

MANAGING YOURSELF THROUGH CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Major change is difficult. Unexpected change is even more difficult. In this paper, I offer some possibilities for navigating change more effectively.

I begin by presenting a model of change, which describes the stages we go through as we respond to change. Next I look at why each stage happens, why we respond the way we do, and how we move from one stage to the next. Then I offer some ideas about how to respond more effectively in each stage.

THE SATIR CHANGE MODEL

Virginia Satir, a pioneer of family therapy, developed a model of how individuals experience change. The Satir Change Model says that as we cope with unexpected or significant change, we predictably move through four stages: Late Status Quo, Chaos, Practice and Integration, and New Status Quo. In this section, I describe the characteristic emotions, behaviors and performance we typically experience in each stage.

Figure 1 shows how our performance changes as we move through change. As you read about each stage, consider how similar graphs might describe the way our emotions and behaviors vary throughout the change process.

The Late Status Quo

The Late Status Quo stage feels familiar. Every day is more or less like the day before, and you know more or less what to expect from day to day. Your life is going mostly smoothly, with small fluctuations in performance from time to time. You may feel comfortable in the Late Status Quo, or you may feel bored, frustrated, "stuck," or mildly anxious. Whatever the feeling, the Late Status Quo has an overall sense of familiarity.

Example: In October 1985 I had a good job, writing software to support the Quality Control department at a company that manufactured computer aided design systems. I had just started taking my first university classes in software engineering. I had been married two months earlier, and my new bride and I were having a house built. Though things were changing, the changes were moderate, and were happening as we had planned.

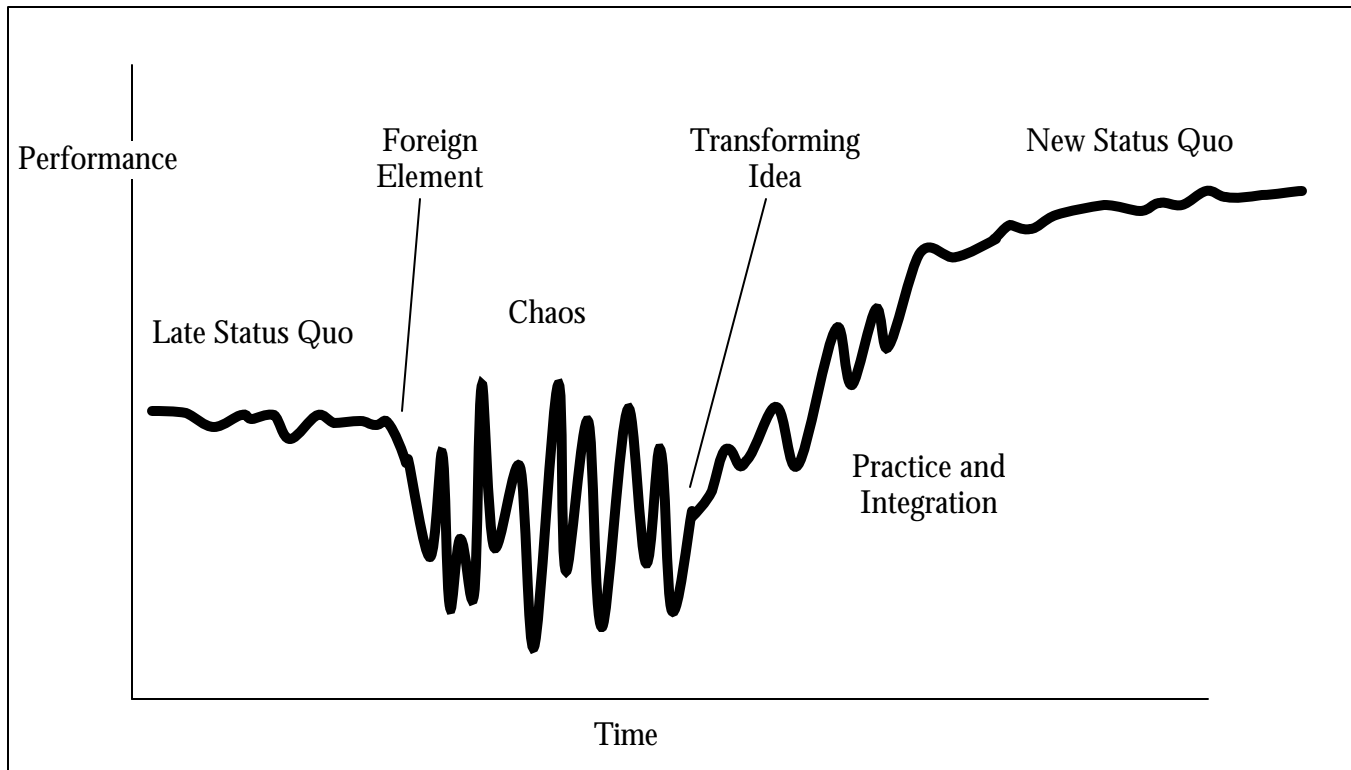


Figure 1. The Satir Change Model

The Foreign Element

Something happens that shatters the familiarity of the Late Status Quo. A significant event occurs, or you become aware of information that you had not expected, that invalidates one of your assumptions. For example, your company reorganizes, putting you into a new role, or you get bumped from an airline flight, or you win the lottery.

This new awareness is called a Foreign Element. It is foreign because it comes from outside of your world, from outside of your expectations and assumptions.

Example (continued): On October 3, the plant manager called everyone to the cafeteria, where he announced that our plant was closing. We no longer had jobs.

Chaos

The Foreign Element throws you into Chaos. In the Chaos stage, you are suddenly in unfamiliar territory where your life is unpredictable, and your usual behaviors do not work. Your performance drops. People around you may act in unusual ways. You feel stressed, confused, afraid, hurt, uncomfortable, elated, a strong sense of urgency, or some other strong emotion. You may ricochet from one feeling to another.

You have one idea after another about what you can do. You may respond in ways that are not typical for you: directing the people around you, trying to stay in control; disengaging and retreating to some familiar activity; focusing on one small part of the problem, ignoring the chaos happening around you; or scrambling to find information about what is going on. Some of your actions work and some do not, which may heighten the confusion and the sense of urgency. Your feelings, behaviors, and performance are all over the map, unpredictable, varying from day to day, or sometimes even from moment to moment.

Chaos is a very creative time, though you may experience the urgency and stress more than the thrill of creativity.

Example (continued): My performance (income, in this case) immediately went to zero. My wife and I negotiated with the home builder to terminate our contract, and moved to an apartment closer to her job. I sent resumes to 45 companies, and waited by the mailbox for the replies. A few companies sent me form letters, informing me that my experience and qualifications didn't meet their current needs, but they would keep my resume on file. Most companies did not respond. I began considering jobs in other fields. In addition to having zero income, I also had little marketability.

The Transforming Idea

You create lots of new ideas when you are in Chaos. Eventually, one will be a Transforming Idea, an idea that helps you make sense of the Foreign Element, or at least cope with it. Many ideas seem like Transforming Ideas when you have them, but it is very difficult to predict which ideas will work and which will not. Sometimes a Transforming Idea comes with an "Aha!" feeling. Sometimes a Transforming Idea will make you laugh. Usually, the only way to know whether you have a Transforming Idea is to try it and see what happens.

The Transforming Idea gives you a new understanding of what to do. You begin to see a way out of the Chaos.

Example (continued): My wife suggested that I stop looking for a job, and go to school full time. Though this would not help with our income, it would help with the deeper problem of my marketability. In the meantime, we could live reasonably comfortably on her income for a few years.

Practice and Integration

In the Practice and Integration stage, you start to try your new idea or new behavior. You learn rapidly and make progress. You make lots of mistakes, and every now and then your progress slips. As you learn what works and what does not, you become more skilled and hopeful. You sense that you are moving toward something new. Your performance improves, often to levels higher than before the Foreign Element.

Example (continued): While I was in school, I worked as a research assistant at the university. My wife and I painfully adjusted our lifestyle to our limited income. I got excellent grades, and graduated with highest honors.

The New Status Quo

In the New Status Quo stage, your performance begins to level off as you master your new skills. You continue to get excellent results with less concentration and attention. You feel good about how rapidly you are learning. You turn your attention toward other important areas of your life, armed with new skills, knowledge and confidence.

Eventually, your new skills become second nature, and your learnings become assumptions and expectations. With time, the newness fades, and the New Status Quo becomes a Late Status Quo.

And the change cycle begins again.

Example (concluded): After I graduated, I continued on to graduate school. I continued to get excellent grades, and applied what I was learning by writing software for local companies during the summers. Eventually, I got a good job, where I continued improving my software development skills, and in time developed a career as a project manager.

Additional Thoughts about the Satir Change Model

You may be in a different stage with respect to different changes. You may be in a Late Status Quo in your family, while at work you are in Chaos from an unexpected reorganization.

Of course, Foreign Elements are not always courteous enough to wait until you are ready for them. A surprise may arrive while you are in the middle of Chaos, or while you are practicing the Transforming Idea from an earlier change.

THE REASONS FOR EACH STAGE

Each stage of the Satir Change Model has a purpose. There are sound reasons for each stage, even when our responses seem painful and confusing.

Assumptions and the Late Status Quo

The change process starts with the Late Status Quo. It is the assumptions we make about the world that make Foreign Elements foreign. If we never made assumptions, we would not be surprised by anything that happened.

Then again, if we did not make assumptions, we could not function. We are human and have human limitations. We can not know everything. We can not pay attention to every detail of what is happening around us all the time. We make assumptions about what we can rely on to remain the same, so that we can use our limited knowledge and attention to handle things that may change. For example, I assume that the walls in my house will continue to stand up. If I could not make that assumption, I would have to put my attention and effort into making sure they stayed up. That would leave much less time available for other things, such as writing about the change process.

Most of our assumptions work well enough, most of the time, in most situations. The proof is that I have stayed alive long enough to write this article, and you have stayed alive long enough to read it.

Unfortunately, as necessary as they are, assumptions are not absolutely reliable. They are at least a little bit different from reality. A Foreign Element points out a hole in one of your assumptions. If you expect to have a job next week, getting laid off will be a major Foreign Element. Suppose, on the other hand, that you are not sure you will have a job next week. You might get your resume in order, and start contacting colleagues about job openings. Then, if you get laid off next week, it may still hurt, and it may still be a surprise, but you will likely be more prepared to handle it. The Foreign Element will be somewhat less foreign, and your Chaos will be somewhat less stressful.

Our assumptions allow us to focus our time and energy where they are most needed. And when our assumptions are incomplete or incorrect, they set us up for Chaos.

Chaos, Stress, and Creativity

Chaos is stressful. The stress is our response to a Foreign Element, an indication that one of our significant assumptions differs from reality. We may experience the stress as pain, fear, confusion, urgency, excitement. Whatever the emotion, the purpose of the stress is to motivate us to make sense of what is going on and figure out how to respond effectively. Up to a point, the greater the stress, the greater our motivation to resolve the chaos.

When we are in Chaos, we are uncertain about what we can do to make things better. We try a variety of responses. We do more of what we have been doing, or less. We try behaviors that worked at some other time and place. We try things we have never done before, hoping that something, anything, will work. We search frantically for information, though we are uncertain about what information will help us. We yell, or cry, or shut down, or run away. We may try each of these things, one after another. Our behavior becomes very unpredictable.

To express this in a different way, we become very creative. Our stress jolts us into extraordinary creativity. We generate a great variety of possible things to do, and we try them.

Unfortunately, most of our ideas and behaviors do not help, and some of them make things worse. We continue because each new idea, each new behavior is potentially a Transforming Idea. Eventually, some behavior, some idea will work. But we don't know which one until we try, so we try many different things.

The purpose of Chaos is to generate a Transforming Idea.

Learning During Practice and Integration

Once we have a Transforming Idea, we start on the road out of Chaos and toward higher performance. Unfortunately, we do not immediately become highly effective. A Transforming Idea is usually new for us, so we do not know everything we need to know about it. We do not yet have experience and skill with our new behavior. We do not yet know how the results we get may be effected by tiny differences in our new behavior. We do not yet know in which situations our new skill is appropriate and in which it may be less effective.

The Practice and Integration stage is about learning. The purpose of this stage is to master our new skill and knowledge, and integrate them into our daily lives, to improve our effectiveness in light of the information we received as a Foreign Element. We practice, and we learn from the results.

Because we are learning, we sometimes make mistakes that set us back in the short term. Because we are learning, our performance generally increases over time.

New Assumptions and the New Status Quo

As our skill and knowledge grows, our need to continue practicing and integration diminishes. We get less and less payoff for our efforts to improve. At the same time, other issues begin to demand our attention. As we master our new skills and knowledge, they gradually become assumptions. Our new assumptions, like all assumptions, have both benefits and dangers. Because we have done real learning, our new assumptions leave us more effective than the ones we left behind.

The purpose of the New Status Quo is to allow us to turn our attention toward other important areas of our lives.

MANAGING YOURSELF THROUGH CHANGE

So far, I have described what happens inside us as we go through significant change, and why we respond the way we do. In this section, I present some possibilities for managing yourself effectively during each stage of change.

Managing Yourself Through a Late Status Quo

The first rule is to stay healthy. When a Foreign Element comes, you will need all the capacity you can muster.

Remember: This will not last. Changes are coming.

Appreciate yourself. Your assumptions and expectations are mostly working. That is quite an accomplishment.

The Late Status Quo is not the most effective time to make significant changes in your life. Because you have no recent experience of major change, you may underestimate the stress of Chaos. Also, you don't

have recent successes to bolster your confidence as you deal with Chaos and the setbacks of Practice and Integration.

Find moderate change to make, to get back in the habit of managing change. Find something to *gently* push your comfort zone. Learn to ski. Take a photography class. Learn a foreign language. Purposefully experience the change cycle. That way, you will be better prepared when something big happens. But remember, try not to take on anything enormous.

Notice what changes make it harder for you to maintain the status quo. These little changes may give you information about an assumption that is no longer working.

Managing Yourself Through Chaos

Again, your first priority is to stay healthy. Take care of yourself.

Remember: This will not last. You will eventually have a Transforming Idea.

Your instinct may be to get out of Chaos at all costs. You may try to reject the Foreign Element to remain in the Late Status Quo. This is a natural response, and it sometimes works, at least for a while.

View the Foreign Element as a gift of information, and try to accept the information. Try to think of at least three possible meanings for this new information. Then check out these meanings.

Appreciate yourself for recognizing and accepting the Foreign Element, rather than trying to deny reality.

Acknowledge that you are in Chaos. Spend some time observing and learning from your internal reactions.

Remember that Chaos is a natural part of the change process. It is okay for you to feel chaotic when you are in Chaos. Also remember that Chaos is necessary. The purpose of your urgency is to encourage you to create new ideas to make sense of the Foreign Element.

Try to identify and clearly state the assumption that was violated by the Foreign Element. Clearly stating this assumption may help you to create a Transforming Idea.

Consider adjusting how you measure your performance. When I lost my job, my income went to zero. I struggled to find a Transforming Idea that would get me a new job, a new income. My wife, by noticing that my poor marketability was a deeper problem, was able to come up with the powerful Transforming Idea that I should get a degree. Instead of measuring my performance by my income, I could measure it by my marketability, a more fundamental need. Though my income stayed low while I was in school, my marketability rose with each class I completed.

While you are in Chaos coping with one change, it is very difficult to manage changes in other areas of your life. Try not to make irreversible long-term decisions. Your judgment may not be at its best right now.

Get support from other people. Talk to others about what is going on for you. If others are going through a similar change, listen to what is going on for them. Mentor each other. Share ideas and experiences.

Stay grounded in the present.

Managing Yourself Through Practice and Integration

Remember: This will not last.

Expect that your performance may go down before it goes up. Expect that you will have setbacks. It is possible that a setback will throw you back into Chaos.

Mistakes are not failure, they are feedback. Each mistake contains information for you. When you make a mistake, adjust what you are doing and try again. Mistakes are natural and necessary.

Practice one new thing at a time, so you can make sense of the results you get. If you change too many things at once, it is very difficult to know how each change affected the results.

Go for quantity before quality. Try your new skill in slightly different situations. Try slightly different behaviors. Find out what works and what does not. Find out where your new skill works and where it does not. Allow yourself lots of mistakes.

Try your new skill at least three times before deciding whether it works. Just because it worked once does not mean it will work again. Just because it failed once does not mean it will fail again.

Practice in a safe environment, where mistakes are not too costly. One of the most important things to learn is the limits of your new skill, ideas, or behavior. The only way to find the limits is to try it where you are not sure it will work. This is a lot less palatable if mistakes are costly.

This is a pretty good time to make changes in other areas of your life. You have confidence because you have survived Chaos, and are feeling good about what you are learning. But don't make too many changes during Practice and Integration stages. Failure may knock you back into Chaos, and a number of failures may damage your confidence in navigating change. You need the satisfaction of *completing* a successful change now and then.

Appreciate yourself for taking risks and for learning.

Managing Yourself Through a New Status Quo

Celebrate. Appreciate yourself for negotiating this stressful change and for your new level of performance.

This is the most effective time to make changes in other areas of your life. You are feeling good. You have a realistic view of how change happens, and you know there will be discomfort and mistakes. Your confidence is high, because you know you can successfully manage yourself through change. You are prepared to take on the next challenge.

Remember: This will not last.

SUMMARY

The Satir Change Model describes the stages we go through as we experience significant change. By understanding this model, and knowing what stage of change we are in, we can choose more effective responses, to turn unexpected change into an opportunity to learn and improve our performance.

REFERENCES

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Weinberg, Gerald M. *Quality Software Management Volume 4: Anticipating Change*. New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1997. ISBN: 0-932633-32-3. This excellent book is about how to be an effective change

artist, Weinberg shows how to apply the Satir Change Model to organizational life. Though the focus is on software development organizations, most of the ideas apply to organizations of all kinds.