

Leveraging the Anxiety Associated with Change Recognizing the Positives and Eliminating the Negatives

It is not hard to accept that by the nature of their positions, supervisors and managers are on the frontline of constantly occurring change within their organization. From a frequently changing production schedule to the unexpected absentee employee, change abounds on a daily basis. Unfortunately, both for the manager/supervisor and the employees they are responsible for, there can often be a great deal of anxiety associated with all of this change.

Regrettably, in response to this anxiety it is not uncommon to hear such comments such as “that’s life, so you just need to live with it” or “that just goes along with the job” or “if you just follow the proven process, everything will be just fine.” In defense of these comments, they are not generally made from a malicious or adversarial perspective but are in fact a reflection of a general lack of knowledge about the relationship that exists between change and anxiety.

Drivers of Anxiety

So, as a supervisor or manager wanting to try to improve the management of anxiety, developing an understanding of the relationship between change and anxiety is the perfect starting point. There can be many drivers of anxiety but the following three main drivers deserve the most attention:

1. **Significance** – The greater the level of significance a change represents, the greater the level of potential anxiety that will exist. For example, the change associated with making an on time shipment of product to your largest customer will have the potential to create far more anxiety than the change associated with the daily removal of trash from the office trash receptacles.
2. **Difficulty** - We need to recognize that no matter how you want to personally define difficulty, the more difficulty you have associated with a change the more likely you are to experience the potential of anxiety. For example, the difficulty involved with coordinating an international delivery of needed materials has a much greater potential to create anxiety than the coordination of sending your company truck to the local hardware store to pick up some cleaning supplies.
3. **Control** – Organizations and individuals are more likely to experience less anxiety when they are in control as opposed to when they are not in control. For example, using employees that are directly under your control to accomplish a critical task that you are ultimately responsible for will generally produce less anxiety than having to rely on the employees that are under someone else’s control to accomplish the task.

In addition, a lack of control can also be associated with the unknown. Even though a change might be fairly simple, if a change contains a lot of unknowns, the unknowns create a feeling of a lack of control. This then increases the potential for anxiety. For

example, producing a product for the first time often represents contending with many unknowns compared to producing a known product that has been in production for a long period of time. The unknown associated with the change of producing the new product greatly increases the potential for anxiety.

It is also important to realize that significance, difficulty, and control are not just individual characteristics but are, in fact, dynamics that can be interacting with each other relative to the same change. For example, a change can be very significant, but if you believe that you have a great deal of control over the change, then the anxiety that might otherwise exist can be tempered or even completely negated.

The *Why* Behind the Change/Anxiety Relationship

At this point you might think that knowing what the drivers are behind the anxiety related to a change is interesting, but it is of limited value without knowing why this interrelationship exists in the first place.

The answer to “why” exists in the fact that organizations and individuals have come to realize they are not always successful in obtaining the change they desire. If an organization or individual knows that the change they desire will always take place, then there would be no reason to have any anxiety. However, through experience, organizations and individuals have come to recognize that a desired change cannot be guaranteed.

More importantly, organizations and individuals have learned to realize the ramifications and affects associated with significance, difficulty, and control and this inability to obtain guaranteed change. Over time organizations and individuals accumulate a vast knowledge base relative to change. This knowledge base inherently provides the ability to realize that change is not guaranteed and has created recognition that significance, difficulty, and control can play a major role when attempting to obtain a desired change.

It has also inherently created a defense mechanism in the form of anxiety that helps bring certain change within an organization to a higher level of awareness (or in the case of an individual, from the unconscious to the conscious). In this higher level of awareness/conscious state, a specific change is more likely to be focused on relative to everything else that is going on in the environment at that point in time. Even though in the end there might not be anything you can do about increasing the potential for success, this anxiety response provides an opportunity to focus on the desired change with the hope of increasing the chances for a successful outcome.

Is this set of dynamics good or bad? The answer is generally positive. While anxiety caused by the underlying drivers of significance, difficulty, and control can sometimes create paralysis or other negative consequences, anxiety is in fact the natural response associated with bringing issues/change into the forefront of attention. This in turn helps organizations and individuals to focus on changes that require immediate and/or full organizational or mental awareness.

Action Items to Leverage Off Of The Change/Anxiety Relationship

The key now is to determine as managers and supervisors, how to leverage off of this knowledge of the change/anxiety relationship in order to improve performance and reduce the negative aspects associated with anxiety?

1. Recognize Anxiety As An Indicator Requiring Attention

Now that we know that the drivers of anxiety are significance, difficulty and control, you can leverage off of anxiety as an indicator of these drivers and address the drivers head-on in order to improve your chances of obtaining the change you desire.

As a supervisor or manager, the above discussion should help you recognized that anxiety that creates stress is undesirable, but anxiety that creates focus can be good. No matter if it is anxiety that you directly have as a supervisor/manager or the anxiety you see in the members of your staff, recognizing it as an indicator of a potential problem in accomplishing a desired change can prove very beneficial.

Therefore, it is advantageous to explore the underlying factors that are creating the anxiety with a focus on the elimination of the source of the anxiety. This in turn leads to an improvement in the ability to accomplish the desired change. For example, upper management has instructed you to initiate a change. From your perspective, you do not recognize any issues in the execution of this change.

However, you see that one or more of the members of your staff seem to be anxious relative to the implementation and execution of this change. Upon discussion with the members of your staff and closer examination of the underlying reasons behind this anxiety, you come to recognize certain difficulties associated with the execution of this change that were not previously obvious.

Therefore, the anxiety associated with the members of your staff helped you focus on these difficulties. This not only helps to eliminate the anxiety of your employees, but also increases the probability that the desire change will in fact be obtained.

2. Leveraging Off Of Anxiety As An Indicator To Help Reduce Anxiety

When you see that anxiety exists, focus on it back to the driver and address these underlying drivers head-on to reduce the anxiety that is being experienced.

In contrast to number 1 above, there will be times that the anxiety you or members of your staff are experiencing is unjustified. However, if your analysis indicates that the drivers of the anxiety are without merit, you have the perfect opportunity to dispel this anxiety helping either yourself or the members of your staff to move on in the execution of the change in a much less stressful state of mind.

For example, a member of your staff might be anxious about a change that is about to be executed. Upon a review of the concerns creating the anxiety you determine that the employee is placing far more significance on the change than what actually exists. In

addition, you determine that there are numerous unknowns that the employee is dealing with that are compounding their anxiety level.

Your realization of the underlying reasons behind the anxiety provides you the opportunity to help put the significance of the change in proper perspective and to address the unknowns that the individual is struggling with. This in turn improves the ability for that employee to deal with the change and effectively participate in the execution of the desired change.

3. Recognize The Significance Of Experience And Knowledge In Creating Anxiety

The ability to obtain a desired change is greatly influenced by the experience and resulting knowledge directly associated with the change.

As a manager or supervisor, it is important to recognize that there are often two interrelated dynamics at play when implementing and executing a change. As already discussed, there can be the dynamics of unknowns that can tend to create a feeling of a lack of control thereby, increasing anxiety. However, experience and knowledge can be a dynamic that can tend to reduce these unknowns and therefore, decrease anxiety.

As a supervisor or manager, you can leverage off of these interrelated dynamics to reduce anxiety and increase your potential for obtaining a successful desired change. If you determine that anxiety exists due to a lack of control/unknowns, a positive course of action is to close the knowledge gap that exists relative to the desired change.

In other words, helping your staff understand and/or providing additional training associated with the implementation and execution of a change not only helps reduce anxiety, but can also greatly increase the likelihood of obtaining a successful desired change. The old saying that “a little bit of knowledge can go a long way” truly works to help eliminate the unknowns that in turn reduce stress and increase performance. The key is the analysis of exactly what the underlying drivers of the anxiety are and the head-on attack to address these drivers.

Conclusion

Many people and organizations view the anxiety associated with change in a purely negative context. Left to its own set of dynamics, this negative context has merit. However, if as a supervisor or manager, you understand the real relationship of anxiety and change, you can use this knowledge to greatly enhance your ability to obtain a desired change with a staff that experiences much less negative stress.