

How Well Are You Coping With Change?

We are currently experiencing some significant changes in our business lives... major changes to our tax system have just commenced and we have increasing global competition fuelled by rapidly changing technology and the Internet. Are your managers equipped to cope with this?

Dr David Olsen, a leading expert in change and stress management says that dealing with change effectively comes down to four basic *coping skills*. Fortunately, they are skills that can be learned and in fact as we go through these you will no doubt recognise different people you work with who have or don't have these skills.

The first is **problem solving**. I don't mean here someone who has necessarily great problem solving skills, but someone whose *attitude* to a problem is let's solve it. Some people react quite negatively to problems... "*Oh no!!*" Others procrastinate or avoid dealing with it hoping it will go away... like those many thousands of small business people we read about who have not yet registered for GST.

What happens when you don't deal with the problem straight away is that it doesn't go away, and neither does your awareness of its presence. You might be trying to pretend that it isn't there or deliberately ignoring it... *but you know its still there!* And that is *stressful!* Change creates problems. Things are working smoothly one day, and the next day something changes... then we have a problem. The problem in fact is the signal to us that something has changed.

Change is not going away, so it is critical that we get better at this *problem solving* skill. You do that by dealing with problems as soon as you know it is there. Secondly, have a positive attitude towards problems... and I don't mean removing the word *problem* from your vocabulary. Problems are opportunities to learn how to do things better... but problems are still problems. You need to recognise them, deal with them, and move on.

The second skill is closely linked to the first, and that is **flexibility**. I know that may sound obvious, but what I am talking about here is the *degree of comfort you have in operating in an unstructured, unpredictable environment*. Do you expect things to change, or do you have an unconscious expectation (or hope) that things will slow down and go back to normal?

I was doing some team development work with a management team recently and the team leader told me that he hated change... absolutely detests it! Well he has problem. Hate is a pretty strong emotion, in fact a stressful emotion... so he is sentencing himself to a lifetime of stress, because change is not going to go away. You can change your perception about things if you want to. This manager needs to want to change his perception about change first... and there is a good case for that, and then to start thinking about all the positive things in his life right now that are there only because of change. Then when another change occurs, consciously think about what the

opportunities are as a result of this change. If the opportunities are not obvious initially, he needs to think about what he can learn as a result of this change.

The third skill is **communication**... and specifically the ability to share your thoughts and feelings with others about problems and concerns. If you are having difficulty coping with something, just talking it through with someone will help you to understand the problem better, and it may even help you come up with a better solution.

Many people have difficulty in communicating with others about problems... they prefer to keep things to themselves. It doesn't help you cope any better... in fact you will cope far better by discussing problems with others. Obviously you may need to be selective about who you talk to... but you do need to have people at work that you can talk to.

That leads me to the last of the four *coping skills*... **closeness**. I can hear you saying now... **closeness!! At work!! Who are you kidding?** Well I'm not kidding anyone, you do need to have some close relationships at work. I don't mean intimate relationships, I mean people who like you and care about you... people you feel comfortable talking with about problems when they arise.

In My article last year about happy workplaces being more productive and profitable, I quoted from a BRW article that identified from Gallup research, twelve factors that need to be present to create a *great workplace*. Two of those twelve factors were:

Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person? And...

Do I have a best friend at work?

By the way, Gallup defined "great workplaces" as those that performed well on four measurable outcomes: employee retention, customer satisfaction, productivity and profitability.

So not only does **closeness** help you cope better with change and stress... it will help you to create a more successful company.

It doesn't sound so hard does it? Four simple skills of *problem solving, flexibility, communication* and *closeness* that can make a significant difference to how well your organisation copes with change in a positive and productive way.

It isn't hard... but it does require conscious effort, otherwise we slip back into old habits.