

# Tea & Toast: Change, change and more change

Hilary Bryan, 21 June 2024

## A look at philosophy

Life is *flux* said Greek philosopher Heraclitus. For him, in 500 BC, everything was constantly shifting, and becoming something other than it was before. Like a river, life flows continually. You can step from a riverbank into the river. The water flows over your feet, but it'll never be the same water that flowed one moment before. Heraclitus concluded the very nature of life is change. So to resist this natural flow was to resist the very essence of our existence. He said: There is nothing permanent except change.

Similarly, 20th-century psychologist, Carl Jung concurred. For him a refusal to embrace change as a necessary and normal part of life will lead to problems, pain and disappointment. If we accept that everything is constantly changing and fleeting, things run far more smoothly. Life again is flux.

Modern Stoics hold an annual Stoic Week. They challenge themselves to:

- focus on the process not the outcome
- face up to the reality that adversity is part of normal life
- learn from adversity, and through failure.

Adversity, as part of change, is a learning experience.

## Accenture's Pulse of Change: 2024 Index

**Key findings: In 2023, business leaders faced an all-time-high rate of change, and expect change to accelerate further in 2024.**

The analysis found the rate of change has risen steadily since 2019—183% over the past four years and 33% in 2023.

88% of senior leaders anticipate an even faster rate of change in 2024. But 60% see this as an opportunity.

47% say they're not fully prepared for the huge rate of technological change. A far lower, 27% claim their organisations are ready to scale up generative AI. 76% saw generative AI as more of an opportunity than a threat, with roughly the same number investing with caution because they're concerned about its responsible use.

What about you? Are you ready for the AI and technology change challenge?

## 1. Technology,

This particularly includes the scale and pace of AI being adopted.

## 2. Talent

Skills shortages and poor staff engagement.

## 3. Geopolitical

This includes wars and cyber attacks.

## 4. Consumer & Social issues

Social risks, consumer confidence in the future, household savings all play a role.

## 5. Climate

Climate-related disasters, economic loss caused by natural disasters and environmental risks.

## 6. Economic

Overall economic disruption, financial volatility and business outlook.

A majority of leaders didn't feel ready to respond to change in 2024. A majority also believed Technology and Talent change combined will be the most disruptive in 2024.

(The global survey included more than 3,400 senior leaders in 20 countries and 19 industries.)

## Not one version of change

We have numerous words for rain: drizzle, shower, storm, downpour, cloudburst, thunderstorm, deluge. But we use one word for all types of change. So, Let's try and categorise different types of change.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Change you make yourself: you've decided on it and you're taking key decisions: marriage, moving countries</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Change that happens very suddenly over which you have no control: earthquakes, sudden deaths</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Change that creeps up on you over time: growing old, change of seasons -</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Changes you want to make but find hard: going to the gym. not eating Tim Tams -</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Change decided by someone else that affects you and that takes time to happen: restructures, changes to your workplace - waking up every day to a thunderstorm with ongoing showers</li></ul>	

## Why thunderstorms and ongoing showers are hard to cope with

We avoid threat; we'd much rather have rewards. But threat is far more powerful: far stronger than rewards.

### Threat response

- kicks in faster
- is stronger and lasts longer
- increases our heart rate
- pumps cortisol: stress hormone
- reduces dopamine: reward chemical.

### Reward response

- slower to activate
- milder
- shorter-lived
- increases dopamine.

## We like to predict what will happen and be certain

And it's very useful. Along with prediction comes certainty. Both are often absent during this kind of change.

Let's take this a step further. Would you rather be certain about a negative outcome, or face uncertainty about what's likely to happen? We'd prefer the former. One feature of organisational change that fuels uncertainty and the inability to predict is the length of time organisational change takes. Proposals, consultations processes and then final announcements can take time. And during this time, we can't predict, we face uncertainty and also have to deal with constant ambiguity.

## An ongoing downpour: job loss and change

We're in central Wellington, so we're working with a lot of downpours. Wellington and job losses are hand in hand at the moment.

Chances are people are experiencing grief. But it may be unacknowledged. After all, no-one's died, but it's still grief. That's according to Lucy Hone and Denise Quinlan.

Job loss, as a result of change, is real grief, but it's often disenfranchised. That means, it's a major loss, but it's not as valued as grieving for someone who's died. Hone and Quinlan argue it should be. Losing your job is real grief.

They go further and argue the five stages of grief are *utter BS*. It's often used during organisational change to help people. So let's forget it.

Everyone experiences grief as a result of job loss differently. There's no formula - no five stages.



## Two approaches to cope with job loss as a result of change

Oscillation theory	Secondary losses
<p>Your mood will ebb and flow. You may well wallow and cry one minute, and then withdraw /avoid and distract yourself the next. It's ok not to be ok; don't diminish it.</p> <p>You'll be angry for a while and then laugh at other times.</p> <p>Oscillation is to be expected.</p>	<p>Job loss is more than just losing a job. You'll experience all sorts of secondary losses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Belonging</li><li>• Identity at work and at home</li><li>• Relationships</li><li>• Status</li><li>• Meaning and purpose</li><li>• The future you'd envisaged</li></ul>

## What to do for yourself when it's pouring with rain

### You can teach an old dog new tricks

This is very good news. Neuroscience has taught us that our brains can continue to learn throughout our lives. In older brains the focus is particularly on social skills and emotional intelligence. We can learn by experience, reflection and mental activity. Our brains change their structure with every different activity they perform. They form new and stronger connections between neurons. So use it or lose it. We can learn new things, new ways of working and get to know new people.

### You can't have too much self-awareness

What are your secondary losses? What mattered to you in your job? What are you learning about yourself? What's really important to you? What are your values?

And to help you think things through - talk to someone. Isolation won't help you.

### You can experience growth

Following on from self-awareness, you can re-appraise. You can change direction and even find a silver lining. This isn't Pollyanna thinking. In the up moments of your oscillation, think: *but luckily...*

Ibarra argues that when we're faced with a significant change, such as a job loss, we should think big about possible new identities. She rejects the notion of an inner core or true self. Instead, she says we have many possible selves. And it's unlikely we'll discover those by looking back on our careers and job we've just left and reflecting. We'll find them by experimenting, trying things out and learning.

## Leading people through a downpour, thunderstorm or a shower

### Maslow's wrong

We all know our need for shelter, food etc is the base of Maslow's hierarchy, but neuroscientists, particularly Hilary Scarlett, challenge this. Social connection, and being loved and cared for is paramount.

And the brain processes social and physical pain using the same network. This network includes the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC). It goes into overdrive when we're rejected and lack social connection. Think about it. Remember a time when you felt insulted, treated very unfairly or had a hurtful argument. As Maya Angelou says - *we remember what we felt*.

So, during change, social connection is more important than ever. People need to feel they belong, are listened to and are part of a strong team.

So, it follows that our brain's reward network is triggered by social connection. During change when threats and uncertainty abound, people need to feel they're part of an in-group. They're all in this together, with leaders spending their time with their team and their people.

### Encourage a growth mindset

Encourage people to learn something new and break out of a possible fixed mindset. Then reward them for it. Treat failure as learning. Get that dopamine flowing and those neurons connecting. Get people on board with the concept of a growth, rather than fixed mindset.

### Set short-term goals people can achieve

Break new tasks down into smaller chunks. People will then get a dose of dopamine before they tackle the next chunk. And if people can get into flow, all the better. Flow is a great state, when our neuroplasticity and dopamine give us a fix and we're totally absorbed in something new.

### Remind people of past achievements

Remind people of what they've achieved and how they can translate past achievements to present change challenges. The result is reward-related dopamine.

### Praise and recognise people

The Gallup engagement survey asks people to rate how much recognition and praise they've received in the past seven days. It's because the dopamine won't last much longer. Unexpected rewards generate even more dopamine. Remember that lovely feeling of surprise when you get a bunch of flowers delivered? Even if it's only a small thing someone has done, praise them for it.



## Acts of kindness

Givers and receivers benefit. Small acts of kindness are contagious. Be kind.

## A little bit of novelty

We might all be getting wet with lots of change, but people like a bit of novelty – something out of the ordinary. Changes of location for team meetings, spontaneous fun events, new ways to communicate – anything that will wake people up and get the dopamine flowing.

## Have a laugh

De Bono: ***Humour is by far the most significant behaviour of the human brain.*** The neuroscientists agree. Watching comedy DVDs increases productivity. Having non-work related fun together as a team is valuable. But you can go a step further and see the humour in the change situation you're in. That's powerful.

## Communicate, communicate and then communicate more to boost certainty

This is a basic. Even if there's nothing to actually communicate, communicate anyway. Updates every day at 3pm or every Tuesday at the team meeting or every other day by email all create the certainty our brains are craving.

Try *surround sound* communication, rather than cascade. This means encouraging communication at all levels. Senior leader to leaders, leaders to staff, peer to peer, staff to leaders. Encourage open and regular communication. Genuine dialogue and transparency are best. Let people have their say and remember the oscillation. One day they may be upbeat, the next quite the opposite.

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