



Dancing With Change

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Dancing with Change Part I

On any given day, I have the opportunity to observe how change affects me and those around me. As I see the variety of responses to change I begin to see the dance. Sometimes we have a partner, sometimes we do not. At times it is like the quick step, or maybe a tango or even a line-dance. **How gracefully we move with the change determines the quality and length of the dance. And how, we approach it determines how we experience it.** Just as in Dancing — when we allow ourselves to move freely in rhythm with the music with no thought of how we look or how good we are — the level of enjoyment and freedom is high. When we approach dancing with fear or trepidation we don't enjoy the activity and may not even hear the music. Then there are times when we want to sit out the dance!

The real question is, **why is it that so many of us have a difficult time with change** (whether we acknowledge it or not)? If you read even a few of the books available on *change management*, you can quickly begin to identify and understand that our responses to change are tied to psychological and emotional triggers. Triggers like: the need to believe we have control, disagreement with the change, a belief that there is a better way, and of course...fear. Even if we acknowledge that these types of personal responses are a part of our life, how can we begin the process of responding in a different way? We begin by:

- observing our response.
- acknowledging and owning our response.
- identifying the underlying beliefs that triggered the response.
- looking at change as an opportunity for growth and self-awareness.

Shall We Dance?

The emotional responses we experience when facing change are actually the initial invitation to the dance. Our beliefs, and the resulting fears, are the catalysts for our response to change. **Our beliefs are often so ingrained that we may not be aware of the influence they have over us** — even after we have responded — yet those very beliefs are behind our reaction to change. Let's look at a few examples of triggers. In our industry, change mandated by the government happens frequently, and quite often we may not agree with it. In cases like this, we may not react because we feel there is nothing we can do about it. If this type of change does not trigger an emotional response, could it be that after years of experience we have come to believe that

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we have minimal or no control over these changes? If the belief that we have no control in a particular situation results in little or no emotion in our response, what happens when an event forces change to something we thought was in our control? That's when the emotion starts to rise and the dance really begins! What if a director from another department began to assign work to one of our team members without our knowledge and agreement? I suspect there would be an emotional response of some nature. Why? Because in this circumstance we believe we have control. I also suggest that in both of these examples, our beliefs are so ingrained that we wouldn't even be aware of them — they would simply trigger our response. Our beliefs about control will play an active part of learning the dance.

Learning The Steps

As we begin the dance we start with learning the steps. **Once we have practiced them long enough, we no longer have to think about the steps** we just allow ourselves to enjoy the movement and music. It is exactly the same experience when we practice modifying our response to change. *Lesson One:* begin to observe yourself (the emotions that arise) as opportunities for change coming your way. An employee wants to change a process, the government wants to change part of a regulated program, or your boss wants to reorganize the office. *Lesson Two:* as you begin to observe the thoughts (and subsequent emotion) that arise when faced with these changes, simply acknowledge that the emotion is present and identify the nature of the event that triggered the response, for later contemplation. This step is an important one because it will assist you in determining why you are resisting the change. *Lesson Three:* you then start the process of identifying your underlying beliefs and companion emotions that are being triggered. **This process sounds quite simple but in reality it is the most difficult step for most of us because it requires a level of objective self-study and some pretty radical honesty.** When you begin to see how your beliefs influence your responses, you can then move toward modifying them. And finally, *Lesson Four:* you begin to view change as an opportunity.

The management of change always begins with the individual and then can be moved to the team, departmental, and organizational levels. With the strength of resistance many people have toward change, it is critical that we begin with ourselves and then coach others along the same process.

A work environment where each team member recognizes and understands dancing with change creates a platform for creative and positive interactions and, increased productivity and teamwork. It also allows us to spend our time focused on work and our customers, not the emotion.

In part two, we will review some dance routines that can be used to actively shift our “triggered” responses to ones that are more positive, healthy, and creative. We will also identify methods we can use to begin the process of modifying our response to change thus experiencing the dance in a whole new way. In part three, we will explore methods that can assist the entire organization in Dancing with Change. Until then, enjoy the dance!

Dancing with Change Part II

Dancing requires either, enough expertise to trust that our body knows and remembers how to move to the music or, being very aware and conscious of how we are moving to the music. **Our level of skill will determine the amount of focus we give to the dance.** The emerging theme here is that as with any new activity, learning to dance with change will become much easier as our skill level and ability increase with practice. And the opportunities for growth will be never ending!

Watching the Dance

If you have taken the time to consciously observe yourself and your reactions to events in your life, you have begun to notice how our beliefs can trigger all sorts of emotional responses, especially when we are confronted with change. *One reader asked whether self-directed change was any easier to deal with.* The answer is not necessarily. Self-directed change can cause an upheaval of emotion in our lives just as often as change directed by others. The difference is that in self-directed change the emotion is often delayed until we’ve begun planning for the change, whereas in outside directed change, it often rises immediately. In both cases, the emotion may show up as self-doubt, indecision, or anxiety and is often experienced physically (nervous stomach, headaches, etc.) before we are conscious enough to become aware of it mentally.

Where to Dance

As we continue to dance with change, **our skill level increases and it becomes almost effortless.** One of the primary benefits of learning this type of dance is that we can dance whenever and wherever we choose. Others around us may choose to continue reacting to change but that does not have to affect how we respond. We can choose the opportunity or we can choose to be in resistance.

Shall We Dance?

There is one last factor to consider when choosing a partner — some people will refuse to dance. That is certainly their choice just as choosing to dance is ours. However, once everyone around them is dancing they may reconsider when they see the positive impact in the environment.

Teaching the Dance

Although modeling a change is one of the most frequently used tools to teach others, we will add communication and the four steps we learned when we began to dance. **Communicating what we have learned about modifying our response to change will set the stage for others being able to see the connection in their lives.** We will begin with an explanation of the four steps.

- Observing our emotional responses to change and beginning to understand that we have no control over anything except our selves and our behaviors.
- Observing and contemplating the event that triggered our responses.
- Observe how our beliefs influence our responses to change.
- Begin to move with change as an observer, viewing it as an opportunity.

Sharing our own experiences with those we have partnered with will be invaluable to them in their growth and discovery. Part of the explanation that we can give to others is the two models discussed in part two of this series. While the models are simple in construct, it takes time to change habitual thoughts and behaviors and we have the opportunity to provide very real examples for those we are teaching. If we are working in a team environment (that team may be comprised of our business unit or department), the invitation to dance can be given to all team members at one time. The element of group experience in this instance has very high value as everyone will be able to observe others in the group going through the same change, yet with differing results. Each team member will also become both the dance instructor and the dance partner — leading to an easier learning experience.

If you have been practicing the art of self-observation discussed in part one, you may or may not have experienced the actual activity of practice as change. If you have been able to simply observe your beliefs without any judgment, you probably have not had much emotion arise from it. If, on the other hand, you became mentally involved with your observation, you probably experienced quite a bit of self-judgment stemming from your beliefs. In either case, we're going to continue our dance with change and take a look at two methods that have helped others in observing and managing their responses to change.

New Dance Routines

We all acquire skill through knowledge and practice, so until we learn different methods and gain expertise through practice, our dance with change usually begins with resistance. We have a “zone” of comfort and complacency that is derived from our beliefs, thoughts, and convictions all designed to keep us from becoming uncomfortable. Feelings begin to arise that we really do not want to deal with — the emotional triggers that change is the catalyst for. People go to great lengths to insure that things do not change. In fact, a great deal of energy is expended in the resistance to change rather than in learning the dance. **We want to believe that we are in control.**

The first routine that can assist us in learning the dance is to realize **that the only control we have is over ourselves and our Behavior** — nothing else. We may be able to influence but we actually have no control over anything else (test this one, you'll see the proof). The model is actually one question you can ask yourself when emotion is present as you face an event or situation. Take a few minutes to observe your response and reaction to the event, and then ask yourself -- *Do I Have Control Over This?* If yes, then you have the opportunity to decide how you are going to react and what action you are going to take. If you truly have control, then you can begin to utilize the practice of seeing where your resistance is coming from. If the answer is no, then let it go. This is the stage where so many of us fall into habitual response.....we are not able to let it go. And the longer we stay in resistance the greater the emotion will be. It begins to take on a life of its own and entire stories get created that are based upon emotion rather than fact. It is a common cycle and one that uses a great deal of energy. It seems rather obvious that it would be in our best interest to use that energy toward a positive outcome, dancing rather than resisting.

This brings us to the second dance routine, learning how to move with the music.

Allowing the Music to Move You

Allowing ourselves to be moved by a piece of music requires a letting go, a desire to experience rather than to restrain our expression. How that translates to dancing with change is to **allow ourselves to release the perceived control and look at a situation or event without our triggered emotional responses**. Use of the word *allow* is deliberate — give yourself the freedom (from emotionally driven responses) to look at a situation as an observer. Separate yourself from the dance, become part of the audience, and see what is really happening.

Begin to realize that *WHAT IS -- IS*. And, *WHAT ISN'T – ISN'T*. A piece of the resistance pattern is that we want something to be different than it is. We either refuse to accept what it is, or we believe it should be something different. In either case, we refuse to acknowledge that in this very moment, the situation is just what it is. It is a waste of time and emotion to wish something was different than it is. Once we can accept the facts of a situation, we can then put our energy into a decision about how we are going to respond to it. We can consciously choose the nature of our response, whether that is acceptance and agreement, or whether it will be an attempt to influence the final outcome. This type of response is much more clear and focused and will give us the freedom of dancing with change rather than resisting it.

Choosing a Partner or Dancing Alone

Practicing the new routines described here will positively modify your response to change. You will regain control over habitual and, often unconscious, responses and deliberately focus your energy and attention on the change. I am often asked if this will work when no one else is responding in this manner, and the answer is yes. Remember that you have no control over anything or anyone but your self, however, the possibility to influence is certain. **As others in your work group and team begin to observe your new way of responding, you will become a living model of a different way of interaction with change**. Dancing with Change is relatively easy to bring into an organization or team and we will explore those possibilities in part three.

Enjoy the dance!

Dancing with Change Part III

Dancing can be a solitary activity or can be done with a partner or group. Often the solitary dancer is part of a larger group; one individual sharing the experience with others. Dancing is also a self-elected activity chosen with deliberation simply for the experience of the dance. If we do not enjoy dancing we have the choice not to dance!

Choosing to Dance

When we make the conscious choice to dance with change, it is a proclamation of our understanding that we have control over nothing but ourselves and our behavior. **It is an act of self control that allows us to see the opportunities** to dance with change, rather than the fruitless effort of trying to control it. Once we have made that shift — **our focus is on what is possible**, and that opens a whole new perspective in terms of how we view the events in our life. When we are in resistance to change we often cannot see the many opportunities that change can bring forth, many of which just might make our lives a bit easier. At the very least, choosing to dance will free up the energy we usually use to resist the change and allow us to focus it elsewhere. Once we have consciously chosen to dance with change and have experienced the difference between *moving with* rather than *reacting to* change, it's time to invite others to dance along with us.

Dancing with Partners

In most cases, our colleagues and team take their cue from our response to the changes occurring in the workplace and have already begun to notice that they are not seeing the habitual (or learned) response from us. They may not yet know what is different, but they see the difference.

As you might have guessed, the next step in the process is teaching others to dance with change. When we dance with a partner, one will lead and one will follow, yet **each person has a responsibility to the other and work together to achieve the best result**. There is also the expectation that the more experienced dancer will lead, which we have already begun to do by our modeling different behavior toward change. We will continue to lead until our partner becomes proficient enough to either dance alone, or chooses a different partner.