



Management Assistance Program

ADAPTING TO CHANGE AT WORK:

Effectively Navigating the Turmoil of Organizational Changes through Adaptation

GOALS:

To help organizations, managers, and employees:

- Adequately prepare themselves for change in the workplace
- Learn the skills for coping, handling and managing the changes on a day-to-day basis
- Develop adaptive strategies to anticipate and prepare for further organizational changes
- Adjust emotions, thoughts, and behaviors toward future realities and opportunities

OVERVIEW:

The late 1980's represented a time of massive organizational restructuring and many national organizations felt the dramatic affects of corporate change for the first time. In response, several intense studies were conducted to estimate the impact of change and predict the long-term results on the workforce as a whole. It was concluded that change was inevitable and therefore companies needed to train their staff to cope with and handle such changes and also to anticipate more changes in the future. Many managers were given courses in change management and employees were instructed in stress and coping skills to enable them to survive inevitable disruption in the workplace. Workforces today need to go beyond coping with change to develop adaptive skills at all levels of an organization. Adaptation in this context is more than an attitude; it is a behavioral skill which improves individual and organizational productivity. Those individuals who are the most successful in negotiating and adapting to changes are those who see and embrace change as a catalyst for positive results.

- The adaptive skills are developed in individuals as they gain skills, knowledge, and self esteem in their new positions.
- The ability to further adapt is enhanced by the management and the organization as they provide change leadership and the vision for the new business.

- The ongoing skills of adaptation are maintained through constant communication and open negotiation around the opportunities for professional growth and expansion.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Assist employees and managers in preparing for changes by giving them processes to begin to navigate their own courses.

Effectively navigating change depends on three factors:

1. internal stability,
2. the ability to seek and gain more information about their new environment, and
3. the perception that they have control and freedom to make decisions about their own future.

With this in mind organizations should:

- Provide clear information about known changes and their commitment to assist with the unknown changes when they occur.
- Provide stability and consistency for those aspects that will not change and understanding and patience for those aspects that have or will change.
- Empower all staff to make suggestions and communicate ideas about positive strategies for dealing with disruptions.
- Discourage negativity but accept discussions of problems that are presented with possible solutions.
- Encourage dialogue and brainstorming to share ownership and responsibility.
- Provide employees with strategies to resolve their personal issues regarding change and encourage them to keep an open mind regarding the results of the changes.
- Encourage all employees and management to continue to address pertinent questions and concerns.

2. Provide proactive timetables and planning strategies to assist with the uncertainty of the evolving organization.

Adapting to organizational change often means developing “makeshift” policies, processes, procedures, and protocols which are temporary until the organization gains greater clarity and understanding regarding its direction and final structure. Here are some strategies to assist with the interim period to help management and employees deal with the experiences of loss that are often associated with change:

Management Resources

- Managing the loss of the familiar:
 - Acknowledge that events in life do change and one cannot always return to the way things were
 - Acknowledge that the losses right now may seem to outweigh the gains but change also represents opportunity
 - Provide reassurance of employees' personal and collective worth and value
 - Encourage future thinking as managers and their staff together reinvent the future rather than re-create the past
 - Announce what will not be changing and what current gains can be anticipated

- Managing the loss of some aspects of control:
 - Increase communication and provide opportunities for dialogue as new systems replace old ones
 - Involve staff in management of the current departmental changes and/or preparation for more organizational changes
 - Assist employees in managing their own experience of change by developing appropriate short-term plans
 - Provide leadership for problem resolution but involve all staff in problem management strategies (ask them to assist with the change process by being problem solvers rather than problem identifiers)
 - All employees (including management) should be visible and engaged in the process of helping the organization sort out the details of control (not cloistered in their offices or disengaged during meetings)

- Managing the loss of the sense of security:
 - Provide time-tables for the department, the office, or the individual staff members (enable them to see where they fit into the overall changes)
 - Create a climate of stability by answering as many questions as possible
 - Work with angry or disgruntled staff one-on-one (not in a group setting)
 - Discourage negative predictions or scenarios that are not based on facts and reality (hold individuals accountable for their negative words or behaviors)
 - Increase expectations of yourself and the other staff to deal with the changes and keep the business effective and progressive (be realistic regarding the ability to meet expectations during the change)
 - Be upfront and honest with bad news and respect individual's rights to be initially upset with the news (they would be more

accepting of bad news from a manager who was truthful and respectful than one who they felt was deceitful or untruthful)

- Managing the loss of optimism:
 - Provide staff with positive scenarios regarding possible outcomes
 - Help staff to realize that they affect the destiny of the organization and they can have a positive influence on future success
 - Encourage staff to map out their own professional plans regarding their own goals and objectives during the change and after
 - Enable the staff to recognize the importance of their own personal values and initiatives actualized in their work and encourage them to examine how their personal/professional values have a place in the work setting

3. Provide staff with personal and professional tools for revitalization and integration into the newly emerging workplace.

Enable the staff to recognize that they have already been through other changes in their lives and that this change may have similar dynamics and components to other changes they have experienced. Encourage them to utilize coping tools they have already developed to deal with change such as:

- The ability to advance beyond their negative emotions, thoughts, and symptoms as they make decisions regarding their future
- The ability to see change as an ongoing process which they are able to navigate
- The need to grieve and face the past losses but the need to also look for current opportunities and face the future with positive expectations
- The need to deal with the stress, anger, and frustration in healthy and productive ways – using all resources available to them
- The realization that their behaviors have to remain professional and appropriate in the workplace at all times
- The realization that change is hard for most people and this is a situation that they are not experiencing alone but one that is shared by many.

4. Create an environment of trust, stability, and confidence by:

- Providing weekly “structured” meetings that focus on current and future needs, goals and decisions
- Setting limits on negative conversations which deteriorate relationships and create fear and confusion. Cynical or pessimistic attitudes may exist but must not be displayed in the workplace through words or actions
- Implementing early and effective intervention on conflicts and disagreements to resolve issues
- Developing problem solving strategies using brainstorming and problem resolution techniques
- Constantly re-clarifying the current status of the group in comparison with where the organization was and where it is headed in the future
- Making sure all support services and resources are made available and understood

SUMMARY: Tips for Effective Adaptation to Change

- Take one thing at a time and take your time as you move through change.
- Learn to accept what you cannot change and create temporary, partial, or permanent solutions for those you can.
- Recognize the source of your discomfort with changes and work off stress.
- Nurture yourself and avoid the use of alcohol, drugs or anything detrimental to mask feelings or temporarily diminish the pain.
- Explore the positive side of change and get involved in exploring options.
- Expand interests and make positive choices regarding your future.
- Use the transitions to gain new skills and insights and let your behaviors change your attitude.
- Re-discover your values and beliefs and re-apply them to your life situations.
- Talk out your concerns and listen to others' ideas, views and suggestions.
- Create a Personal Action Plan with specific ideas for coping with the changes.