

Overcome the Four Barriers of Change

By John Baker

What is the opposite of growth? Some would say it is “status quo,” but that’s not true. The opposite of growth is death: Whether in your personal life or work life, if you’re not growing you’re dying.

The business organism must grow to survive. Even if we could miraculously hold everything steady – costs, margins, productivity – our value proposition immediately degenerates due to the unyielding forces in a competitive marketplace.

What is the miracle that stimulates growth? It’s called change. Change is the sharp stick that moves us out of our comfort zones, and forces us, as George Lucas would say, “to do dangerous and scary things.” Change creates opportunity for growth. But why do we resist change so much? Why is it that when change happens oftentimes our first reaction is to dig in our heels?

Some people don’t react this way ... these people consistently find winning strategies during times of uncertainty. They see change not as a threat, but as an opportunity, not full of peril, but full of possibility. These people avail themselves of change, taking advantage of new opportunities that emerge in evolving times. And they do this by asking better questions of themselves.

Instead of asking defeating questions that start with negativity, such as, “Why is this happening to me?” they ask empowering questions like, “What positive things can I do?” Instead of asking, “Why change the status quo?” they ask, “What’s right about this change?” Instead of asking, “What has been lost?” they ask, “What’s been gained?” Instead of asking, “What will this change do to me?” they ask, “What can I do with this change?”

Asking yourself constructive questions allows you to overcome the following four barriers of change:

Barrier #1: Fear. New things threaten both old practices and tightly held beliefs. When we feel threatened, we feel fear, which affects us both physically and emotionally. And, if we perceive the change is personally targeted, our sense of fear magnifies. Peter Senge said, “People don’t resist change. They resist being changed.” Once we feel the “victim” of change our perspective becomes narrow and self-centered: that’s why people going through change frequently seem self-absorbed. *“This change is all about me.”* In this state of mind, our response to change is often irrational.

But fear can be managed. Using reasoning skills, positive self-talk and other support systems – encouraging friends, supportive family – we can achieve our goals despite the presence of fear. You see this type of determination in someone who confronts a crippling phobia, or someone who decides to renew a vocational passion after losing their job. Companies manage fear as well. Kodak Company was adrift when their traditional film products were threatened by the digital age. Kodak had to re-think their entire corporate purpose or die. They concluded that they weren’t just a film company as much as a company committed to saving memories. With this new mindset, organizational fear evaporated and a new energetic focus on innovation emerged. To confront fear and overcome the first change barrier, ask yourself:

- Why fear change if it leads to success just around the bend?
- What are my talents strengths and contributions that survive the change?
- What value can I add? How can I be of service to someone else?

Barrier #2: The “What If” Game. When things begin to change we waste an enormous amount of time looking back and reminiscing on the question of “What if...?” What if I hadn’t made that terrible career move? What if I had gotten my degree? What if I invested in better ventures? What if I had been a better parent or spouse? The what if game is like a big penalty box, paralyzing players from moving forward and taking action. To stop playing this game, fill your mind up with forward-looking, solution-centered questions.

- What positive effect on my life does going back to school deliver?
- What favorable outcome would result by committing more time to an important priority?
- What resources are available to me?
- Where do I go for help? Where can I help out?

Barrier #3: Labels. So you’ve lost your job and you’re no longer the VP at Widget Inc. Your role has been outsourced. Your corner office is gone. Your secretary is gone, too. You feel defeated by the events the world has thrown at you. But wait: You’re not your job. You’re not the corner office, or the title on your business card, or the plaques on the wall. These are just labels. You were an effective, happy, productive person before you acquired these accoutrements, and that hasn’t changed. You still have skills and experience that serve you well. Your labels control you like a dog tethered to a tree: It’s easy to confuse your reality with the length of the leash. Let go of the labels and be the CEO of your life. Ask yourself:

- What are my core competencies and how can they serve someone else?
- Where do I find value in life, and where do I want to spend time?
- How do I enhance my existing talents and be more useful to others?

Barrier #4: Lack of Focus. Change clouds perceptions like a suddenly shaken snow globe. It seems that a clear course of action is needed, but swirling information and too many variables confuse the situation and push resolution just out of reach. Establishing an action plan is a great strategy during times of change, but oftentimes, poor execution hamstrings our best planning. The problem: not enough focus. Focus means having greater impact on fewer things. You cannot execute without focus. Those who survive change know that to deliver on essential goals; you have to decide to fail on non-crucial tasks. Ask:

- Where am I going to fail in order to maximize my chances of winning?
- What is imperative; what do I absolutely have to do to succeed?
- What is the very first thing I need to do? When do I need to get it done?

When change happens to you, the questions you ask yourself are as important as the answers you seek. Some folks ask themselves, “What’s to become of me?” Those who are successful ask, “What will I become?”

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