Meeting the Challenges of Proactive Change

Change occurs all of the time. In fact, it's fair to say that change is a constant. We usually don't even notice change, however, unless it affects us. Sometimes the change we notice is inconsequential, but sometimes the change does include consequences that impact us directly and severely. And often we are called upon to participate in the change process. This is viewed as positive if we perceive the change as good for us, but can be quite uncomfortable if we believe the change will affect us negatively.

I've heard insanity defined as "continuing to do the same thing day after day but expecting improvement." This implies, of course, that improvement requires change. Indeed, improvement is change. Nevertheless, people often resist change in their job settings. They are secure and in control in their "comfort zones," and feel threatened by a presumed loss of control or predictability following a proposed change in their work assignment, environment, or culture. This article discusses the concept of change and offers some guidelines for helping people accept proactive change and participate actively in facilitating a change process. First, let's consider four general categories of change we experience regularly.

Four Types of Change

Most of the daily changes we encounter, actively or passively, can be classified as incidental, reactive, developmental, or proactive. Incidental changes are small things that occur everyday which don't have lasting impact but often do involve excessive time, stress, and conflict both before and after the change. For example, I'm talking about: a) minor changes in the environmental setting at work, at home, and in the community; b) our purchase decisions, perhaps involving a change in product or brand name; c) changes in our lifestyle, often determined by seasonal variation in weather; and d) decisions we make to get through the day,

from selecting clothes to wear, food to eat, routes to take us to our destinations, and when to initiate or end particular activities.

These daily changes we experience involve decision making, either by individuals or groups. Sometimes we spend excessive time deliberating or worrying about these decisions, even though the consequences may be trivial. Sometimes the change occurs without our input or choice, and as a result we feel a temporary loss of personal control. Then, we waste time and energy complaining about the change because we were uninvolved in the change decisions, not because the change has significant negative impact in our lives.

Some change does have dramatic and long-term impact, perhaps changing how we make numerous incidental changes. Much of this change occurs in response to a crisis. We call this reactive change, and it actually attracts the most attention and resources. And, those people who help us get through crises (including doctors, lawyers, counselors, and consultants) are considered heroes. They are usually compensated well with status, money, and often media attention. Some crises are caused, in part, by a third type of change we all face -- developmental change.

Developmental change occurs as we age, and it can have a dramatic impact on a company's rate of injury and illness. An older workforce, for example, is more at risk for cumulative trauma disorders, from sore muscles and joints to back injuries, hearing loss and even carpal tunnel syndrome.

We have limited direct influence on cumulative changes to our physical appearance and capabilities, yet this type of change certainly causes a great deal of worry and distress. Some people attempt to control this change through vigorous exercise, diet programs, or cosmetic surgery. Other people seemingly accept their bodily changes and "go-with-the-flow".

Accepting bodily changes over which we have limited control is healthy from a psychological perspective, but an appropriate exercise and stretching program can reduce the risk of workplace injury. Therefore, some attempt to slow the debilitating effects of aging can have significant safety benefits. This is an example of the fourth change category -- proactive change.

Things we do to prevent a crisis are classified as <u>proactive</u>. A proactive program is implemented in anticipation of potential reactive change. To some people it's not obvious that certain proactive change programs are necessary, and therefore this type of change often meets resistance. And the rewarding consequences for promoting proactive change are often not apparent. Therefore, the people who address this type of change (for example, educators, industry trainers, ergonomic specialists, engineers, and safety leaders) are typically unsung heroes who often receive insufficient resources and attention for their crisis-prevention efforts.

Safety boils down to asking people to do something for proactive reasons -- to change for reasons that are not immediately obvious. This is a special challenge, requiring understanding, patience, and perseverance. It's important to realize the various dimensions of proactive change and develop strategies for dealing with each. First, let's consider three levels of support for proactive change.

Three Levels of Buy-In for Change

The letters A, B, C are useful for identifying three levels of people's acceptance of change and willingness to participate in a change process. First, people must become <u>aware</u> of the change, including a rationale for why the change is needed. Success in convincing people that a change is useful and worth the effort results in a change in their <u>belief</u> system. However, people might believe in the values of a particular change process but still not participate

completely. The "C" level is <u>commitment</u>, which implies total involvement in the change process.

Two other "C" words, <u>choice</u> and <u>control</u>, suggest ways to go from awareness and belief to commitment. Thus, if we give people choice through development and implementation of a change process, we will increase their perception of personal control and thus their commitment to contribute to the change. You can read more about the power of personal choice in my June 1995 *ISHN* article.

The six letters of the word "change" can represent words which imply particular strategies for facilitating awareness, belief, and eventually commitment in a given change process. In other words, the word "change" can be used as a mnemonic for remembering various dimensions to consider when attempting to get people involved in a new safety initiative, designed for proactive impact. Each word suggests questions to resolve in order to move people from awareness to commitment.

"C" for Consequences

We are motivated by consequences. We do what we do because of the consequences we expect to get as a result. Thus, if we want people to buy-in to a proposed change and get involved in the transformation process, we need toconsider consequences. People need to realize the proactive benefits of implementing the change and perhaps the reactive disadvantages of not changing. You can readily get buy-in if you can clearly show severe disadvantages of not changing and advantages of changing.

Sometimes the change process appears overwhelming, and the benefits of the proposed change are not certain nor immediate enough to motivate participation. This is especially the case for safety initiatives that seemingly detract from the more certain and immediate

consequences of competing activities like production. In this case, it's useful to show that the change is less overwhelming and intrusive than it might seem. Or, you may have overlooked some positive consequences other than the delayed bottom line of injury reduction, which could motivate buy-in and involvement. The next five words suggest strategies for addressing these issues.

"H" for Habit

Proactive change usually requires a change in behavior. Whether working on a new machine or implementing a new procedure, we alter our way of doing things. This means we need to eliminate old habits as well as develop new ones. When our daily routine is changed even slightly, new behaviors are substituted for old ones. Of course, we can only adjust our behavior through feedback, and often the necessary feedback is not naturally available. Therefore, some proactive change requires an ongoing feedback process to help people make the necessary adjustments in their behavior.

Remember that old habits are often difficult to break. Fold your hands, for example, and note which thumb is on top -- left or right. Now fold your hands with the opposite thumb on top. Does this seem awkward? Now fold your arms in front of you, in the habitual way you've done it for years. Try reversing which arm is on top, and again notice how unusual it feels to perform a simple behavior like this in a new way. Of course, if you continue to reverse how you fold your hands or your arms, you will accomodate. With practice the new behavior will feel natural. In time, a new habit will be formed.

So don't expect people to demonstrate appropriate behavior change right away, even if everyone expressed buy-in and commitment for the proactive program. Sometimes old habits need to be broken. Patience is indeed a virtue when initiating a proactive change process.

"A" for Attitude

A person's attitude toward a proactive change process will influence buy-in, belief, commitment, and daily behaviors related to the process. Remember, however, an attitude is a strong emotional feeling toward something. It is much more than an opinion. Often the way we introduce or implement a change has more influence on the attitudes associated with the change than the change itself.

People can develop a negative attitude about a change initiative by the very manner in which it is presented. If the change comes across as top-down and dictatorial, some people might develop a negative attitude in order to assert their individual freedom. Their contrary attitude is really a defense mechanism by which they can maintain a sense of freedom while complying with top-down requirements. "I might do what you want, but I don't have to like it. You can't control my attitude."

Safety professionals need to consider the "C" words -- "choice" and "control" -- when proposing a new proactive process. People's opinions about a change initiative might be negative at first, but these can be changed in positive directions with a rational discussion of the issues reviewed here with the "change" mnemonic. You can facilitate positive attitudes and inhibit the development of negative attitudes associated with the change by allowing people choice and a sense of personal control throughout the development of changes required for implementing and maintaining a new safety initiative. You also increase acceptance of a transformation when you address people's needs. This is the next word in our "change" mnemonic.

"N" for Needs

It's useful to consider the personal and group needs of people affected by a proactive change proposal. You assure buy-in and facilitate commitment if you show people that their needs are being addressed during the transformation process, and that although the change might be uncomfortable and inconvenient at first, the eventual outcome will be positive on a "need satisfaction scale." In other words, the change can be justified in terms of people's needs.

It's easy to justify safety initiatives in terms of need satisfaction. However, it's important to contrast short-term versus long-term needs. A proactive change for safety might be inconvenient and uncomfortable, and may seem quite unnecessary from an individual and short-term perspective. But a collective and long-term view clarifies the need for an effective safety process. Thus, it's often necessary to teach people to look beyond their personal and immediate needs and consider the long-term group needs addressed by a proactive change for occupational safety.

"G" for Goal-Setting

Goal-setting is the mechanism for turning a vision for proactive change into action. For this to happen, however, goals need to be specific, motivational, achievable, recordable, and trackable (and the first letters of these words spell SMART, as I discussed in my September 1994 *ISHN* contribution). Thus, you might have a vision for an injury-free environment, but for this beneficial change to be realized, proactive process goals must be defined in such a way that progress toward achieving the goal can be recorded and tracked. This monitoring process documents incremental change, leading eventually to the proactive change defined by the goal.

When a particular goal is achieved, certain individual and group needs are satisfied. Anticipating such need satisfaction during the goal-setting process motivates participation in the

proactive change initiative. Hence, the motivational component of SMART goal-setting means we begin with the end in mind. When we acknowledge the human needs to be satisfied after goal achievement, we motivate involvement in the change process.

"E" for Empowerment

Continued participation in a proactive change process requires that people feel empowered. This means the participants not only believe the change is justified in terms of need satisfaction, but they believe they will be successful in reaching their goals. In other words, I'm not referring to the typical management definition of empowerment as <u>giving</u> people more responsibility. Rather, I'm defining empowerment as <u>feeling</u> more responsible as a result of having the knowledge and resources to make the change.

People feel empowered to work for proactive change when they have the knowledge and resources to achieve specific goals, feel a sense of personal control over the change process, and expect success from their change efforts. I have discussed these aspects of perceived empowerment in *Professional Safety* (September 1994) and in my new book *The Psychology of Safety* (Chilton Book Company, 1996). Suffice it to say here, that change agents need to realize that empowerment is increased when participants perceive self-effectiveness, personal control, and optimism in the situation. And certain things can be done to increase these perceptions. To find out what these are, ask potential participants, "What would increase your belief that this change initiative is not only within your domain of personal control, but that you will make the proactive differences needed to reach these goals?"

In Conclusion

Proactive change is the most difficult kind of change to achieve because the beneficial consequences from such change are usually not immediate nor certain. Yet from the perspective

of long-term costs and benefits, proactive change is the most important kind of change to achieve. Making people aware of the need for proactive change will not assure their participation. People need to believe in the rationale (or principles) behind the change initiative and then develop personal commitment to participate. People's commitment to contribute to a proactive process can be activated and maintained by addressing six issues or targets of focus. These are readily remembered by considering the letters in the word "change."

First, address the ***Consequences*** (advantages and disadvantages) of changing versus not changing. Then, consider the ***Habits*** (or behaviors) that need to be adjusted, and the ***Attitude*** we want to associate with the process. Involvement is motivated by pointing out the long-term individual and group ***Needs*** satisfied by the change, and by using appropriate ***Goal-setting*** procedures to translate a general vision into specific action plans. Finally, if the participants perceive they have the necessary information, resources, and personal control to accomplish the proactive goal, they will expect the best and feel ***Empowered*** to make the change happen.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller presents numerous real-world examples of ways to implement proactive change in his 1996 book "The Psychology of Safety," and on newly released videotapes and audiotapes. For more information, please call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).