Managing individual reactions to change

People dealing with personal loss and bereavement often experience a cycle ranging from initial shock, denial, anger and anxiety before moving to acceptance. It's not unusual for people to experience a similar journey during major change.

The speed and duration of the cycle varies depending on the individual, the degree of change and its impact. And it's not always a one-way journey. People may feel they have come to terms with a change only to have something unexpectedly throw them off course and they find themselves back experiencing worry or anger. This sort of 'flip-flopping' is quite common.

Shock

Denial

Anger

Worry

Action

Acceptance

Relief

Depression and resistance

There are ways to help people through the change curve:

Shock

- Get everything out in the open with as much information as possible and repeat it.
- Be realistic with promises even if it means saying "I don't know. I'll have to get back to you."
- Be alert to how people are reacting.
- Be available, patient and non-defensive. Don't argue too much.
- Accept there will be strong emotions – good and bad feelings – and don't tell people how they should feel.
- Allow time for people to absorb what's happening.

Denial/anger

- Offer clear instructions.
- Check for understanding, challenge assumptions and deal with concerns and rumours.

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- Be specific about what is required.
- Establish shorter time frames.
- Follow up and keep checking in with people.
- Empathise.

Worry and confusion

- Accept emotional displays.
- Provide opportunities to sound off.
- Listen and be supportive.
- Keep people involved, motivated and build success experiences.
- Continue direct control with clear expectations.
- Tolerate mistakes and some inefficiency.
- Communicate.

Relief and acceptance

- Expect some setbacks. People will "flip back" at times.
- Allow for differences in recovery time.
- Reinforce hopefulness and be optimistic.
- Continue to build the team spirit.
- Manage closely and provide constructive feedback.
- Reward and emphasise achievements.
- Highlight benefits and positives.