

NAVIGATING CHANGE:

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYEES

Dr Amanda Wallis and Jasmine Harding from Umbrella Wellbeing outline the common responses to change and what we can do about them to feel better.



DR AMANDA
WALLIS



JASMINE HARDING

The impact of organisational change is widely felt. This is true whether change is involving one team or twenty, ten people or ten thousand. It explains why many in the public service might feel impacted by change right now, even when the most recent estimates of job losses may be only directly involving a minority.

The ripple effect includes those whose colleagues, partners, friends, or children have lost their jobs, those who are taking on more work to cover newly vacant roles, and those who are living in fear of future redundancies. Wherever you are in the wave of change, whether you are coping okay or struggling, living with uncertainty can take a toll.

What is 'change'?

Living with uncertainty is a catch-all for any kind of change that involves some degree of ambiguity (ie, events that are open to different interpretations), novelty or newness (ie, no prior experience to fall back on), or a lack of predictability (ie, it's unclear how things will turn out). A lot of life events can fit this description – receiving an unexpected medical diagnosis, for example, or starting a new business.

While change is constant in the workplace, and usually happens incrementally, some periods of change can feel more abrupt than others. Some researchers call this 'discontinuous change', where there are significant rapid shifts in direction, staffing, or ways of working driven by major internal problems or external forces. Discontinuous change represents a significant departure from how things were done in the past, and it can be received in a few different ways.

“[Discontinuous change is] change which is marked by rapid shifts in either strategy, structure or culture, or in all three”.

Grundy, T. (1993) *Implementing Strategic Change* (London: Kogan Page)

Common responses to change

There are several research models depicting how people respond to significant change at work. However, putting these aside, the first rule of thumb is that no one person will respond in the same way. Some people will experience change as unsettling and anxiety-provoking, while others will experience the same change as relieving and exciting. For what it's worth, most research models depict the emotional journey through change as highly variable, usually incorporating some type of shock or resistance, some apathy or depression, before eventual acceptance and integration. Like grieving someone's death, there is no script

for when these stages occur, or whether they will occur at all.

What we do know is that studies usually find uncertainty to be the hardest part of any kind of change. Uncertainty often leaves us feeling off-balance. We spend our time worrying about the future, which impacts our energy, mood, concentration, and ability to sleep. Conversely, when the change process is transparent, communicated clearly, and involves the workers who it is going to impact – regardless of what it is – we are better able to adapt.

According to data from the Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment, perceptions of poor change consultation increase the odds of psychological distress and poor performance by double, and turnover intentions by nearly triple (compared to perceptions of good change consultation). So, when managed poorly, organisational change can have significant impacts at the personal and organisational level.

On the flip side, new research from the University of Canterbury suggests that these adverse effects can be buffered by team support, good leadership practices, and psychological safety to discuss issues and suggestions openly. In line with research recently published by Umbrella in the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations*, we need to have solid workplace resources in place (like social support) to manage workplace demands (like organisational change).

It's striking that many of the research models depicting organisational change have something in common with models devoted to bereavement. In other words, we experience grief when we go through change at work, just as we experience grief when we lose someone we love. This is especially true for those people who have lost their jobs or are witnessing the loss of jobs in their social network. After all, grief is a normal reaction to upheaval.

Supporting yourself and others

If you are wanting to support someone who has lost their job, or it has happened to you, start by validating that it's normal to feel a range of emotions, because grief is complicated, change is hard, and especially so when it's out of our hands. Optimism, hope, or gratitude are just as valid responses as anger, despondency, or fear. Most people benefit from emotional validation (“it makes sense that you feel this way”) early in the change process. This helps them to work through the immediate emotional intensity, before their more clear-headed brain can kick in to explore options.

It's also useful to keep in mind that, just as there are varied reactions to change, there are varied ways to cope. Generally, psychologists group these coping strategies into two categories: adaptive and maladaptive. Maladaptive

strategies tend to provide short-term relief – including denial, self-blame, and heavy substance use but can often make things worse in the long term. They're also much easier to slip into when we are under stress or navigating uncertainty. Adaptive coping strategies, however, include things like seeking support, positive reframing of the situation, using humour, or problem solving. These adaptive strategies generally lead to better outcomes, and they all have their place for different people, and at different times.

Try to match your support with the type of coping you, or the person you are supporting, needs. A classic example of a mismatch is jumping feet-first into looking for solutions (eg, sending job applications) when what someone really needs in the moment is emotional support (eg, a listening ear).

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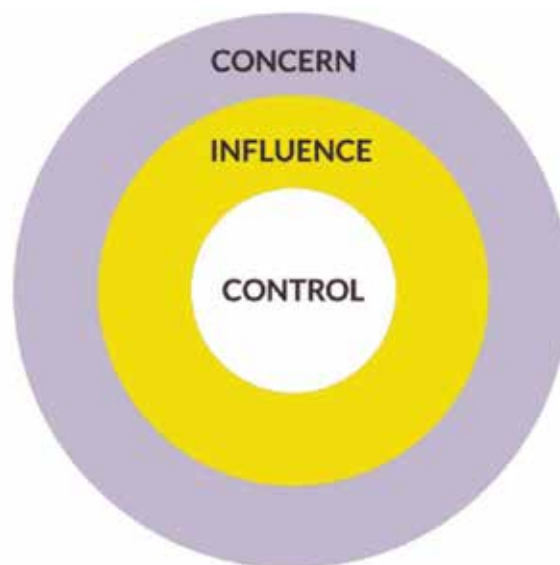
Coping with your own uncertainty

One of the ways we can look after ourselves during uncertain times is to think back to the times in life in general, or our career so far, where we have adapted to change or uncertainty. What helped us to cope? What did we learn? What could we do again, now, and what would we do differently?

Sometimes this will point us in the direction of coping strategies that work well for us. Adopting a challenge mindset, for example, works for some people as an evidence-based way to reframe tricky situations. Instead of focusing on the threats in your environment (a sure-fire way to activate your stress response), look for the growth opportunities instead. Perhaps recent change has helped bring a laser-sharp focus to what's most important to you and what kind of work you want to do more of. Or perhaps the restructure has given you more responsibility in your role and a chance to grow your experience towards the next step in your career.

These kinds of strategies are most effective when we apply them to situations that we have some control or influence over. Stephen Covey's circle of control model is an excellent visual reminder of this.

You might ask yourself, is this thing I am worrying about in my direct control? This includes things like behaviours, decisions, and attitudes. If not, can I exert influence over it,



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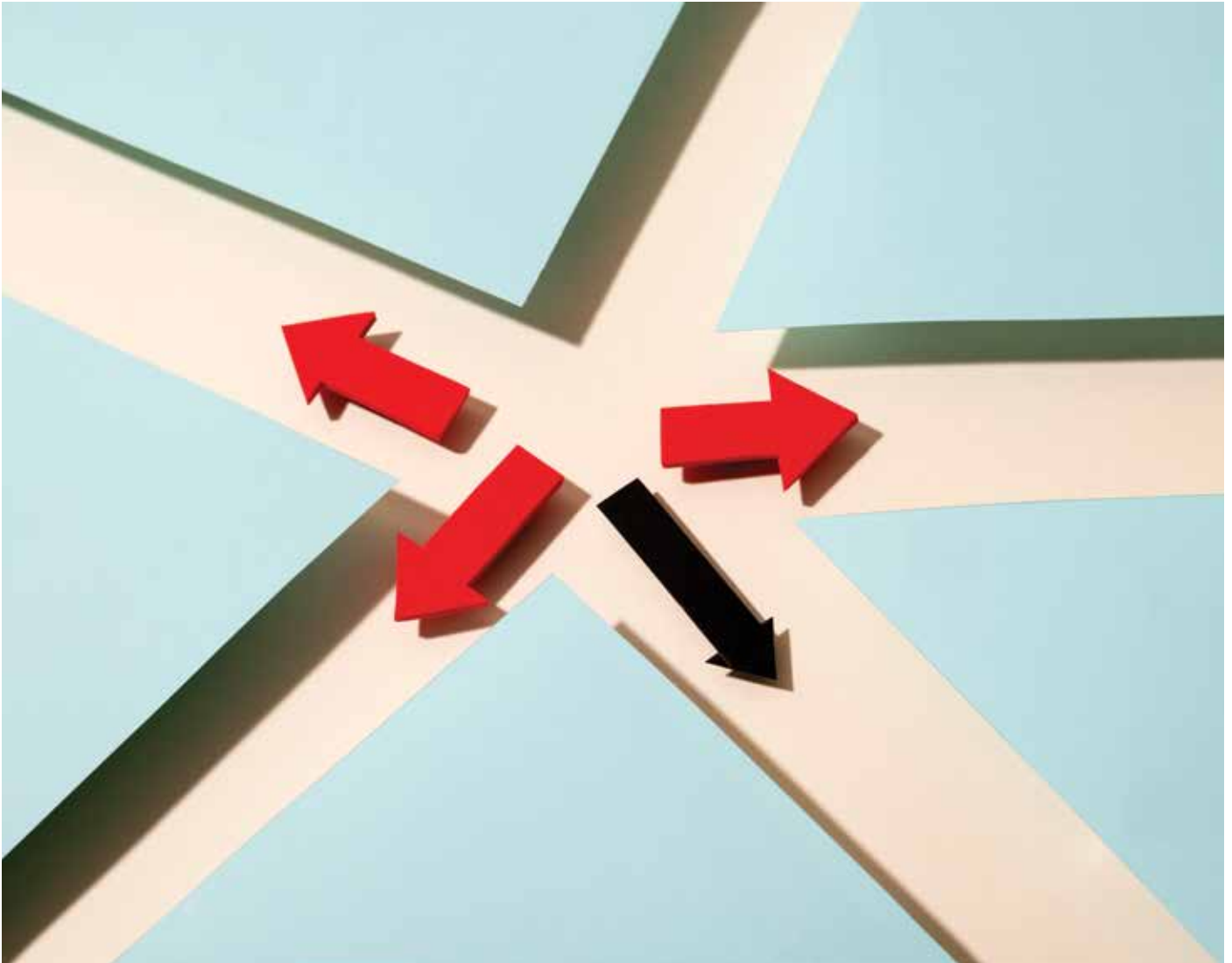


IMAGE BY FREEPIK

for example, in my home environment, my relationships, or my health? And how might I make the most of the situation by adopting a challenge mindset?

Other times, we might notice that we are concerned about something that we can neither control nor influence. In these cases, ‘acceptance coping’ can be a useful tool. This style of coping is precisely what it sounds like – finding a way to accept the situation as it is, even if we don’t like the outcome. It means being okay with the reality that we cannot change this situation as much as we may like to. Importantly, acceptance isn’t a passive process; it’s not simply giving up. Instead, it’s reminding ourselves, “This is how this is right now.” Psychologists often call this ‘active’ acceptance and, in work environments that we have very little control over, research has shown this to be

a particularly useful strategy. For more significant changes in our lives, it can take some time to come to a place of acceptance, and that’s okay.

If you find your mind getting trapped in the wider outer circle of concern, try to notice, and then nudge yourself back into the present, and into the sphere of what you can control. Fortunately for us, the things we have control over tend to have the greatest positive impact on our health.

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Keep up with the basics

As many research articles and theories as there are devoted to coping with organisational change, there is no beating the basics: looking after your physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health.

Think about them as your core pillars of wellbeing – physical, social, emotional, and spiritual – and reflect on how balanced each of them are feeling. Remember to move your body, eat well, rest regularly, and give yourself the opportunity to sleep well, as best you can. Connect regularly and intentionally with colleagues, friends, and family. Notice and acknowledge your emotions and where your mind is wandering. Do more of the things that bring you joy and give you a dose of meaning and purpose – whether that's nature, faith, relationships, or something else altogether.

The research is very strong that these small actions add up, and are mutually reinforcing, helping make us healthier and more robust to change when the next wave eventually comes our way. **PS**

Dr Amanda Wallis leads research, development, and innovation at Umbrella Wellbeing (www.umbrella.org.nz), where she draws on her research experience to uphold scientific rigour across all of Umbrella's services, helping to create thriving minds, people, and business. Amanda has a PhD in Psychology, a Diploma in Positive Psychology and Wellbeing, and is a regular contributor to industry, media, and academic publications on the topics of workplace mental health and organisational wellbeing.

Jasmine Harding is a registered clinical psychologist at Umbrella Wellbeing, providing one-on-one coaching for clients and facilitating workplace wellbeing workshops. In addition to her clinical experience, including working with people with a wide range of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, Jasmine has a strong research background, having worked at children's research centre in the prestigious Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology.

Hitting the Reset Button

Times are changing and the job market has turned 180 degrees. Significant downsizing has meant H2R's Career Transition team have been extremely busy providing support to affected individuals. We acknowledge this is a challenging time for many public sector staff.

Those of us who have experienced a few changes of government will know that usually there is a period of hitting the reset button then balance and normality will resume. The new norm may be in the form of leaner organisations, but things have a way of sorting themselves out.

Market Update

Contractors – Demand for contractors has declined significantly and this has impacted hourly contracting rates. You can view our Contractor Hourly Rate Guide at www.H2R.co.nz/tools-tips which provides an indication of the hourly rates we are now seeing versus rates in July 2023 for a range of Corporate and IT roles.

Permanent and Fixed Term Roles – These are still flat and probably will be until after the budget announcement. However, we are seeing green shoots as new structures are established and roles such as IT, Finance, Employment Relations and HR are still coming to market.

In June 2024, H2R will have been serving the public sector for **20 years** through many ups and downs. We're still here to have a chat about job opportunities and where the market is heading. Visit www.H2R.co.nz for the contact details of our recruiters.



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