Change is Difficult

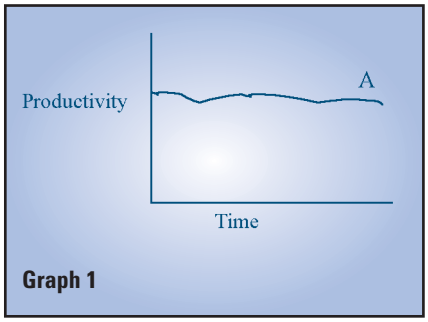
by Carl A. Rabenaldt

A famous author once wrote "change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better."[1]

This is all too true. We are all uncomfortable with change. Change is difficult on an individual basis and especially hard on an organizational basis. What we have found over the years is that understanding the basics of change helps individuals and organizations more readily accept change.

So why is change so hard? Imagine a graph of your actual productivity. The X axis is time and the Y axis is a measurement of your actual production. Let's graph long-run production as opposed to short-run production. The reason we differentiate between the two is because short-run production tends to have large swings. You have good days and you have bad days. One day you feel you have accomplished a lot, and the next you feel the whole day was wasted. On the other hand, long-run production is somewhat even. You probably have about the same productivity curve this year that you did last year (identified as "A" in Graph 1). As you can see in the graph, these production curves tend to level out over time. You learn to do your job and you do it. Systems and procedures are in

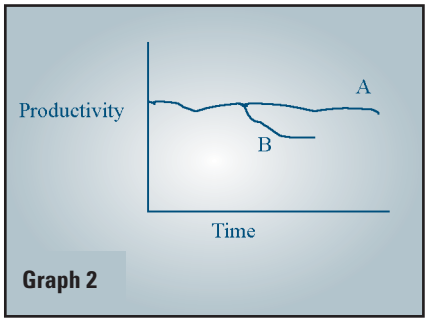
place and by following those procedures you get your job done. That is until someone wants change.



Graph 1

Let's say someone comes in and decides we are going to automate the process for work orders. Instead of tracking work requests on 3 by 5 cards, the tracking will be done on the computer.

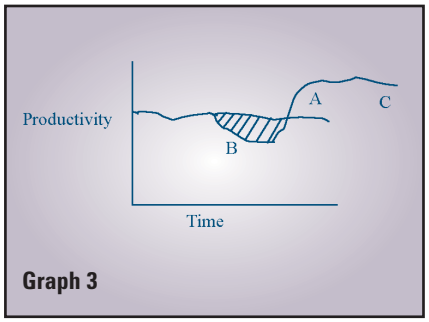
Learning the new system will take some time. People will have to change some of their habits. This new learning will slow production down. What used to take people five minutes, now takes them 20 minutes because they have not had time to develop good work habits and are still learning the new system. In other words, production will fall (identified as "B" in Graph 2) from your normal production curve "A."



Graph 2

This drop in production will cause some people to lose interest. Others will voice their concerns saying the old system was better or more efficient. In the short run, these naysayers may be correct. Support of the change is most difficult during this period.

But, in the long run, the loss in production is soon gained back when new habits are learned. Once people start to understand the new systems and procedures, all the loss in production should be gained back plus a little more.



Graph 3

After the change is in place and new habits are formed, people will start to see an increase in their long-run production (identified as "C" in Graph 3). Once this new production is achieved, it will not go away. You now have a new productivity curve.

Unfortunately, short run inefficiency is what causes many good changes to fail. People will complain

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about the new system and will point to legitimate problems in an effort to go back to the old method. They do not recognize the inherent production problem associated with change and think the temporary production loss is permanent.

Another problem exists because people claim to be too busy to change. In essence they are saying, I am too busy to become more productive. These people will always be too busy because they are not looking for better ways to do their work.

There are inherent problems associated with change. People are resistant. But, understanding the problems and taking a few measures can minimize change resistance:

1. Make sure top management is aware of the possibility of short-term inefficiencies (production drops) and will support the change in the long run.
2. Develop a detailed implementation plan when changing operations and procedures.
3. Include production drops and extended hours of involvement in you change implementation plan
4. Inform people that being too busy to change is a very short sighted view with regard to the big picture.

The best advice is to communicate this concept to others. By letting stakeholders in the process know about the resistance to change and why this resistance happens is the first step to successful change.

Reference:

1. Booker, Richard Booker (1554-1600). *In Samuel Johnson, preface to A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755

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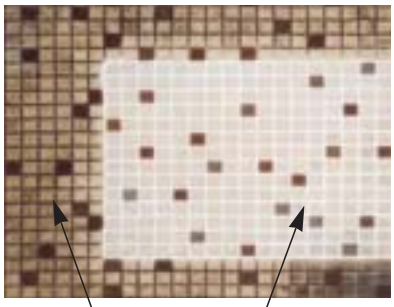

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