

Making the Most of a Difficult Transition

By Harriet Meyerson

It's crisis time. Your company upgrades the computer system, changes the product line, downsizes or merges with another company, or you get a new boss. What can you do to weather the change?

"When it freezes over, Ice Skate," says Patt Schwab, Ph.D. a professional speaker who is an expert in the field of workplace change and humor.

During a difficult transition you may not be able to concentrate on your work, you may feel immobilized by stress, and you may be frightened about the future. Dr. Schwab lists three areas where people have underlying anxiety during difficult transitions.

1. Not Feeling competent.

There's an overall feeling of not being competent any more because, as soon as you master something, it changes. So you start feeling like an idiot when, previously, you have been quite competent.

2. Not Feeling significant

The feeling of not being important emerges as fear of losing your job when companies downsize or merge.

3. Not being appreciated

When there is a stressful change, supervisors and co-workers get so caught up in handling the crisis that they don't have the time or energy to give appreciation.

Feeling competent, significant, and appreciated are the most important feelings in creating a team spirit in the workplace, and are usually the first things to go during turbulent times – when they are most needed.

Harness Your Power

Don't despair. You will have the power to float through difficult transitions instead of thrashing around in a sea of confusion when you build options for yourself.

Analyze

“Analyze what you can or cannot do,” recommends Dr. Schwab. “If you can’t stop a merger, then figure out what the next step is and live with it. Don’t waste time fighting what’s a done deal.”

If you’re being laid off, do some analysis about what your skills are and who your contacts are, and how much time you have between now and your last paycheck.

If you’re merging with another company, do some research to learn as much as you can about the other company.

Look for opportunities that may arise out of the change. If you get laid off, you get to spend more time with your family, or go back to school.

Say Farewell

“There is a whole progression of natural feelings you go through during a transition,” explains Dr. Schwab. “First you deny that something is going to happen, then you resist it, then you explore different scenarios, and finally you accept it and commit to the new change.”

Saying good-bye to the past is important to moving forward. You must let go of one side of the pool before you can swim to the other side. So, suggest to your boss that you have a farewell lunch or dinner. If the company is merging, have a slide show about the company’s history. If you are getting an upgrade to a computer, have a symbolic smashing of the old system.

Use Humor

“Humor doesn’t undermine the feelings in a serious situation. What humor does is that it lifts you above it. It allows you look at the situation from a different perspective. Humor helps clear your head. Humor empowers you, and bonds everyone together,” states Dr. Schwab. Here are some ways to use humor in the workplace.

This Day in History Research the historical events that coincide with your difficult transition. Make a list of several things that happened on this date and end your list with the troublesome change at your company. Print copies to give to your co-workers.

Post Cartoons & Jokes Find appropriate cartoons and jokes to post on the bulleting board or pass around.

Put on Skits “Skits are a great way to let loose of the tension. In a humorous skit you can say things that you can’t say otherwise without looking like you’re really not a team player, reveals Dr.Schwab. This can be a useful way to let off steam. “If you laugh, it doesn’t hurt so much.”

Be Prepared

A crisis usually doesn’t give you time to prepare. You must live your life like the Boy Scout motto, *Be Prepared*. “This means, you’ve kept your training up to date, you haven’t extended yourself financially, and that your relationships are good – both in and out of the workplace,” emphasizes Dr. Schwab.

Even if your company isn’t in a crisis mode, preparing yourself for any possibility will help you ease through difficult transitions when they do happen. And in today’s workplace, they are more likely to happen than not.

In other words, says Dr. Patt Schwab, “Don’t wait till it freezes over to polish your ice skates!”

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