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Principles of Change*By Scott Byorum, Nationwide Real Estate Tax Service, Inc.**“Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes (turn and face the strange).” ~ Changes by David Bowie*

One of the constants in business and life is change. But not everyone accepts or adapts to change at the same rate. However, by understanding the basic process that people go through in dealing with change, individuals and organizations can help themselves and others manage that process quicker and with less resistance.

At first glance, it may seem that we each deal with change with one of three basic approaches. We may resist change, in the hopes that it won't happen or that we will be able to slow it down or manage it. We may embrace change, thinking it will just be easier to accept whatever it is, get it over with and move on. Or, we may anticipate change, always on guard and prepared so that somehow, whatever may come, it won't really feel like change at all.

That's usually because we are dealing with change that we perceive it as being imposed on us (i.e., management is having us do this now), so we are in a reactionary or anticipatory mode. However, how we deal with change is a little more subtly complicated than that. But it does follow a specific trajectory in each of us, from the time we perceive the announcement of change to when we finally accept or reject the change.

As we go through the timeline of transition in change, there are two main factors that weigh on our reaction to the alteration: Attitude and Involvement. All other perceived factors tend to fall into these two influences.

Attitude: This is our general mood based on what is going on in our life and our feelings about the change confronting us; it is two-pronged. Example: “This new protocol they are implementing at work sounds like a good idea, but I'm going through foreclosure...I can't deal with it right now!” Or, simply: “Wow, things were going so great, but this is such a bad idea that management is trying to implement.” You are both going to feel good, bad or indifferent about your life in general, and good, bad or indifferent about the change.

Involvement: Based in part on your attitude, but not ruled by it, your level of involvement is going to depend on whether the change is meaningful (i.e., whether it will improve or convolute your life further) and how much input you have in its design and outcome. So, even a person with a bad attitude can be highly involved in a change initiative if it is meaningful enough to them and they have enough influence over it.

With these two prime factors in mind, the timeline of transition is this:

Initial Reaction: Change has announced itself! If life is great and the change looks good, a person is likely to be excited, especially if they were involved with its design. Somebody in a poor state of affairs hearing this news for the first time may experience disbelief, or even feel numb or angry. And there is the range in between.

Adjusted Reaction: Here is where a person decides what they are going to do about the change. They will, on some level, either embrace the change or resist it.

Change Management: How the change is implemented is critical to how it will finally be accepted or rejected. Is the change being forced on people? Is it well executed, simple and swift? Does everyone know, understand and accept their roles? Or is it a bumbling, confusing, time-draining nightmare?

Acceptance/Rejection: Here's the moment of truth. Everyone will be on board with the new way of doing things or they will all eventually go back to doing what they were doing before. Or, even worse, you'll get a mish-mash of both which will foment dysfunction, resentment and possibly catastrophe.

Reflection: Some people put a lot on establishing trust up front for change management initiatives, but trust is often a byproduct of how successful an initiative was executed before. And that depends a lot upon the starting attitudes and involvement of those the change affects. Future efforts will be received accordingly, with even greater passion...or greater resistance.

Things are going to change; that's just how it is. You can better plan for change and navigate it more successfully by understanding peoples' circumstances and involving them in solutions. Or, you can just spring things on people and deal with the fallout.

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