

# Finding Your Way on the Road to Change

By Linda Salvay, *Vantage* Editor, Utilicorp United

“The more things change, the more they remain the same,” observed 19th-century French writer Alphonse Karr. It’s apparent he never witnessed anything like the recent activity at UtiliCorp.

With the changes prompted by Project BTU (Building Tomorrow’s UtiliCorp), very little appears to remain the same. Yet even in times of dramatic change there are predictable patterns. Learning to work through them, suggest UCU change management experts Adrienne Edmondson and Gene Caresia, can help to make even monumental changes more manageable.

Basically, explains Edmondson, there are five stages of organizational change. Often they “run together,” making it unclear exactly what stage the individual is experiencing. “A lot of times we as humans have to maintain a little bit of flexibility in dealing with these things,” she counsels. But in general the pattern remains the same:

**Awareness** — People learn that a change is going to take place. Their immediate challenge is to begin believing that the change can take place, and that they can and will be part of it.

**Acceptance** — People begin to understand what the change involves. The most important element in this stage, says Edmondson, “is what I call WIIFM — ‘What’s In It For Me?’ When people understand that they’re going to gain some kind of benefit, it’s easier for them to accept and get involved with the change. It’s at that point that they’re willing to help.”

**Preparation** — A plan must be developed to make the change happen. “When you’re building the plan, you’re getting people involved, they’re giving you input on the best direction to take in order to prepare the project,” Edmondson notes. This is the stage at which people take ownership and begin to integrate the change into their lives.

**Implementation** — People transform ideas into action. Edmondson compares it to putting the icing on newly assembled layers of a cake.

**Adoption** — By the time the change reaches this stage, it’s “running like a well-oiled machine.” What at first seemed like monumental change is now familiar. Changes still are made at this stage, mostly in the form of refinements or continuous process improvement.

Where is UCU in the change process? Comments Gene Caresia, “The major focus of our efforts right now is on the first two steps — awareness and acceptance. Employees certainly had to shift gears when we consolidated all the division entities into one giant UtiliCorp. At that time there were a lot of structural changes, organizational changes and job changes, as

well as some job loss. The changes we're experiencing now include making all of the processes that cut across the old former division structure consistent: finance system, customer service processing, materials management process, and so on."

For the change management team, he says, this means "doing a lot of communication, a lot of stakeholder assessment — which entails working closely with those most directly impacted by the change — and then preparing to initiate training activities along the way."

Caresia anticipates that the greatest impact of Project BTU will be on "average, day-to-day workers," who can expect new technologies, work processes or consolidations of activity to define their roles. For example, "We're going to consolidate our call center operations to two or three locations. Calls from all our territories will be taken at those call centers. So those people will certainly undergo a change." A call center in Raytown, Mo., for instance, might take calls not only from Missouri, but from three or four other states as well. Individuals handling those calls "will have to be knowledgeable of the work rules in those states, the commission rules and regulations that affect those states. And of course, we will provide the technology, the training and the materials to make that possible."

Besides managing the overt changes in work routine, employees are certain to encounter the emotional aspect of dealing with new and unfamiliar circumstances. Adrienne Edmondson offers advice for handling change on an emotional level:

- Keep an open mind.

- Don't react to rumors, and don't spread them.

- If you have a question, ask it, even if it is controversial.

- Don't get caught up in a whirlwind. Edmondson explains that "some people are very good at getting people stirred up in the workplace. You can still be a team member and not get caught up in that."

- Learn flexibility.

- Find avenues outside the workplace that help to release anxiety. "Life is filled with ups and downs, and the quicker you realize that the work environment is part of that, the better your survival in the work environment will be."

She adds, "The biggest problem with change — and it just comes back to our nature — is the fear of the unknown. We don't know what it's going to do to us, what it's going to bring us, what kind of lifestyle, work style or new environment it will create for us. So if we can do these things to build awareness and acceptance, and go through all the necessary steps for effective change, we can take away the fear factor."

Realize, however, that successful completion of the five stages of change doesn't mean the challenge is over. "Change is constant," Edmondson reminds us. "It's the only sure thing."

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