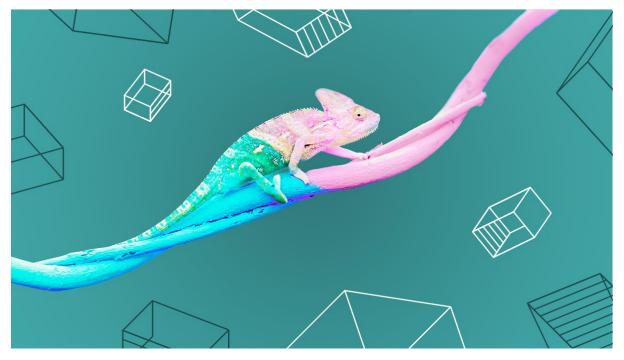# How to Become More Comfortable with Change

by Kathryn Clubb and Jeni Fan   November 10, 2021

HBR Staff/Getty Images/JoZtar/filo

Summary.

One of the most common unconscious mindsets is that "change is temporary," but when you see something as temporary, you tend to cope with it instead of accepting and embracing it. The reality is that change is a constant, and you'll need to navigate it often in your career.

- The authors identify three common change-averse mindsets: receivers, resistors, and controllers. Receivers see change as something that happens *to* them that shakes up their sense of control.

- Resistors push back against change, falsely hoping it might go away. And controllers find change overwhelming and isolating.

- By consciously examining how you approach change, you can adopt these strategies to move toward a more change-ready mindset, and welcome change as an opportunity.

The pace of change has increased massively in light of the pandemic. Managing it now requires a strategy akin to whitewater rafting. New and unpredictable obstacles will continue to present themselves every day — and not just for companies, but for workers themselves.

As someone entering the workforce, you should expect to face the many challenges that accompany fast-paced change. Some of you may be joining a new company, leading a new team, or reporting to a brand new boss. Others may find that the scope of your projects shift more frequently or that your pitches must be updated more often to keep up with competitors.

https://hbr.org/2021/11/how-to-become-more-comfortable-with-change

No matter what job or industry you pursue, you'll need to learn how to be adaptable and navigate these experiences gracefully to grow in your career. Your mindset, above all else, will have a major impact on whether you succeed.

Unfortunately, too many of us have the mindset that "change is temporary." When you see something as temporary, you tend to *cope* with it instead of *accept* it — and if you don't learn how to accept, embrace, and work through your discomfort in unfamiliar situations, you will inevitably find it difficult to progress in the rapidly evolving world of work.

Here's the good news: You can change your subconscious mindset by making a conscious effort. By learning how you think about change, you can train yourself to recognize (and avoid) the three unhelpful mindsets below. In turn, you're more likely to embrace a change-ready approach to work.

3 Common Change-Averse Mindsets

Receivers

If you typically see change as something pushed on you, you're likely a "receiver." In some situations, you might feel that the change exceeds your scope of responsibility or authority.

For example, let's say your boss and other senior leaders suddenly shift the direction of a project you have been working on for a few months. You and your teammates have done the work and see some customer-related issues with the new direction. But you are fresh at the company, and because you have a receiver mindset, you decide that the more seasoned leaders are probably right. You go along with the new direction, dumping all the work that you have done.

Change might feel "above your pay grade," and this can result in a flight response — not in a physical sense, but in terms of your own agency. Your sense of self-confidence or feelings of being in control might be shaken up.

By reacting this way, you largely abdicate your own authority. You might "look up" for direction, trusting that your boss (or their boss) will be the one to get the organization through the change.

Signs you're a "receiver"

- You wait for direction from others before moving forward.

- You escalate decisions, assuming they're "above my pay grade."

- You accept decisions (even when you don't think they will work) to avoid questioning your boss.

In contrast, someone who is change-ready believes that everyone has their own talents and contributions to bring to the table. You might be change-ready if you want to see the decision made by the people closest to the work — which might be you.

How to shift toward a change-ready mindset:

- Find a "no regret" move for you or your team to take. Figure out an action you can take that is not only consistent with the change, but also valuable in the short term.

- Generate possible solutions before you take any problem to your boss.

- Back up any reservations you have about a decision with data or perspectives that might not have been known or included during the original discussion.

Resistors

Resistors are less passive than receivers, but that's not necessarily a good thing. If you're a resistor, you might try to maintain your own power by pushing back against change and those who are championing it. Resistors rely on their own experience and information and try to maintain their current situation by resisting change with the belief that it will go away soon (a belief that is nearly always incorrect).

If you're a resistor, you might freeze, choose inaction, or take only the actions that you yourself can control. Resistance can take many forms: questioning the authority of the change leaders, seemingly agreeing to a change and then doing nothing, poking holes in plans as a means of delaying action, or explaining the reasons the change does not apply to you.

At the end of the day, resistors hope to wait out change. For example, consider the same situation as before — your project is given new direction by the higher-ups at your organization. As a resistor, you might start asking detailed questions about the new direction that supports the work you and your team have already done. You try to protect — and not change — the work done to date.

Signs you're a "resistor"

- You bring up reasons that something cannot be done based on precedent or history.

- You agree to a stated commitment, and then find reasons not to execute on it later.

- You poke holes in plans as a means of avoiding or stalling action.

A change-ready person knows that the enduring success and direction of the organization is the North Star for all action. As industries change to keep pace with evolving customer needs and unexpected disruptors, the change-ready mindset looks to the positive — often customer-driven — reasons for change. Being change-ready means seeing opportunities rather than threats and finding your own motivation to change.

How to shift toward a change-ready mindset:

- Explore how the proposed action or solution is different from what happened in the past. Be informed by the past — but not captured by it.

- Raise your reservations at the appropriate time (team meetings, ideation sessions, or project planning). Participate in the debate to get to a better solution, see how the sausage is made, and then commit to the decision (regardless of whether it was your idea).

- Ask questions that improve and encourage the solution rather than shut it down. For example, try to avoid asking things like: "How do you expect me to get all this done?" Instead, you ask: "What are the one or two most important ways I could help make this successful?"

Controllers

If you're a controller, your goal is to control change and stabilize or manage its effect around you. That means you take charge by taking the reins. You might create exhaustive lists, try to consider all the risks, and over-analyze details to give yourself a sense of control. This might sound good, but it's ultimately a fight response**,** because even the most well-crafted plan must eventually contend with unexpected circumstances. If you believe you've controlled change and see obstacles and missteps

as failures, you might have a tendency to micromanage or even blame others for mistakes or lack of progress.

The false silver lining for controllers is that you take ownership. You believe that it's up to you to get the team, or yourself, through the change. According to our research, however, stepping up in this way does not encourage others to truly accept the change alongside you. In reality, they might step back when you step in too much — and worse, you might find change to be stressful, exhausting, and isolating because you're doing everything by yourself.

Now let's turn back to our main example. As a controller, when your boss give you new direction on a project, you likely will try to get ahead of it. To look or feel like you're more in control, you might communicate that you anticipated the change. You might even ask for detailed input for an updated plan incorporating new items that undo much of the work you and your team have done.

Signs you're a "controller"

- You seek information that supports your own views or reservations.

- You prefer getting detailed instructions on what to do instead of inquiring about what has been tried already and generating a brand new plan.

- You discount obstacles raised by others to stick to the plan.

In contrast, adopting a change-ready mindset means understanding that everyone has their own relationship to change, and that change might impact different people in different ways. Resistance to change is a source of information — not a barrier to overcome. So get curious. Make space for varying reactions, and work with people to define what has to be true for a change to be successful. People are more committed to changes that they help define and shape. All in all, be the author of your own future.

How to shift toward a change-ready mindset:

- You can bolster your own thinking and solution-generation by including people who don't think like you and will give you candid input. Workshop your idea or solution with a diverse group of colleagues to gain perspective and improve on the idea.

- When a colleague or team member comes to you for help, rather than just sharing your expertise or what you would do in the situation, ask what they've already tried. Guide them to create their own solutions and workarounds by being a thought partner.

- The question isn't whether you'll encounter obstacles, but how you'll handle them when you do. Will you learn, use those lessons to improve your idea or solution, and try again?

Moving to a Change-Ready Mindset

Do you consider yourself change-ready right now? Almost everyone has a predominant relationship to change that will drive their thoughts and actions, but different situations also bring out different responses. You and your team members might also see things differently than your manager does. In fact, McKinsey research indicates that 86% of leaders see themselves as role models, while just 53% of their direct reports agree.

With that in mind, here's your guiding principle: People with a change-ready mindset know that change is continuous and see it as a source of opportunity. Carol Dweck's work on the "growth mindset" comes into play here. Change-ready people look at changes both big and small as

https://hbr.org/2021/11/how-to-become-more-comfortable-with-change

opportunities for personal development, and "failed" experiments as a rich source of learning and growth. Similarly, they look for ways to break out of old ways of thinking, stay curious, and challenge the status quo.

People sometimes say that a change-ready mindset seems too good to be true. We would argue otherwise. In 2020, we saw more people step up to meet new challenges with change-readiness than ever before, adapting to new ways of working, relating, interacting, and being. Even the most change-ready people found new, more meaningful purpose in some cases. In the most tumultuous year many of us have ever experienced, change-ready people shifted and adapted with every new obstacle and opportunity to become savvier, stronger and more resilient.

To become one of them, learn to recognize the three change-averse mindsets above and course-correct so you're always heading in the right direction.

Authors

Kathryn Clubb is head of change and transformation at BTS, an organization that works with leaders at all levels to help them make better decisions, convert those decisions to actions, and deliver results. After being a partner in Accenture's Strategy Practice, Kathryn was the Chief Innovator at WHWest, Inc. With decades of experience helping companies transform and execute strategy, Kathryn has extensive experience working with a variety of top global organizations.

Jeni Fan is a senior director at BTS and leads change and transformation for the East Coast of the United States. She serves as a strategist advisor and thought partner to clients undergoing large-scale change: from culture to strategy, to pre- and post-M&A. Taking a human-centered, evidence-based approach, her work focuses on alignment and building sustained systemwide change at all levels of an organization. Her work spans multiple industries and sectors.