THE CHANGE CURVE—PREDICTABLE PATTERN OF EMOTION-REACTION WHILE IN CHANGE OR TRANSITION: MODELING CHANGE BEHAVIOR

AUGUST 14, 2013 JOE DEPAOLA

The Change Curve: Change has an important impact on people in terms of what they do, how they do it, where they do it or, in some cases, if they will even be needed to do it... the change curve, or transition curve, helps us to understand the emotions that people may go through when changing... When faced with change in the workplace or in their personal lives, most people go through a certain range of reactions. The concept of the change curve is used to explain the typical order of people's reaction to change. By observing employees closely, you can tell how far they have progressed along the change curve. Keep in mind that employees may be at different stages of change curve at different times... The idea of a change curve has been around for a very long time. Everyone goes through it: the highs and lows of dealing with change. However, the change curve is nothing more than human response to change, and it's based on a combination of psychological models including; Kurt Lewin’s 1952 three-phase model of social change (i.e., Unfreeze—Change—Refreeze) and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s Five Stages of Grief model that explains people’s reaction to death. Over years, many organizational and behavioral psychologists explored, expanded, and adapted the
change curve to reflect the emotional reactions of people to transitions and change. One of the most famous articles written on the subject is *The Death Valley of Change* by P. David Elrod II and Donald D. Tippett in 2002, which provides experimental verification of the model, and how leaders can apply it to organizations in transition. There are numerous versions of the change curve in existence but no matter which curve you use the basic principle is the same; people follow predictable patterns of psychological reactions to change over time. A nuance of the model is that within the change curve, you can have people who view any kind of change either; positively or negatively, depending upon the individual. However, at an aggregate, using the change curve as a guide in transformation planning, organization change, merger and acquisition... it can help to better understand people’s reaction, uncover barriers, recommend actions to overcome resistance faster... The Kubler-Ross’ original five stages are; denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance— and represented pictorially in graph:

![The Kubler Ross Change Curve](image)

In the article *Stages of the Change Curve* by Sidharth Thakur writes: Although there is no dearth of change models, one of the simplest and most practical change model identifies just four stages of the change curve; denial, resistance, exploration, commitment. Despite simplicity, it has gained wide acceptance in the field of change management. Managers and employees find it easier to understand and relate to these simple four stages of the change process... As soon as a change is proposed the typical
reaction is full of stress and negative emotions that rise to a peak before the change can actually get acceptance, and then normalcy is restored. It’s important for management to understand the change curve and reactions that can be seen during the different stages of the change process. Change is never smooth, easy or quick... and since it involves many uncertainties and turbulence it can only be represented graphically as nonlinear: The change curve is best represented as a type of ‘U’; plotting ‘time’ on X-axis and ‘emotional intensity’ on Y-axis. The change process can be very painful, for example; at the peak of the change curve there is a slow down in employee productivity resulting from heightened stress and uncertainty. But, as team members begins to realize the importance-benefits of proposed change than their acceptance of this new norm—reverses the emotional upheaval, and work productivity gets back on track and aligned with the new normal. The typical graphical representation of the change curve’s four stages: denial, resistance, exploration, commitment is shown as follows:

![The Change Curve](image)

- **Denial**: For most people— in denial— change is not easy to accept and they try to ignore thinking and talking about it... Since change is interpreted as uncertainty, people shift their attention to the past and familiar feelings that make them feel secure. This shift causes a dip in morale of team members. At this stage team leaders must help team members to understand the objectives, process, and how it affects them. Keeping the team informed about what is happening helps to
build a sense of security.

- **Resistance:** Resistance to change begins as people realize that the change is actually taking place and there is no way to avoid it. During this stage of the change curve feelings like anger, self-doubt, fear and anxiety can build, which can significantly stagger the progress of the change process... In addition, it can cause morale and productivity to take a nosedive and some team members may show their resistance to the change by being uncooperative. In these situations, management leader must be proactive; listen to the concerns and demystify the change...

- **Exploration:** This stage of the change curve is the exploration phase where the team members become a part of the change. This is where people start acting and learning new ways so as to constructively contribute towards change. A fresh wave of thinking where people understand the rationality of the change and the importance of their role in the change process. It’s mostly an exploratory stage where people are experimenting with the change to determine their positioning... Leaders must establish meaningful roles for team members so that they can actively participate in the change.

- **Commitment:** Commitment is the final stage of the change curve as productivity and emotional normalcy is restored. The team members begin to feel more in control and committed to the new roles and realities— they are engaged, co-operative, and work actively for the new normal. During this phase it’s important that management leaders acknowledge-reward team members for their contributions; keeping them motivated and committed.
Business can’t change if people don’t change. Getting sustainable business results means changing people’s behavior, actions and attitude to get things done in more effective ways. According to Trilogy; while there’s no magic wand to achieve change, there is a formula for businesses to achieve success; first, start with attitude, since it sets the tone for the entire process. If you don’t have the right attitude about change, then the business will not achieve sustainable results... Next, multiply attitude by the components of talent, skills, and knowledge, which when combined will reach goals: The result is a positive behavioral change that then leads to sustainable results... Change is a common thread that runs thru all businesses regardless of size, industry, age... The world is changing fast and as such, organizations must change quickly too. Organizations that handle change will thrive, whilst those that don’t will struggle to survive. The concept of change is familiar in most businesses, but how they manage it (and how successful they are at it) varies enormously depending on leadership, nature of the change, and people involved in the change... The change curve illustrates the typical emotions and reactions that people go through during change process. However, when people know that change is a transition to a new normal, it can empower them to be proactive and take control so that the change process is a positive experience and they get a sense of achievement and enhanced self-esteem... The change curve model shows how people can react when they are involved in managing business or personal change, especially when they are not in
control of the change or the transition...

The best way to manage change is to create it: undoubtedly it's the best change model of all. This is all fine and good, but how can I use the change curve? Here are a few pointers: First, use it to understand that negative emotions during change are normal and, most of the time, they are transient (i.e. they will pass). This is very helpful in supporting yourself or others during change, especially if the change is well outside your comfort zone. Second, use it to show empathy and communication with people going thru change, for example; some people get stuck in the negative emotions or they feel like a victim and that, in the longer run, will be counter-productive and self-hurting. Whereas by taking control and understanding the change curve process people can be motivated and become proactive in moving quickly to the positive states shown on the change curve. Third, use it for feedback and learning by checking periodically where people are on the change curve and how they are moving along it (or not). This can help people to develop or maintain their perspective and, to some extent, de-personalize the process they are going through, and thus reduce the intensity of any negative emotions they are feeling. Also, it facilitates the planning of positive actions to accelerate progress for integration of new behavior, habit… Change is a common thread that runs through all …