



## Change: From Threat to Opportunity

*by Jon Craighead*

Let's for a moment examine the fundamentals of change from both a physiological and a psychological perspective. In a physiological sense, there is the phenomenon of homeostasis, which is the term for the body's automatic reactions to internal physical changes. For example, we human beings automatically regulate our body temperatures to ward off the effect of external changes by sweating when hot and shivering when cold. Another example occurs in the case of organ transplants which, if not chemically assisted, will automatically be rejected by the body. From a psychological perspective, if I entered your office when you were not present and rearranged your desk, upon your return you would likely be disorientated and very upset. The point of these examples is that resistance to change is automatic and happens without initiation or awareness on our part. We humans prefer the familiar and resist the unfamiliar, which change represents. Psychological changes are difficult to resolve as they require initiated action on our part. This article will focus on the psychological aspects of change as seen from an organizational, an interpersonal, and an individual perspective.

Business leaders are trained to anticipate potentially disruptive and costly changes, called disasters. These particular changes can take many overwhelming and often deleterious forms, such as a snow storm which hinders the movement of people and merchandise; a surprise competitive product that seriously jeopardizes your primary offering; or an unforeseen loss of key personnel which jeopardizes productivity. And of course there is the inevitable system breakdown that brings everything to a sudden halt with no known immediate resolution. Successful leaders are expected to have vetted plans in place for such anticipated disasters. Yet there is always the possibility the best laid plans can be circumvented by unanticipated contingencies that render those anticipated plans ineffectual. Leaders are expected to respond skillfully and remedy these disasters expeditiously. Skilled leaders have a facility in adapting to circumstances in order to resolve these critical situations. By defining and assessing the situation, they're able to bring the operational process back into existence in the shortest possible time, while minimizing the human tendency for shame and blame. By not resisting the inevitable, a skillful practitioner of change is the solution to an otherwise critical problem.

Personal behaviors are the most difficult to impact. The work required to change these unconscious behaviors is complex. They are usually rooted in past experiences which are based in nonspecific or conceptual realities. Activities such as persistent lateness, substandard work performance, and general unhealthy lifestyle practices can result in

antisocial behaviors that normally aren't noticed until there is a startling incident of their toxic sway. When these outbreaks occur it, takes a commitment of both the targeted person and the perpetrator to bring resolution to the incident. Even more lethal is a negative mindset housed internally and spewed outwardly. These negative eruptions explode uncontrollably with traumatic effect, the consequences of which impact not only those present but the perpetrator as well. Again, it requires the help of others to cause a change and the commitment of the perpetrator to transform such behaviors.

These aforementioned personality disorders are examples of people needing to come to terms with life as reality rather than imagination. Beyond these, for most of us our current experiences are significantly different than our remembrances. It can be as simple as witnessing our children move into adulthood, or as complex as dealing with the physicality of aging. One especially difficult experience for some people can be witnessing the decline of long held values and standards that once were a reliable guidance system but are no longer pertinent in our existing realities. If we can awaken ourselves to our natural and automatic resistance to such changes, we can enrich our ability to accept and adapt to the challenges that they evoke.

Changes are the natural effects of a natural evolutionary process. They can enhance our appreciation of life itself. Transforming our relationship to change from threat to opportunity empowers us to change what we can and accept what we cannot. A dynamic relationship to change enhances the overall quality of life's pleasures and keeps the adventure of life exciting. To quote the saying popularly attributed to Darwin: "It's not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one most adaptable to change."