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**HUMAN
REACTIONS**

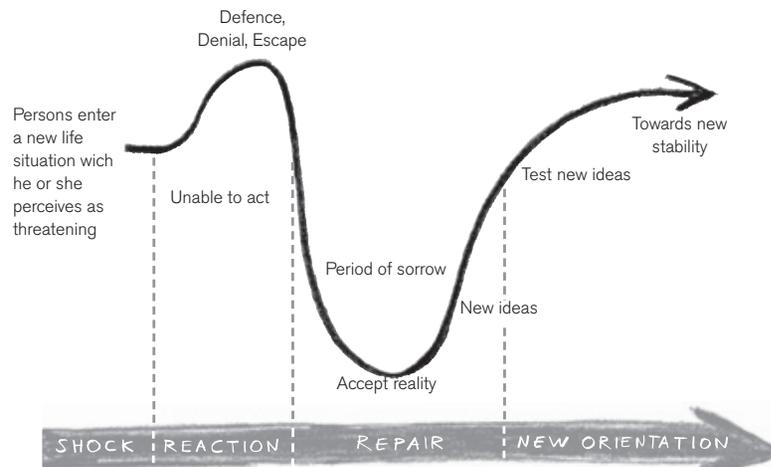
We all react differently to organisational changes, positively as well as negatively. It is when the change is seen as a loss that it can be viewed as a threat or crisis. Examples of types of losses that arise during organisational changes include:

- Loss of colleagues, managers, co-workers and friends
- Loss of power and opportunity to influence
- Loss of security and status
- Loss of expected future scenario
- Loss of resources

Some of these losses can be perceived as less significant and dramatic for some but can be com-

pletely overwhelming for others if there is a loss of purpose and strong reactions. These losses lead to reactions of grief that may be associated with strong emotions, counter-forces and resistance. These reactions often follow a cyclical course encompassing the different phases described below.

Our most familiar behaviour patterns are often insufficient when we find ourselves in new, unforeseen situations. In times of crisis we feel that we are not good enough, experience a sense of abandonment and feel that most things are chaotic. Our identities are threatened; we are thrown out of balance and we lack energy.



Picture 13

The loss curve – human reactions during phases of change and transformation.

Source: J Kullberg

People react differently to different types of losses.

Our reaction pattern is quite predictable.

Chaos and confusion.

Ask. "Why".

Bitterness and aggression.

Defence drops and self-esteem returns.

Look ahead and try new things.

THE DIFFERENT PHASES OF THE LOSS CURVE

Shock

The **shock phase** can last from a few seconds to days. We are often blocked and cannot take in what is happening. Reality is perceived as chaotic. We feel like strangers and deny realities. Feelings of confusion, fear and anxiety dominate. Afterwards, we can have difficulty remembering what really happened in certain situations.

Reaction

The **reaction phase** is when we are forced to open our eyes to what has happened. At the same time, we are wrestling with the information and defending ourselves against the new, uncertain reality. The question "why" repeats itself. We revert to familiar ways and patterns to resolve the conflict. We mobilise our energy and we turn feelings of bitterness, anger and aggression both inwards and outwards. It is important to describe emotions with words, though it is difficult and taxing.

Repair

The **repair phase** can go on for a long time – anywhere from a few months to a few years. During this time we slowly begin to accept reality and this leads us to new ideas and choices. We realise that we cannot live in the past. Our defence drops and we begin to rise to higher energy and activity levels. Our overwhelmed and damaged self-esteem begins to recover and our betrayed hopes are addressed. When we get this far we say we have reached phase four, the new orientation phase.

New orientation

In the **new orientation phase** we notice that we have developed and grown. We have learned more. We are more confident about the new. Apprehension and confusion has subsided. We test new ideas and ways of acting. By going through crisis we often emerge stronger and better equipped to meet new changes. We generally say that we have gone through a second-degree learning phase - we have relearned instead of learning new.

LEADING THROUGH THE LOSS CURVE

On the following pages we will delve into the reactions and grieving process that arises when an individual perceives the change as dramatic. We also describe how you as the leader can read the signals and reactions, but also how to lead and support.

THE SHOCK PHASE - DENIAL

The **shock phase** can begin suddenly when an employee is told about dismissal or a dramatic transfer. But it can also arise gradually as an employee finds out about a change via rumours or random information. If it is possible to control, it is better for the individual and for the manager to handle the first, more controlled situation. The shock phase can last anywhere from a few seconds to a few days.

It is a **type of paralysis**, often marked by mechanical behaviour and general distraction. The person is void of emotions and often described as "capable", "strong" and "silent". In reality, he/she is shutting out reality, has difficulty processing information and under the surface the entire person is in a state of inner turmoil.

Conscientious, rational actions can be difficult, even impossible. Feelings of confusion, fear and anxiety dominate. We can have difficulty remembering what really happened and was said afterwards.

Signals and reactions

Those around us may not even recognise a state of shock; it does not have to be particularly dramatic, and appears only in small behavioural deviations. There are several different psychological defence mechanisms that subconsciously step in to help the individual through the day, but which conceal the actual, unstable inner state. The mechanisms are often very difficult to distinguish and resemble discrete behavioural disruptions:

- A person can *regress*, revert to an earlier development phase and become childish, irresponsible and perhaps helpless.

- *Denial* of events is common.
- It is easy to excuse one's own role in events, *to project* or blame others. A person who spreads conspiring rumours can believe that a dismissal is due to a conspiracy against him or others. Strong aggressive emotions can surface.
- *Identification* can also occur and this means the reverse, that the person assumes the good qualities of others. For those who identify too strongly with their work, dismissal can have disastrous ramifications for their self-perception and identity.
- *Rationalisation* is when the person justifies their behaviour with reasons that are socially more acceptable than the true reasons. There may be a need to conceal egotistical needs that are at the root of certain actions.
- Some people *isolate* themselves, become insular and reject support from others.
- Others want to be strong, *suppressing* or repressing their reactions. But "getting it together" can be dangerous since the suppressed reactions surface later as physical or mental symptoms that can be difficult to trace.
- *Escapism*, illusion or daydreaming from the truth is a common trick for pretending that things are alright. Common behaviour in groups include "business as usual" and focusing on the past. The energy in the group turns inwards; communication comes to a halt, which can take the form of the end of shared coffee breaks. When people begin to safeguard their own interests, they can begin guarding their territories and it is easy to misunderstand each other. There could appear to be a high level of activity, but this need not mean that things are being done effectively.

Confusion, fear and anxiety.

Energy turns inwards, communication slows down and people safeguard their own interests.

Defence mechanisms step in to help.

Make sure you are available.

Provide information as early as possible and allow time for questions.

Emotions take over and are sometimes incomprehensible.

Strong and primitive defence mechanisms.

Supporting and leading

Is it essential you provide feedback that everyone is working with the right things, instead of doing things right. There is a huge need for communication. Make sure you have time in your schedule for discussions and questions that arise. What you as manager do to ease and shorten the shock phase is to talk frankly and openly with your employees about what the information and decisions involve, try to visualise the context and offer new opportunities in the face of the new situation. This can be done in group meetings and individual discussions.

Try to give information to as many people as possible at the same time. But when drastic transfers or dismissals are an issue, you must first have individual discussions with the people involved, before the information is announced at a large meeting or in writing. Your employees must have the chance to ask questions, particularly those affected by drastic transfers, managerial changes, or when people face dismissal. It is also wise to distribute written information that confirms and cements the information about the decision you need to announce.

Follow up information actively. If the organisation is to be dismantled or staff dismissed, immediately schedule regular talks, preferably once a week with those concerned. Be attentive to the need for support and information. Those being dismissed may need to meet you in private to talk about the situation. The support of co-workers is also essential in this context.

It can be difficult to face a person in shock. There is no right or wrong. The most important thing is that

you are there and prepared to listen actively to both emotions and thoughts.

In summary, your role during the shock phase is to be accessible, listen, maintain contact, provide as much available information as possible, keep your eyes open for new conflicts brewing or behavioural changes and encourage co-workers to support each other.

REACTION PHASE - RESISTANCE

The shock phase and reaction phase are normally referred to as the emergency phase since they deal with issues such as repression, denial, resistance and critical reactions. This is why we devote so much time to these initial phases.

The reaction phase begins when the person concerned is forced to face what has happened and no longer tries to run away from it.

Emotions normally take over in the reaction phase. The situation now is taxing, empty and mechanical. Irritation, fear, keeping a stiff upper lip. Something feels wrong but is it me or everyone else?

The inner pressure looks for release, often expressed in very strong emotions that are sometimes difficult for outsiders to understand. A lot of energy is spent on resistance and defence. The reaction phase is often referred to as the defence phase or censor phase.

Employees can often use strenuous self-control to maintain a behaviour pattern that feels empty, or complete a task that feels questionable.

Signals and reactions

The entire psychological apparatus undergoes a sudden conversion during the reaction phase. Its task is to integrate reality as functionally as possible. When mobilised, the individual defence mechanisms of certain employees can react primitively.

The person affected tries to find meaning in the inner chaos that arose in conjunction with the overwhelming message. The question why repeats itself. As does the lamentation of how absurd and unfair it is that this is happening to me and us. It may be difficult to find an existential meaning if there appears to be no way out of the nightmare. The process eventually advances from irrational to rational behaviour. This can be induced through dialogue, conversations and support. The reaction phase can be a vast rollercoaster ride filled with grief, anger and hope.

At this stage we can observe responses such as aggression, blame, anxiety and depression. It is not uncommon to hear "what difference does it make? The company doesn't care about us any more! I have devoted my soul to this company and look what I have to show for it..."

During the reaction phase productivity often falls drastically and the employees are often out of balance and negative. Many experience troubles in their personal relationships and have trouble sleeping.

The group escalates its unity against a common enemy. This unity is part of gathering strength and arguments to launch at the decision-makers in an

attempt to nullify or reverse the decision. They can form groups, gather facts, write petitions or protest lists, find evidence in the form of mappings or surveys that can be used as counter arguments. A lot of the fact-gathering is biased since they are only looking for information that supports their belief. This is, however, a good process since it helps appreciate and value positively all measures taken.

Supporting and leading

You must be able to deal with critical situations and not back away from things that appear unpleasant. You need to be there for your employees during this phase. You need to be accessible and listen, even if it takes time.

You also need to show that it is fine for your employees to vent their emotions. You will be able to deal with resistance easier if you also accept negative and critical bursts of emotion. In so doing you will facilitate forward motion in the change curve.

Being able to "get it out of your system" is important during the reaction phase. When people are dismissed, both those that will need to leave and those remaining in the organisation feel guilt and bitterness.

The individual needs to address their emotions and grief in order to accept the new reality. As leader you should help as much as possible, but remember too that many forms of help are needed in the reaction phase. It is unreasonable to expect one person to be a pillar through every phase and for all factors. You will need someone who can provide comfort and warmth,

The question "Why?" is often repeated.

Don't wait – deal with the situation directly.

It must be acceptable to show feelings.

Productivity could fall drastically.

Prepare for many different types of helpers and sources of support.

Constantly inform and invite for questions.

Belief in the future and desire to work returns.

Arrange “rituals” to say goodbye and to welcome the new situation.

The question “How?” is often repeated.

someone who can encourage, someone to bolster performance, someone to initiate fun activities, and someone who can provide structure and ask questions. **EXERCISES** includes an exercise that provides the opportunity to map out your support system, and that of others, and how it can be used.

Emotional outbursts can recur and linger as trying behaviour or physical problems. If you suspect that someone really has difficulty unravelling their emotions you should contact your HR contact or someone at corporate healthcare. There are also external contacts that can serve as a sounding board and support for people in crisis.

Remember to continue to inform everyone in your organisation as much as possible. Do not underestimate the need for information, communication and the chance to ask questions even in this phase.

It might also be appropriate to consider if you can organise some rituals that give your employees the chance to say goodbye to the old and welcome the new. Field trips, activities that give the chance to meet the 'new', like a new boss, visits to the new workplace – all can be elements that contribute to people being receptive of the new situation.

Your practical role as manager is more active as listener, explainer and observer.

THE REPAIR PHASE - EXPLORATION

Once we begin to accept our new reality we also begin to see new opportunities. You will see that

your employees start to regain their desire to work and have a belief in the future. Even if this phase can still be perceived as positive chaos it is also referred to as the exploration and examination phase. Your employees have a distinct desire to deal with the new. This is often so extensive that some can perceive it as new chaos. It is up to you to stimulate new ideas and make the most of this new creativity.

Signals and reactions

Strong emotional elements can also exist during the repair phase that now target new logical targets. Your employees will feel a huge need to go to the boss and say what they feel. There may be a pent-up need to express what has been concealed and sort out the new situation. Conflicting opinions and trying discussions may occur but these discussions will probably not have the same unreasonable nature seen during the reaction phase.

A common recurrent question is 'How?' This indicates a willingness to start trying new approaches, attitudes, methods and correlations.

There may be signals that your employees are exaggerating their preparations. There is a frustration – people want so much in this phase but there is still confusion and chaos and it can be difficult to concentrate on work. There is a lack of connection.

Your job is to provide direction and gather energy towards a common goal.

Supporting and leading

There is still a need for a listening and accepting

support group. As leader you may need to repeat a lot of the factual information you have already said and help your employees analyse what has happened so that they can put their situation in context.

If employees still unreasonably criticise the chain of events or individual managers, point out this tendency. Reinforce thoughts related to possible alternatives (but do not say: Let's try and forget this and move on...).

For the repair phase to be as forceful as possible and lead to positive, lasting actions that look forward, the climate in the group and the organisation has to allow for trial and error. There is a risk that attempts will be short-term and lack context instead of having strategically motivated steps. It is your job to support and encourage new thoughts and ideas. The trick is to be both creative and strategic. If you can be happy with "this is the first time we've tried the fifth time" you increase the chance for everyone to learn something new.

Active initiatives such as feedback and reflection are particularly important in this phase. Particularly fortifying and encouraging feedback that helps elevate the individual's self-esteem and motivation. This also helps the individual to take more risks and expand his or her own safety zone. Group reflection accelerates learning and visualises the individual development processes.

You can also actively contribute to the change climate by encouraging and pointing out proposals for improvements. Carefully monitor any projects that

start. Set short-term goals. Hold brainstorming and planning exercises.

The objective is to help your employees see events in perspective and be able to conclude the repair phase themselves and proceed to the new orientation phase.

NEW ORIENTATION PHASE - COMMITMENT

The new orientation phase is a direct continuation of the repair phase and covers the time one year after the event and onwards. We have dealt with our lost dreams of how we wanted life to be. We often notice that we have grown as a result of the crisis and our self-esteem is stronger than ever. We have the courage to try new ideas and ways of acting. We are often better equipped to face new changes.

Signals and reactions

Your employees are now ready to join forces behind a common plan. They are willing to review their objectives and make plans for how to achieve these objectives. The question "what should we do to find the best solution" is heard more often.

New challenges are viewed from a positive and loyal perspective. The climate is positive and active – there is a lot of job satisfaction, purpose and overall satisfaction.

Supporting and leading

Management's primary task is to promote more long-term objectives in the organisation and to unite

Set short-term objectives and follow up.

Allow trial and error. Reinforce the positive.

A common question is "What is the best solution?"

Self-esteem getting stronger.

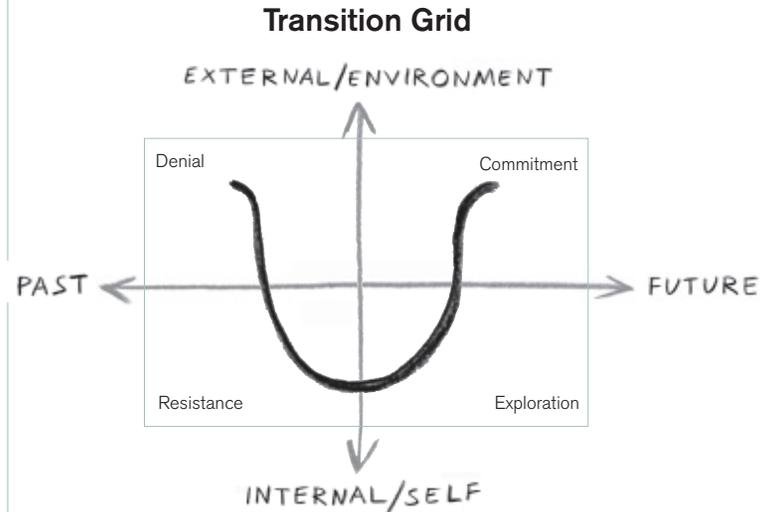
Work with long-term objectives and development of a team spirit.

Energy focus is internal during resistance and exploration.

all personnel around important assignments. To enhance unity as well as efficiency, it is wise to invest in team-building activities in the new or reformed team. This can include reviewing visions and values, or clarifying the group's mission.

REACTIONS ON THE GROUP AND ORGANISATION LEVELS

The patterns can be found even within groups and organisations. In the organisational change process we normally talk about four central phases that relate to the transition grid.



Picture 14

The direction of energy and time in different phases of the transformation.

Source: Flora/Eklind.

Apprehension and confusion are greatest during the first two phases after the planning phase, as is the lack of trust and ability to learn. In the last two phases trust can be rebuilt, learning becomes easier and self-esteem and a belief in the future blossom. The model illustrates how energy levels vary; in the upper half the energy is external toward customers and receivers, in the lower half energy is internal in order to create a unifying force in the organisation. In management work it is about balancing the energy so that customers receive the service they require even when the organisation is busy with internal change processes.

Show appreciation for the work done during the change process. Try to find some type of reward in recognition of your employees' efforts, ambitions and loyalty.

Follow up how the change efforts have been implemented and how your employees are feeling. Reflect on what worked well and what could have been done better. Evaluate the point of improving change-process skills for the next time.

The individual counter-forces can be seen as an effect of the subconscious life that the organisation lives. Most organisational theories omit emotions. They are considered irrational and the organisation is expected to only follow financial and technical rationales. But we know and must begin to recognise that emotions are part of the interaction and part of the organisation process. There is nothing irrational or weak about emotions. The subconscious

life in every organisation contains some degree of anxiety and every individual needs to deal with this. Changes in duties and the organisation affect our identities and relations to others, which can create anxiety that must be diverted. Organisations normally do this through new activities that cause new anxiety. This process is self-generating and happens more often today.

We often hear the expression "that's the way things are done here" and this can explain the collective defence. Both organisations and individuals have a two-faced mask – a Janus face. One side of the mask shows relatively no anxiety but behind the mask may be the face of paralysis and lifelessness. It is easy to change structures but it is difficult to change thought behavioural patterns. Changes can have the opposite effect of what is wanted - in other words, what you want to change may also be reinforced. If you work with group dynamics you will notice that the group always satisfies emotional

needs; needs such as warmth, security, belonging, appreciation, admiration, reflection, competition, dominance and submission.

Everyone can feel apprehension and anxiety. These emotions can surface in change situations. Managers often have to face both their own anxiety and that of others prior to difficult conversations with employees. The manager can easily become a vessel for other people's anxiety. And the anxiety of others can also awaken the manager's anxiety. There are also managers who are anxiety-carriers in themselves and who prefer to devote themselves to pretend activities, shutting themselves away in their rooms, refusing to go to meetings, and remaining occupied elsewhere. These are actions to reduce their own anxiety instead of confronting situations where the organisation's uncertainty takes many forms. Some hide their anxiety by fleeing, like making unnecessary business trips.

Beware of the need to satisfy emotional needs.

Try NOT to take on other people's anxiety.

ISSUES FOR REFLECTION

- 1.** Where are you on the loss grid? Where are your employees?
(see **EXERCISE** Diagnostic Questions)
- 2.** Think back on a significant change in your life. What was most difficult for you to deal with?
- 3.** How should you as leader act to meet your employees' apprehension and anxiety in connection with what for them are significant changes?
- 4.** What is your most common form of defence when your self-image and behaviour is questioned?

