have the motivation to change to make it our change. The upshot is we experience a level of tension that we perceive as a threat to an old habit and so we become uncomfortable.

This process is true for individuals, groups, society and organisations as it turns out.

Read more about habits “The power of Habit.” by Charles Duhigg



Responding to a level of threat:

When our usual way of operating is facing a change, our brain sees that change as a level of threat, especially if we have not made the decision to change. However our brain cannot tell the difference between a social or a physical threat and so will respond in exactly the same way – flight, fright or freeze in either situation. When we are threatened we are less able to access the strategic thinking part of our brain. Instead we respond from the amygdala which is the flight and flight, hence the often uncensored responses we see when change is muted.

What we do know from the work of David Rock is that our threat response is activated by perceived social threat to one of these five domains; status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness.

When change comes as a shock then each of these domains could be activated. Status is about how you might perceive your relative importance to others. Certainty is being able to predict the future. Having autonomy is the sense of control over events that affect you. While relatedness is a feeling of connection and of being safe with others, knowing is someone is a friend or an enemy. Fairness is a perception of fair exchanges between people. Often all these areas of concern can be triggered in a change situation.

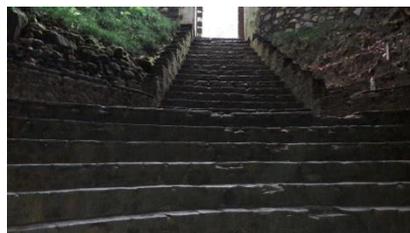
When under threat organisations respond in a similar manner.



So what to do, explore your kete of options:

If we can see change in light of changing habits there are some specific actions we can take to support and encourage people to manage the change.

1. When planning a change think about who is going to be affected and how to engage with them as soon as possible. Identify what are the “habits” that may be affected and the domains of threat you may be creating. Brain storm ways to move away from the threat responses and toward the reward responses.
2. Support people to take care of themselves – so that there is a school culture of self-care and respect for others. This will support all in the school to being able to access their thinking brains in difficult times.
3. Take small steps towards the change within the school community, communicating before hand so there are no surprises.
4. Inform all about your purpose and clarify your reasoning for making the decisions.
5. Over communicate:
 - Create a change plan, communicate it and stick with it – which includes adapting the plan and communicating the reasoning for that
 - Ensure you have multiple ways for people to talk with you, remembering that communication is a two way interaction. Communication is message sent is message received. eg Face to face meetings, online chats, emails with replies, closed group face-book page for the situation, Frequently asked questions sheet
 - Expect people to be upset and be delighted (not in their pain) as being upset is the first step in interacting with the change
 - Be open to being influenced
 - Listen and acknowledge – feelings and the facts of their point of view.



Conclusion

As human beings on this planet we are programmed to move and work in groups. The ability to collaborate and harness our collective energy is what makes us able to live and work in communities.

Darwin did the community of humans a great disservice when he talked about competition being the key to survival. It is actually collaboration. Imagine if your body was not collaborating right now, or the community that you live in, the road network, financial network – mostly everything we do requires collaboration. Even sport – both teams have to collaborate about the venue, time and what game they are playing to make a great event. Our brains are wired to collaborate and to be part of a bigger group.

Acknowledging and understanding our basic brain processes will assist us all to live a little more peacefully.

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