

REDUCING WORKPLACE ANXIETY PART 7 - CHANGE

Change is one of the most reliable sources of anxiety in the workplace, often leaving individuals and teams grappling with uncertainty, resistance, and stress. When COVID-19 disrupted life and work overnight, the upheaval highlighted just how unsettling change can be. For many, it wasn't just the practical adjustments (like shifting to remote work) but the loss of normalcy and the fear of the unknown that fueled anxiety.

In my role during the early days of the pandemic, I witnessed this firsthand. My team, built on face-to-face training, suddenly had to adapt to a world where physical meetings were impossible. Many of my colleagues felt a profound sense of loss, questioning not just how to proceed, but the meaning of their work in this new context. Their professional uncertainties were compounded by personal concerns, like health risks, family responsibilities, and the challenge of balancing it all.

While I wasn't the team leader, I felt a deep responsibility to support my colleagues. To do so, I had to start with myself. Like many, my initial reaction to significant change was resistance. But I've learned that once the initial shock subsides, I naturally pivot to asking, "Okay, this is happening. How do we adapt?" Processing my own emotions quickly allowed me to focus on helping others navigate theirs.

This shift in mindset enabled me to guide my team through chaos. I encouraged them to move beyond the loss of our old ways of working and think about how we could support others. Within a week of the office shutting down, we developed a remote working toolkit tailored for employees and leaders. It provided practical guidance on topics like virtual collaboration, online meetings, and leading through uncertainty. The toolkit wasn't perfect, but it offered immediate value to our organization and gave my team a renewed sense of purpose.

This experience underscored a vital lesson: change is inevitable, but how we process it determines whether it becomes a source of debilitating anxiety or an opportunity for growth. Leaders play a crucial role in this transformation. By addressing their own reactions quickly and guiding their teams with clarity and empathy, they can help navigate even the most uncertain times.

Why We Need to Talk About Workplace Anxiety

When we talk about anxiety at work, we're not talking about clinical diagnoses or panic attacks. We're talking about the everyday stress, worry, and pressure that so many people carry with them. Especially right now. It's the creeping tension that builds up over time. It chips away at focus, connection, and energy. And left unaddressed, it can quietly erode performance, well-being, and team culture.

Workplace anxiety doesn't come from nowhere. It's not just about having a bad boss or a tough deadline. Most often, it's the result of deeper, systemic issues. These are things that exist across teams and organizations, baked into the culture, communication, and leadership norms.

In this series, we're exploring **seven of the biggest drivers of workplace anxiety**. These are the themes that come up again and again in the organizations I work with and the leaders I coach. These aren't just theoretical problems. They're patterns I've seen in action, and in many cases, lived through myself.

Here's what we'll be digging into over the coming months:

1. **Toxic Work Environments** - when fear replaces trust, and people feel unsafe to speak up or take risks.
2. **Imposter Syndrome** - when talented people feel like frauds, and anxiety drives perfectionism or paralysis.
3. **Lack of Supportive Relationships** - when workplace connections are strained, shallow, or absent altogether.
4. **Overwhelming Workloads & Unclear Priorities** - when everything feels urgent and nothing feels achievable.



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5. **Neglected Well-Being** - when people are burning out, and no one's paying attention to the toll.
6. **Resistance to Change** - when uncertainty isn't addressed, and the unknown becomes a threat.
7. **Personal and Global Stressors** - when employees bring real-life challenges into a workplace that isn't ready to support them.

Each article in this series will explore one of these drivers in depth, offering real stories, research-backed insight, and practical tools to help reduce anxiety. Whether you're leading a team or just trying to get through the week with your sanity intact these articles will help reduce anxiety in the workplace

As you read in the intro, this month's article focuses on how change in the workplace is one of the biggest sources of anxiety, and what leaders can do about it. Let's dive in.

The Psychology of Change and Adaptability

Change is inherently stressful because it disrupts the routines and stability humans naturally crave. For thousands of years, unpredictability equated to danger, and our brains evolved to prioritize certainty as a survival mechanism. Even today, when most workplace changes don't involve life-or-death stakes, our reactions to uncertainty are hardwired, triggering anxiety and defensiveness.

At the heart of this reaction lies one key fear: the unknown. People resist change not necessarily because they oppose the new, but because they fear losing control or stability. This fear is compounded by personal and professional stakes. They ask themselves questions like, "Will I fail at this?" or "What does this mean for my job security?" Resistance to change is not merely a behavioral issue; it's deeply psychological, shaped by our need for safety and predictability.

Leaders must understand these dynamics to effectively guide their teams through transitions. Adaptability is not an innate trait; it's a skill that can be cultivated with the right mindset and environment. Dr. Carol Dweck's research on **growth mindsets** provides a powerful framework for approaching change. A growth mindset reframes challenges as opportunities to learn and improve rather than as threats. Instead of saying, "I can't do this," a growth-oriented individual adds the word "yet": "I can't do this yet." This subtle shift fosters resilience and reduces anxiety.

I saw this mindset in action during the pandemic. While some of my team initially focused on what we couldn't do, others began asking, "What can we try?" This openness allowed us to innovate quickly. We didn't have perfect solutions, but by embracing the unknown, we moved forward rather than getting stuck in fear.

For teams, fostering adaptability involves more than just individual mindset shifts. It requires a supportive culture. Research by Luthans et al. (2006) highlights the role of **resilience** in navigating change. Resilient teams bounce back from setbacks and find ways to thrive in uncertainty. Leaders can nurture resilience by:

- **Acknowledging challenges openly:** Don't dismiss fears; validate them.
- **Encouraging collaboration:** Teams adapt faster when they solve problems together.
- **Focusing on progress:** Celebrate small wins to build confidence.

Ultimately, adaptability is about perspective. By shifting the focus from fear of the unknown to curiosity about what's possible, leaders can help their teams build resilience and thrive in the face of change.

Tools for Navigating Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is a natural response, but it can become a significant barrier if left unaddressed. While fear and uncertainty drive much of this resistance, leaders often make the mistake of addressing it solely at a strategic or procedural level. Effective change management requires tackling resistance at a human level. We do this by understanding the behaviors and emotions underlying it.



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One framework I've found invaluable for this is the **COM-B model**, which identifies three key components that influence behavior during change:

1. **Competence:** Do employees feel they have the skills or knowledge to succeed?
2. **Opportunity:** Do they have the resources and time to adapt?
3. **Motivation:** Do they see the change as relevant to their goals or values?

Addressing Motivation: Connecting Change to Personal Goals - Motivation is often the most critical factor in overcoming resistance. People need to see how the change benefits them personally, not just the organization. I learned this lesson during a major restructuring. Initially, I relied on corporate messaging about efficiency and growth, but it didn't resonate with my team. What worked was reframing the change in terms of individual benefits: less busy work, more meaningful projects, and opportunities for development.

Building Competence: Equipping People for Success - Resistance often stems from a lack of confidence. If employees don't feel prepared, they'll hesitate to embrace change. Leaders must prioritize training and create safe spaces for people to practice new skills without fear of judgment. Peer mentoring, hands-on workshops, and access to resources are practical ways to build competence. Additionally, leaders should normalize mistakes as part of the learning process.

Creating Opportunity: Removing Barriers to Adaptation - Sometimes, the issue isn't willingness or ability... it's capacity. Employees may feel overwhelmed by existing workloads, leaving little room to focus on change. Leaders can address this by helping teams prioritize and eliminating unnecessary tasks. Clear communication about timelines and expectations is equally important.

Applying the COM-B Framework - During the COVID-19 pandemic, my team faced resistance to shifting to remote work. Using the COM-B framework, I identified specific barriers:

- **Competence:** Many felt unsure about using collaboration tools like Miro. We introduced step-by-step tutorials and designated "tech champions" for support.
- **Opportunity:** Overloaded schedules left little time to adapt. I worked with leaders to temporarily reduce workloads.
- **Motivation:** Some colleagues missed in-person interactions. We organized virtual team-building activities to foster connection.

By addressing these barriers, we reduced anxiety and fostered a sense of empowerment, helping the team embrace the new way of working.

As a leader, you don't have to solve every issue yourself, but you do need to ask the right questions: "What's holding us back? How can I help remove those obstacles?" The answers often reveal actionable steps that make change less daunting for everyone involved.

Building Resilience and Navigating Uncertainty

Uncertainty is one of the most challenging aspects of change. As humans, we're wired to seek safety and predictability. Unfortunately, feelings of safety and security are often disrupted by change. While it's impossible to eliminate all unknowns, leaders can help their teams build resilience by shifting their focus from what's uncontrollable to what's actionable.

The Power of Clarity in Uncertain Times - Clarity is a powerful antidote to uncertainty. It doesn't mean having all the answers but rather identifying and communicating what is known. During times of change, leaders can help their teams navigate ambiguity by asking three critical questions:

1. **What do we know?** Focus on the facts and actions within your control.
2. **What don't we know?** Acknowledge uncertainties without dwelling on them.
3. **What can we influence?** Direct energy toward areas where action is possible.



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For example, during the early days of COVID-19, my team faced uncertainty about how we'd adapt our work. We didn't have a clear roadmap, but we could focus on immediate needs, like creating remote work guidelines. By narrowing our attention to actionable steps, we reduced the mental noise of hypothetical fears.

Reframing Uncertainty as Opportunity - A critical mindset shift for navigating change is reframing uncertainty as an opportunity for growth. While this may sound overly optimistic, it's a practical approach grounded in curiosity and proactivity. Instead of dwelling on what's lost, teams can focus on what's possible.

For instance, my team initially struggled with the loss of in-person training. But by reframing the challenge, we uncovered opportunities to innovate in remote learning. This shift not only eased our anxiety but also allowed us to create resources that proved valuable long after the immediate crisis passed.

Encouraging Curiosity and Proactivity - Curiosity is a powerful antidote to stagnation. During uncertain times, encourage your team to ask, "What can we learn?" or "How might we adapt?" Proactive problem solving doesn't guarantee success on the first try, but it creates momentum and builds confidence.

Mistakes are inevitable in this process, but they're not failures. They're steppingstones to progress. When my team launched a remote working toolkit early in the pandemic, not everything we created was immediately useful. But our willingness to act, iterate, and learn allowed us to refine our approach and discover solutions we wouldn't have otherwise.

Building Resilience Through Connection and Support - Resilience isn't a solo endeavor. It's built through connection and mutual support. Leaders can foster resilience by creating environments where team members feel safe to share their concerns and mistakes. This sense of psychological safety enables people to navigate uncertainty with greater confidence.

At its core, resilience isn't about eliminating discomfort. It's about finding ways to move forward despite it. By focusing on clarity, reframing uncertainty, and fostering a supportive culture, leaders can help their teams develop the adaptability needed to thrive in changing environments.

Embracing Change with Confidence

Change is inevitable, but the anxiety it creates doesn't have to be. By understanding the dynamics of uncertainty, resistance, and resilience, leaders can transform moments of disruption into opportunities for growth and innovation.

The strategies we've explored (addressing Capabilities, Opportunities, & Motivation, and improving clarity and certainty) are tools to help you navigate the human side of change. They're not quick fixes, but they are powerful frameworks for reducing anxiety and equipping teams to thrive in uncertain times.

As leaders, your role isn't to eliminate change or protect your teams from discomfort. It's to guide them through it. When you model adaptability, create safe spaces for dialogue, and provide practical support, you empower your people to face the unknown with confidence.

The reality is change will always be a source of stress. But it can also be a catalyst for connection, creativity, and growth. By embracing the tools and approaches discussed here, you can help your team (and yourself) navigate change with less anxiety and more assurance.

Whether you're managing a large-scale transformation or guiding a small team through a period of transition, the principles of adaptability, empathy, and clarity will serve as your compass. Change may not get easier, but with the right mindset and support, you can turn it into a powerful driver of progress for your organization and the people within it.

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