



How to Help People “React” Well to Change

By Adrian Pei

Try these 3 proven principles...



Navigating change is not easy, and often elicits a variety of reactions and emotions. Disappointment, frustration, confusion, and fear are just a few that you might experience—whether it’s a company reorganization, or a child who has to move to a new school and city because of their parents’ work.

Not only are these reactions and emotions understandable and normal, but they’re a natural part of the adjustment process that helps people move from one stage of change to another. However, too often people don’t feel freedom or permission to feel and process these reactions, and as a result they get stuck and find it hard to “move on.”

This is where good leadership comes in. In times of change, it makes a huge difference when leaders are able to give permission and language for people as they undergo a significant transition. **Here are three principles I’ve used both at work and in my family to help people as they process what they’re going through.**

Remind people that:

1. You don’t have to feel the same as someone else.

People can tend to huddle together with others—looking for safety and stability—when they feel anxious or vulnerable. Sometimes they find themselves feeling that they



“should” react similarly to those around them (e.g. “Henry doesn’t seem to be worried at all, so I shouldn’t either”). Good leaders can remind each person that his or her reaction is valid, and is there for a reason. **That helps individuals be more self-aware and take ownership and responsibility for what they feel and why.**

2. You can feel two different emotions at the same time. (e.g. excited and sad)

Human beings are more complex creatures than we realize, and often we have conflicted feelings. We love and support a friend or sibling, but we’re also jealous of their success. We are excited about embarking on a new adventure, but also sad to leave the familiarity and comfort of home. We can feel two (or more) valid emotions at the same time, and leaders can help people understand that this is normal—and sometimes **part of truly processing what’s going on inside them.**

3. Emotions can change throughout a transition process.

Emotions and reactions are real, but they also can change. You might feel one way today, and another way next week. In fact, that’s exactly what happens as people work through a transition process—in my change management consulting work, I’ve frequently seen people move naturally from confusion to anger to sadness (or think of the “stages of grief”). I’ve learned to have some patience with this, and not be alarmed with one particular emotion or reaction, which is often just a **snapshot of an entire process.**

Now, these three principles are not about *only* giving people permission to feel things, and then leaving them there to go in any direction—whether helpful and healthy, or not. **Here’s what I do as I try to lead my colleagues or family through a process:**

Step # 1: Be in touch with how you feel, and take responsibility and ownership for these feelings (and why). Your emotions can give you important clues as to what’s going on and why.

Step # 2: What you decide to *do* is equally important. For instance, if you feel angry and decide to insult or attack someone, that’s usually not going to help.



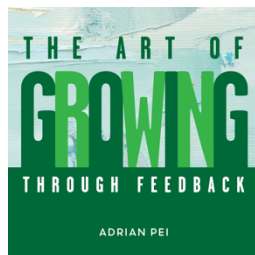
However, if you recognize that there is sadness and loss behind that anger (which is often the case), and you decide to get support for yourself, or if you decide to have a direct conversation with someone to resolve an issue, this kind of movement toward resolution can help.

Action without introspection can be reckless, and introspection without action can be isolating.

Change and transition can be challenging, but leadership can make all the difference. I remember facilitating a version of this while an organization underwent a major transition in leadership—and I could immediately sense the anxiety in the room go down, as we talked through this. That might seem counterintuitive; wouldn't surfacing peoples' emotions raise (not lower) the level of their anxiety?

However, I think peoples' emotions are there whether or not we know or like it—and **if we ignore or minimize them, we often end up just making things worse.** On the other hand, when we give space for an open and healthy process in community, it can help people take responsibility for their feelings and begin the natural process of working through them.

I hope that these principles and steps help you, as you lead your **team, company, church, or family** through the inevitable changes and transitions of life!



I teach the skills required to communicate skillfully in challenging situations in my book [*The Art of Growing Through Feedback*](#) (now available in paperback and e-book). **I'm offering bulk discounts up to 45% off + a free Q & A session with me!** Please write me if you're interested in using it for your team, company, book club, church, or other group.



Discussion or Reflection Questions:

1. What's one disruptive change or transition you've experienced over the past 5-10 years? Please describe what happened, and why it was so significant.
2. What kinds of emotions and reactions did it surface in you? Why?
3. **Which of the 3 principles in this article do you relate to?**
 - Have you ever felt pressure to feel similarly to others during a change or transition process? Please describe.
 - Have you ever felt conflicted about a change or transition? How so?
 - Have your emotions ever changed or evolved over the course of a transition process? How so?
4. What's one situation or process that you can provide leadership over, using some of these principles to help people to process in a healthy way?

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