**Let’s Think Differently About Change to Understand Why It’s So Difficult**

July 12, 2017  • [Karen Gross](https://twitter.com/KarenGrossEdu)

For decades, I have been thinking and writing about change and its importance, particularly in the context of education. I have written, including [very recently](http://www.breakawaylearners.com/), with specificity about how to change culture within educational institutions. My common explanation for the challenges of change is that while people often actually want and see the need for change, those old slippers feel mighty comfortable when change is in the air. In short, change upsets us and threatens our sense of stability.

As a leader of an institution and more broadly at the level of national policy, my efforts to enable change have usually involved the use of symbols. On the university campus where I served as a president, I spent a year scattering books on change across the campus and my office, often talking about the challenges of change and generally keeping change in everyone’s mind. I gave the entire staff and faculty an executive desk toy called a [“decision-maker,”](https://www.uncommongoods.com/product/decision-paperweight) noting that we would be making change together through shared decisions. All this so they could begin getting used to making decisions with the gifted toy. And yes, some of the decision options reflected a touch of humor to increase levity. I gave senior leaders chess pieces because I wanted them to think ahead and understand the need to move from where we were to where we needed to be.

However successful these efforts were, change was often wrenching — more so for some than others. And it most assuredly was not fast. One trustee referred to the whole experience as buckling up one’s seatbelt in a plane and pulling the yoke straight up as the plane rattled against the speed.

For the first time, I realize why. At a workshop run by the Aspen Institute to develop new leaders in higher education, the [president of Valencia College made this stunningly good observation](http://www.chronicle.com/article/What-Will-It-Take-to-Change/240118?cid=rclink#sthash.fXmetcDr.dpuf): “People aren’t afraid of change, they’re afraid of loss.” Eureka moment for me!

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In thinking and talking about change, I (and many others) have always focused on the positives — what change could bring about and enable. I and others spoke about the importance of educational risk-taking, even when those efforts were not a success. I and others made the case repeatedly that deciding to not change was an action in itself — namely choosing to stay put or in fact, fall behind.

What the quoted statement suggests that this focus on the positives of change is flawed; instead of encouraging change for its own sake and the sake of the institutions served by change, we need to focus on the trade-offs. If change is actually about loss, we need to address loss and how to make loss more acceptable.

As psychiatrists and psychologists know, loss and separation (including death) are among the most difficult emotional issues for individuals to handle. Indeed, from birth with the cutting of the umbilical cord, people are experiencing loss and not always with grace and ease. Babies cry when their parent leaves the room, unsure as to whether the parents will actually return. Young children (well, some of them) cling to their parents when they are left at kindergarten. Some young people have trouble sleeping alone, begging for their family members to sit on the bed until they fall asleep. Children are often homesick when they stay overnight at friends’ houses or go to overnight camp in the summer. We give them “transitional” object to soothe the unease of separation — a blanket with a familiar smell, a favorite stuffed animal, a meaningful photo. In the presence of divorce, children experience the strains of loss each time they move between parents, something that some parents try to ameliorate by [enabling the children to stay in their home](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/family/birds-nest-custody-the-smart-new-way-to-divorce/) with the parents moving in and out.

Adults often stay in marriages (even bad or suboptimal ones) because separation is harder than living with unhappiness and newness; the fear of being alone or the fear of new patterns overrides the positives of change. And death — the most permanent of all separations — is accompanied by grief and sadness, even for those who believe in an afterlife. And importantly, even when death is a relief for the person who is ill — alleviating endless pain — that does not make separation easy for the survivors. We have rituals too in the context of death to enable a slow adaption to the loss — funerals, memorials, wakes, tattered black ribbons, candles, songs.

Books on recovering from loss are plentiful; many people are familiar with the stages of grief identified and articulated by [Elizabeth Kubler-Ross](http://www.amhc.org/58-grief-bereavement-issues/article/8444-stage-of-grief-models-kubler-ross). Family dysfunction and poor behavior often showcases itself in the presence of illness and death; separation does not bring out the best in us. Just look at what happens with estate distribution; it can get downright ugly.

To put the experience of loss in the context of education (certainly less threatening than death to be sure), consider these examples. I remember many faculty meetings about improving the university curriculum, most particularly the required courses. The goal was to change the curricula because it was no longer meeting the needs of students — and our focus on students is, after all, the whole point of education.

Faculty see the need for change: times change and thus what we teach needs to change. And such changes necessarily involve reducing or eliminating some existing courses, expanding others and adding new courses. There are only so many hours in the day, right?

But the idea of change is generally welcomed **until** a faculty member understands that the courses he or she teaches could be reduced or even eliminated. For these faculty, change equals loss, not gain. I remember faculty saying things like: “I have enough trouble teaching all I need to teach in four credit hours; how can I teach all the necessary material in three credit hours?” Or, “We cannot discard this material; students need to learn about [topic x], even if there is a more urgent need to learn [topics y and z].”

Ponder this example: many faculty who want to incorporate new materials into their courses do so by adding on rather than eliminating material; course content grows because faculty don’t discard their notes. As I aged as a professor, I started eliminating material — teaching less content but offering greater depth. Doing so was generally painful at some level, although I remember being shocked at how much content I had tried to squeeze into a course in my early teaching years. We get attached to our notes too; the recommendation of tossing one’s notes after using them for two years leaves most faculty quivering. To be candid, I still have my tattered teaching notes, decades after I left my tenured post.

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What all this means for me is that if we want change to be successful, whether in education or any other arena, we need to focus on how to deal with loss more effectively. At the front end, we need to recognize the impending loss to faculty (or others who are affected in whatever arena change is occurring). Then, we need to find ways to help affected people deal with the loss. In the context of education, we need to ask what happens to the material or courses eliminated, the discarded programs, the old notes, the common pathways. (Can you see a bonfire of old notes from faculty? It could even be a fundraiser with alums and students paying to see faculty toss their precious notes. Could we develop other applicable loss rituals that would help?) And, we need to focus directly on the psychological feelings these losses engender.

Consider these three suggestions to facilitate understanding the loss that will then in turn facilitate change: (1) Have personnel overtly recognize that with change comes loss and that loss will likely be disquieting and even painful; (2) Leaders need to realize that change needs to happen more slowly than we might want, not because it is hard to adjust to the new but instead because it is hard to deal with discarding the past; and (3) Giving up old patterns, materials or ideas is accompanied by complex emotions that destabilize, even if these items were sub-optimal in the first instance. In short, just agreeing old slippers suddenly feel good in the presence of a push for change isn’t effective.

Bottom line: if we want change and we most assuredly should, we need to reboot how we go about making change. Instead of describing with glee all the positives of change in a myriad of contexts with accompanying benefits, we need to focus on the pain, discomfort and disquiet of loss. We need to be psychological in our approach to change; only then will be able to make change happen more effectively, most comfortably and with greater success.

Who knew that making change requires us to focus on its opposite: loss and separation?

*Note: A special thank-you to MW who has shown me how hard professional and personal change can be, even as we think about change and innovation every minute of every day.*

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/lets-think-differently-about-change-to-understand-why-its-so-difficult/> [Accessed 22 May 2018]