

# Understanding Organizational Change

---

Carole W. Sebenick, Ph.D. (1999, 2000)

[www.FairfaxPsychologist.com](http://www.FairfaxPsychologist.com)

## How Change Happens in Organizations

1. **You choose it**—Can lead to feelings of empowerment and excitement.  
**It chooses you**—Can lead to sense of special status or disregard and fear.
2. **Anticipated Event** (expected change), **Unanticipated Event** (no warning), or **Non-Event** (something hoped and/or planned for doesn't happen).

## Types of Change in Organizations

1. **Personal Change**--Making a geographic move to accept or keep a job; assuming new responsibilities or tasks; taking on or losing a work identity; etc.
2. **Group Change**--Reorganization of work units; new leaders or supervisors; new clientele; etc.
3. **Organizational Change**--The organizational chart looks different; new policies or procedures are established; the organizational culture or identity shifts; etc.
4. **Environmental Change**--Client needs change; new funding comes in or is taken away; a residence or office is constructed, refurbished, or divided; technology shifts; etc.

## Typical (but often unexpected) Reactions to Organizational Change

- **Resistance**--A search for familiarity, comfort, and stability...Desperate clinging to the boat in the midst of "white water"!
- **Rigidity**--Strict enforcement of the new way of doing things...Throwing everyone overboard!
- **Grieving**--Denial, Anger/Outrage, Bargaining, Despair, Acceptance ... "So what if it was leaking. We loved the old boat!"
- **Ambivalence**--Changing attitudes, alternating between resistance and enthusiasm until the change is understood and accepted...Not sure whether to paddle or swim.
- **Stress Exhaustion**--Even in the midst of exciting, desired changes, personal stress may rise and catch employees by surprise, resulting in illness, fatigue, absenteeism, or a need to shift into "overdrive"...Sea sickness, in the midst of all the fun.

## Emotional Consequences of Transition

- **"Identity Crisis"**—The process of defining who you are (in terms of title, career direction, interpersonal relationships, values and goals) is reawakened
- **Activation of Defenses**—"Favorite" ways of protecting yourself from emotional hurt resurface (e.g., social withdrawal, sarcasm, obsessive activity, denial)

References: Schlossberg, N.K. (1984). *Coping with Adults in Transition*; Fossum, L. (1989). *Understanding Organizational Change*

---

Materials may be reproduced for personal or educational purposes only. In all other cases, please contact the author for written permission to reproduce. Carole W. Sebenick, Ph.D., 10721 Main St., Ste. 307, Fairfax, VA 22030; (703) 362-9313; [Carole@FairfaxPsychologist.com](mailto:Carole@FairfaxPsychologist.com).