

Psychology of Change in the Hybrid Workplace

5 ways you can use psychological and personality insights to help people manage uncertainty and successfully implement change



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What do you think of when you think of the word change?

Personal growth?

Remote working?

Organizational shifts?

For many people, change can be exciting. When you talk about changing habits for the better, or changing the paintings on your walls, change often stems from inspiration and feels like a breath of fresh air.

Or looking forward to the change of seasons—when winter’s cold forces have become too much, we look forward to warmer weather, and all the flora showing their colors.

However, in the workplace, change doesn’t always inspire the same positive feelings.

Organizational change makes a lot of employees groan. And many times, employees fear the worst: restructuring and layoffs. If this is a common experience for employees regarding change, it’s no wonder that companies’ change initiatives aren’t met with enthusiasm.

But organizational change doesn’t have to feel that way. With a little insight into psychology and personality differences, you can give people everything they need to feel empowered during times of change.

That means happier employees, and a better chance of implementing the change successfully.

“ The only constant in life is change

Heraclitus, Greek philosopher

Change, uncertainty, and the hybrid workplace

Change is defined as difference or making something different, something new and interesting, or passing from one state or form to another.

In the world of work, there are many external factors that drive change within the organization. A few of these include:

- New technology.
- Economics.
- Social movements.
- The environment.

The global COVID-19 pandemic is of course another example of an external factor creating change in the workplace.

While pandemics probably wouldn't have made the shortlist of external factors causing change prior to 2020, it has brought about major changes to the way we work. And many of these changes, like hybrid working and the flexibility that technology allows for many employees and jobs, are likely to stay with us moving forward.

There are also internal factors that cause changes within an organization. A few of those include:

- Leadership joining or leaving.
- Gain or loss of financial backing.
- Mergers and acquisitions.

Whether the changes occur due to internal or external factors often doesn't matter. To most of the workforce, those changes aren't under their control.

And that's where uncertainty and fear run hand-in-hand with change.

Uncertainty means feeling doubt. It means not definite or not decided. In other words, uncertainty means things could change.

Part of our negative reactions to change at work comes from what psychologists call the **negativity bias**.

“In many aspects of our lives, people show a negativity bias. We pay more attention to, and put more weight on, the negative aspects of a situation than the positive aspects,” says John Hackston, chartered psychologist and Head of Thought Leadership at The Myers-Briggs Company.

“Negativity bias is often seen, for example, in making decisions about people. In forming a first impression about someone, anything about them that strikes us as negative or odd makes much more of an impression than anything positive. In research studies, when people were presented with a range of both positive and negative information about an individual, the negative information influenced the final impression much more than the positive information.

“The negativity bias can affect how we interpret organizational change. Any change in the workplace is likely to have a mixture of positive and negative consequences, but the negativity bias can lead us to focus on the downsides and ignore the advantages. This effect is often seen in change surveys and climate surveys, where dissatisfied employees are more likely to provide comments, and where [the most negative comments are the longest and most detailed](#). Unfortunately, the negativity bias may make cultural change in an organization particularly difficult to achieve.

“In addition, many times in organizations people aren’t getting the information they need to process the change in the way that feels most comfortable for them. And this is where knowing about personality differences paired with basic psychology comes in handy.”

When it comes to personality differences, people have different ways of taking in information, making decisions, getting energized, and organizing their worlds.

They also have different levels of self-awareness and different interpersonal needs when it comes to social needs: the need for inclusion or involvement, control or influence, and one-on-one connections. When all these differences are considered, it makes sense that people’s wants and needs aren’t all the same in terms of finding out about, internalizing, and responding to change.

And if leaders aren’t aware of these personality differences, they’re likely to present information about change in a particular way. Typically, they’ll present information in the way they like to receive it. This leaves anyone who doesn’t have the same personality preferences and needs as the leader feeling left out. Which means they’re likely not as engaged with the change.

Ready to learn more about how you can use psychology and personality insights to best manage change for your people? Here are five factors to focus on. They’ll help your people manage the uncertainty associated with change, be in the best place to receive new information regarding changes, and be excited about changes instead of dreading the unknown.

1. Inspire change through ownership

As mentioned earlier, personal change often feels invigorating while organizational change doesn't. Why aren't people as excited about organizational changes as they are about redecorating or starting a new physical health journey?

It's partly because of the positions that people are in when the change occurs.

Those in leadership positions within organizations are often the decision makers when it comes to change. They've reviewed the problems, discussed the available options, and chosen what they think is the best solution.

For decision-makers in the organization, the change is intentional. It's a conscious, considered decision that solves the problem at hand. Additionally, for leaders, that change provides opportunities—such as reducing costs, reorganizing the team to work together in a more effective way, focusing on a new revenue stream, and more.

However, for many employees, these exact same changes are imposed changes.

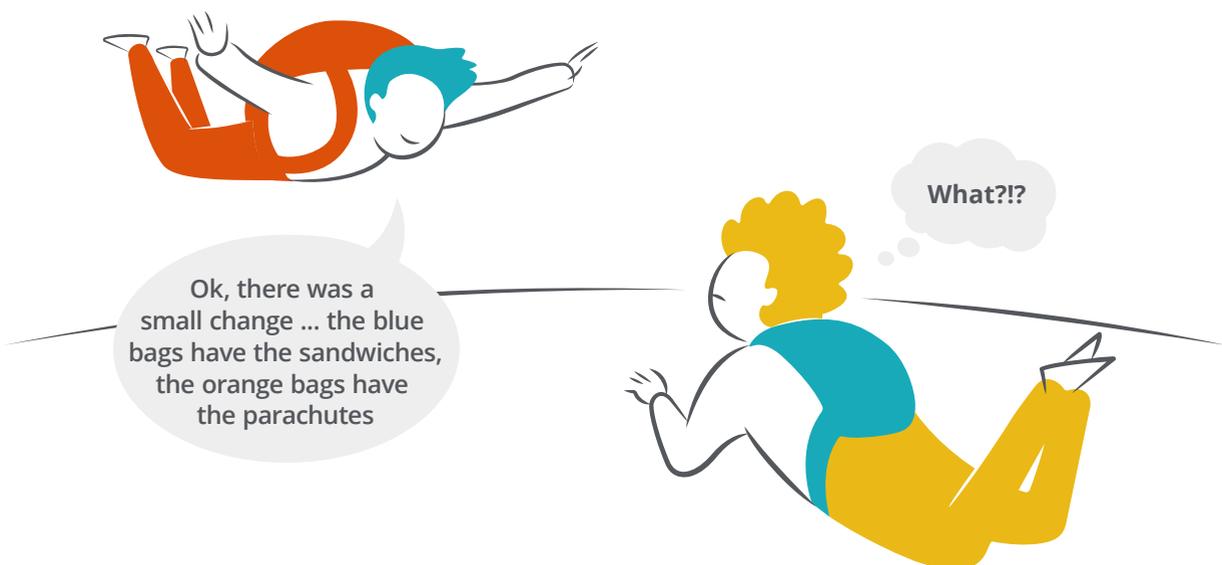
Not only have the employees often not been involved in the problem review, discussing options, and choosing solutions, they may not have even known these issues were being discussed in the first place! In many organizations, changes are announced after a decision has been reached by leadership. For the employees, the changes may seem sudden or abrupt.

In addition, while these changes may solve larger, company-wide problems, the changes can disrupt employees' routines or procedures. This creates new problems for lower-level employees. Now managers and their reports are left scrambling to figure out how these changes will affect their work, in addition to processing what the changes mean at the higher, company-wide level. This all happens at the same time.

The same managers may also start receiving questions from their direct reports that they don't have the answers to yet.

And—let's be honest—most people don't like being told what to do.

But **ownership influences our response to change.**



A change for one person that seems minor could seem devastating to another person.

When change is imposed, it can lead to people feeling demotivated, resistant, and resentful. However, as with personal change, when the change is intentionally made and people understand the purpose of it and feel involved in the decision, then people feel motivated, inspired, and committed.

Organizations can't be run completely democratically. But when it comes to organizational change, make sure you focus on transparency. In many instances, you can give your people information early enough to feel like they are part of the intentional change process.

Consider the current changes many companies are dealing with in returning to the office and working a hybrid or remote schedule. Let's say that an organization's leadership sends out an email saying that, by a certain date, all employees must be back in the office at least two days a week unless given special permission from their managers.

This feels like imposed change to employees. They weren't aware of it ahead of time and they're simply being told what change is going to happen.

However, imagine instead that the organization's leadership team sent out an email saying they were currently evaluating the return to the office, and would like to hear about hybrid working preferences from their employees through a survey. Anyone with concerns was encouraged to talk to their manager about how the working situation affects them and their work.

Let's imagine there was then a follow-up email from the leadership team. It said that, based on feedback, i) the office will reopen, and ii) they're encouraging people to coordinate across departments and work in the office at least two days a week.

In this example, the change now feels like a discussion rather than an imposition. Employees feel their input is being heard, and no matter the results, they're more likely to be engaged and responsive to the change because they were involved in the process. It doesn't feel as forced.

Most people want a genuine opportunity to have some ownership in what's going on.

Early, clear, and inclusive communication efforts as the change begins can give your people that ownership.

2. Understand how change impacts different people

Change impacts people differently. And some of those differences can be attributed to differences in personality.

For example, some people are fine with change. In fact, they prefer more flexibility when it comes to "best laid plans". Others prefer not to change the plan once it's been put in place. In the webinar [How to adapt to constant change—especially in the workplace](#), John Hackston talks about another personality difference related to change: survivor guilt after layoffs.

In The Myers-Briggs Company's 2020 research, we asked participants the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "I feel guilty that I still have a job, when others have been laid off or furloughed."

In total, 31% of people agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

However, if you look at the responses by personality type, there's a significant difference between those with an [MBTI](#)[®] preference for Thinking (who make decisions based on logic and data) and those with an MBTI preference for Feeling (who make decisions based on values and how those decisions will affect people).

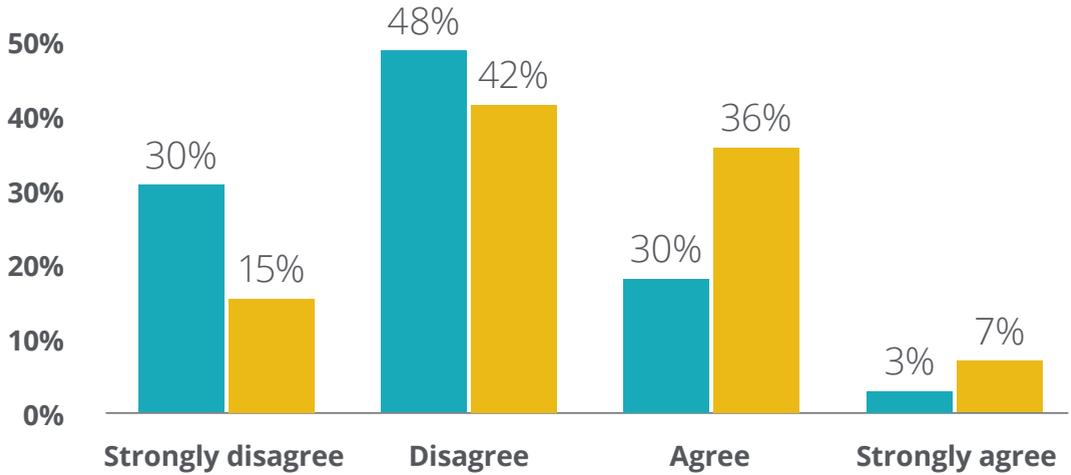
Only 21% of those with a Thinking preference agreed with the statement about survivor guilt after a layoff. 43% of those with a Feeling preference agreed with it.

Thinking Preference

21%

Feeling Preference

43%



*Graph of respondents who were asked to respond with the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "I feel guilty that I still have a job, when others have been laid off or furloughed."
Research by The Myers-Briggs Company, 2020.*

"The people with a Feeling preference were much more likely to feel survivor guilt for still having a job. And there are several reasons why this personality difference is very important," says Hackston.

"If you look at the data, managers and especially high-level executives are far more likely to have a Thinking than a Feeling personality preference and so they may be less prone to survivor guilt themselves. They'll take it less seriously. They may, for example, be congratulating people on still having a job, but that's likely just to add to the guilty feelings that others may have.

"And from our research, those that experience higher survivor guilt were also more likely to experience higher stress, to find it more difficult to concentrate, and find it more difficult to remain focused. And those last two especially relate to performance."

"This isn't just about being nice to people. It's about using psychological and personality insight to affect performance and the bottom line as well."

Another psychological insight into how change affects people comes from their personality preference for Judging and Perceiving.

According to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® framework, when it comes to how people organize their outer worlds there are two groups. People who prefer to organize their world in a more structured, timely way are said to have a preference for Judging. They're often stressed by disorganized people or organizations, and last-minute rushing.

On the other side, those who prefer Perceiving prefer to keep their plans more open and flexible. They're stressed by inflexibility (either from people or organizations) and don't want to have to make decisions before they need to.

Most Western cultures (and especially in business and academia) favor and reward behaviors associated with Judging preferences: being planful, sticking to an agenda, and making decisions quickly to be able to move forward.

You might think that in this case, those who prefer Perceiving would always be in favor of change and those who prefer Judging would be more stressed by change. But it's more nuanced than that.

Let's take the hybrid workplace and returning to the office as an example.

Employees with preferences for Judging dislike last-minute rushing and prefer organization and structure. In the current hybrid workplace, they're likely to be stressed by:

- Unexpected changes in routine.
- No separation of work from home.
- Other hybrid coworkers being too flexible.
- People not following government or organizational rules or guidance.

On the other side, employees who prefer Perceiving are stressed by inflexibility and making decisions before they need to. In the current hybrid work situation where many companies are returning to the office, these employees are likely to be stressed by:

- The return of restrictions on time and flexibility.
- Lack of variety and spontaneity if working virtually.
- Difficulty of being playful or light-hearted with colleagues who are working remotely.
- Enforcement of now-irrelevant processes.

As you can see by the above, employees with each of the personality preferences are likely to find the changes regarding hybrid work and returning to the office stressful, but in different ways.

What's important for HR practitioners to know is where your leadership team falls in terms of these personality differences.

From our research, as people get higher into leadership positions in the organization, they're more likely to have a Judging personality type. And unless they've learned about personality type differences, they're likely to do things the way they feel most comfortable. **They have an unconscious bias towards their own personality preferences.**

But with training in personality differences, leaders gain self-awareness and greater awareness of others, and can ask themselves whether the decisions they're making are taking all personality types into account—or just their own.

What's important for people managers to know is where their teams fall in terms of personality differences. Even knowing who on your team prefers Judging and who prefers Perceiving can go a long way to better understanding your employees, but also reducing unconscious bias in decisions that affect your team.

For example, if you as a manager prefer Judging but most of your team prefers Perceiving, you may feel stressed by the flexibility that hybrid working offers. You might ask your team members to work 9–5 and be online when you're online. For you, that feels comforting and doesn't cause any stress.

But for a team that prefers Perceiving, what's comfortable to you feels constricting and causes stress for them. They do their best work when they can have flexible hours—maybe starting early or working late—and the guidelines for hours that you assumed would be helpful are actually causing more stress for your employees.

If you're curious about how to combat unconscious bias when it comes to personality type and want to take a deeper dive into how different people respond to change, take a look at the **MBTI Essentials + Change Management virtual workshop.**

3. Give people their missing puzzle pieces

Following on from the above, this next step is a part II when it comes to change and personality type. Now that you're aware of how change affects people with different personality types, it's essential to make sure people have what they need to best handle the change.

And, keeping unconscious bias in mind, **remember that what you (as an HR leader or manager) assume people need to successfully implement the change might be different from what they *actually* need.**

Let's take a slightly different view of personality, this time through the lens of the FIRO-B® psychometric assessment and interpersonal needs. [FIRO-B](#) stands for Fundamental Interpersonal Relation Orientation Behavior® and was originally created for use with high-stress naval warship teams to help them work together most effectively. Scores in each of these areas not only objectively measure interpersonal needs, but also provide key insights into behaviors and motivations.

In the FIRO-B personality framework, everyone has three interpersonal needs. They are **Inclusion, Control, and Affection.**

(Note: the FIRO Business assessment works in exactly the same way but with different terminology that's more appropriate for the workplace. Its three need areas are Involvement, Influence, and Connection. But, for the purposes of this paper, we'll use the FIRO-B terminology).

So, the FIRO-B model looks at the following:

1. Wanted Inclusion
2. Expressed Inclusion
3. Wanted Control
4. Expressed Control
5. Wanted Affection
6. Expressed Affection

For each of the six interpersonal need areas listed above, people can score low, medium, or high.

We'll start with the interpersonal need for Inclusion. This is how an individual relates to a group—especially useful in hybrid working environments.

Wanted Inclusion is how much an individual wants to feel included by others in the group.

Expressed Inclusion is how much that individual works to make sure others in the group feel included.

“When we look at the scores on the FIRO tool, they’re at the intersection of selectivity and frequency,” says Marta Koonz, PhD Archetypal Psychologist and Sr. Consultant at The Myers-Briggs Company. “High Wanted Inclusion is about high frequency, low selectivity. I want to be included most of the time, by most of the people.”

Leaders with high Wanted Inclusion

Here’s an example of a leader with high Wanted Inclusion in a hybrid workplace:

“In the workplace, high Wanted Inclusion can feel to others like micromanagement. This leader wants to be included in things, but when working virtually or in a hybrid workplace, they don’t usually have a chance to drop by people’s desks or check-in with people around the table. For employees of managers with high Wanted Inclusion, it could feel like, ‘...the boss is calling AGAIN? Why can’t they just let me do my job?’ But the manager with this score is only doing this because they want to feel included in the group or even sub-group. In this case, the manager isn’t trying to run any meetings or control the situation, but rather is making sure they’re included.”

This situation could work well when the employees under this manager have high Expressed Inclusion scores. Expressed Inclusion is how much someone makes sure that other members are part of the group (not how much they themselves want to be part of the group). If the manager has high Wanted Inclusion and the team has high Expressed Inclusion, both groups are getting their interpersonal needs met by the other.

Remember, though, that needs don’t always match up as easily as this.

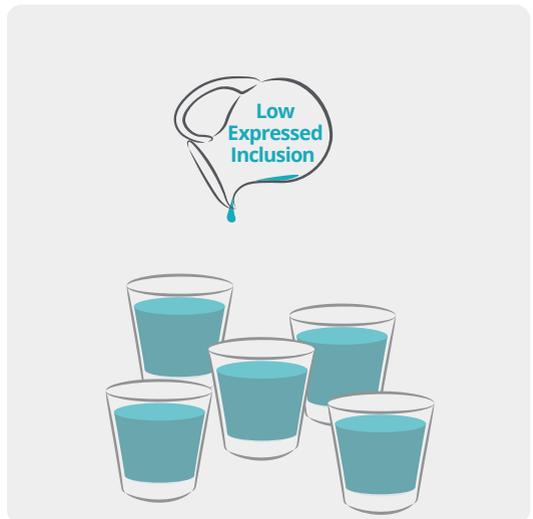
If the rest of the group has a low Expressed Inclusion score, they’re not likely to reach out often to the manager and invite them to be included. On top of that, the fact that some of the team is working remotely means that it’s even harder for a manager with high Wanted Inclusion to connect with that part of the team unless they schedule a meeting ahead of time. In addition to this behavior being perceived by others as micromanaging, it can also erode trust between the team and the manager.

If the team members don't know that their boss has interpersonal needs for high Wanted Inclusion, they're likely to assume (negativity bias) that the behavior stems from the boss not being confident in team members' abilities. They might think the boss doesn't trust them to handle the problem themselves.

Another way to think about interpersonal needs



Individuals with a high Wanted need (for Inclusion, Control or Affection) can be thought of as having a larger glass to fill. It takes more behaviors directed towards them before that person's glass is full (i.e. their interpersonal need is met). On the other hand, a low Wanted score is like a smaller glass. It takes less of those same behaviors from others to fill the glass, and similarly people with a low Wanted need don't need much before that interpersonal need is met.



Having a high Expressed need (for Inclusion, Control or Affection) is similar to having a large pitcher to pour from. Conversely, having a low Expressed need (for Inclusion, Control or Affection) is like having a much smaller pitcher to pour from.

If, on the other hand, this team was aware and knowledgeable about the psychology of interpersonal needs, they wouldn't be as quick to assume a negative motivation behind the boss's actions.

Additionally, the boss would better understand the behaviors and interpersonal needs of the team. The boss would also know that this difference in Inclusion scores is a possible point of contention between themselves and the team. Perhaps they'd be more thoughtful before jumping into all the team's meetings.

Leaders with low Wanted Inclusion

Let's look at another example—a leader with low scores for Wanted Inclusion. What does behavior look like in this case?

"Leaders with low Wanted Inclusion may find that working from home means it can be all too easy to stay disconnected from others. Too much disconnect can have a negative impact by reducing peer feedback opportunities, among other things. Intentional scheduling of regular connection points with team members, colleagues and other leaders would be essential for maintaining a leadership edge for leaders with these interpersonal needs," says Koonz.

"This leader is fine doing their own thing—they don't feel the need to be invited to things. They're fine working on their own projects, not connecting with people, etc. Now there may be a few select people they connect with but remember frequency and selectivity. A leader with low Wanted Inclusion will have a low frequency and high selectivity for group interactions."

How can awareness of interpersonal needs be helpful when it comes to change management and coming back to the office?

"I myself have low Wanted Inclusion," adds Koonz, "and also have an MBTI® preference for Introversion. And these parts of my personality flavor each other. I know that working remotely works really well for me, and I'd struggle if I had to go into an office every day.

"People with low Wanted Inclusion may find that the whole working from home arrangement works really well for them, and they may be reluctant to want to go back to the office. Those with high Wanted Inclusion may be the opposite—they're missing the face-to-face interaction and want to have that interpersonal need for Inclusion filled."

Change, personality preferences, and interpersonal needs

The fascinating thing about these different ways of measuring and objectively understanding personality and behavior differences with both the MBTI and the FIRO tools is that none of these scores are bad. They're simply illustrating different ways of people expressing their unique personalities.

When it comes to change, understanding what people need to help them understand, absorb, and successfully implement that change is critical to success. It's about whether someone needs more concrete data and reasoning behind why the change was implemented (MBTI preference for Sensing and Thinking) or whether they need to understand how the change affects and relates to the big picture within the organization (MBTI preference for Intuition).

Perhaps a group of people needs time alone, by themselves, to process what the change means to them and their jobs (MBTI preference for Introversion, FIRO low Wanted Inclusion). Or perhaps they want to get together to talk through the parts of the change (MBTI preference for Extraversion and/or FIRO high Wanted or Expressed need for Inclusion).

As a leader or HR manager, you need to make sure that, when it comes to change, the type of information, the communication channels, and how it's presented are all available for different personality types to get that information in their preferred way.

You also need to make sure that your own unconscious bias for any of the above isn't running rampant in your actions.

For leaders and managers, understanding how those on your team are similar or different to you will make you a better manager.

And gaining self-awareness through better understanding of personality will make you a better leader.

Knowing how people with different personalities best respond to change will help your team and organization better manage change and implement change initiatives with a higher success rate.

4. Help foster a growth mindset for individuals and within company culture

What is a growth mindset and why is it important to change management?

“Fostering a growth mindset is fundamental to success, both for individuals and organizations. If you believe your abilities are innate and can’t be significantly improved, your mindset may be described as a fixed mindset,” says Sherrie Haynie, Director of US Professional Services at The Myers-Briggs Company.

“In her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, psychologist Carol Dweck builds on this idea with her concept of the growth mindset. A growth mindset is when you believe you can acquire almost any ability with enough work. With a growth mindset, you’re more likely to roll up your sleeves and push forward in the face of challenges and setbacks and achieve success.”

For individuals, **self-awareness offers a benchmark for a growth mindset in personal development**. You can’t grow without understanding where you are starting from. This is why many organizations establish KPIs.

But it’s also important to recognize that personality preferences influence our behavior. They don’t dictate them.

The more aware you are of your behaviors in a certain situation, and the more you know about your potential motivations or reasons for those behaviors, the more empowered you are to alter that behavior. And, many times, altering that behavior leads to better relationships, better teamwork, and greater success overall as you’re choosing the best option for that circumstance.

If you want an example of growth mindset and MBTI type, check [Why Knowing Your Personality Type is Critical to a Growth Mindset](#) in Forbes.

Growth mindset in organizations

So, what’s in it for organizations?

“Growth mindset is also important to company culture when embracing challenges and changes faced by the company and its leaders,” says Haynie.

When faced with a challenge that requires a change, companies with a growth mindset face the challenge head-on. They do this with an excitement for learning something new and meeting the challenge. Those without a growth mindset dread (and then postpone) addressing the challenge until they're behind the curve or, worse, the challenge has become insurmountable.

[Satya Nadella popularized the growth mindset in Microsoft's workplace culture](#) in 2014 when he became CEO. He has since credited the company's performance to its focus on this cultural change. Nadella's challenge, which required change, was Microsoft's response to the world's movement toward a mobile-first, cloud-first environment.

Part of the reason that many are resistant to change (especially organizational change) is the fear of failure.

What happens if you fail personally when it comes to implementing a change? The consequences are often minimal. But with organizational change, many company cultures send a different message. Many punish failure, and sometimes harshly. The problem with this is that, most of the time, innovation doesn't happen without failure. And innovation at nearly every level requires uncertainty and change.

Fear of failure can prevent a growth mindset.

Some companies have ingrained the growth mindset so deeply into their culture that they embrace failure. Astro Teller, director at Alphabet's "moonshot" R&D division, engineered a culture where it's OK to come up with terrible ideas and voice them out loud. In [Teller's 2016 TED talk](#), he talks about how the team kills most of these "moonshot" ideas, but also how the few that do survive sometimes go on to become ground-breaking projects—like self-driving cars.

When people start to work on projects, especially ones that require a lot of effort and time, they often become psychologically close to those projects. They connect some of their professional worth in the success of those projects. When projects fail, or when change initiatives require that certain work stops, it can be taken personally. People can then associate that failure with their own professional (and sometimes personal) value.

With a growth mindset, though, people are more aware that failures happen and that those failures don't reflect badly on the individual. And when people aren't afraid of the repercussions of failure, change initiatives requiring some trial and error are likely to go much more smoothly.

The amount of psychological safety is higher within teams where people aren't afraid to fail. And that sort of trust is gold dust for the bottom line.

5. HR and leaders—don't begin with change

Speaking of trust, the last key when it comes to using psychology to better your change management initiatives revolves around trust and transparency. As mentioned earlier with change management and ownership, you're a lot more likely to get buy-in from your employees if they feel that the change isn't being forced on them. It works better when they have some ownership in the change process.

So how can you snare the psychological advantage of ownership when it comes to change?

Share information around the change much earlier than you think you need to. Not only will sharing more information build trust and transparency for your leadership team, but it will give those listening the chance to feel as if they're part of the change journey.

In other words, don't begin by announcing what the change is going to be.

Begin by sharing the obstacles that need solutions.

While you likely won't give everyone all the information that senior leaders have, by sharing information early you're bringing people into the change management process earlier. You're also giving them time to consider how potential changes may affect how they and their own teams work.

In addition, there will be people in your organization who are excited by change initiatives and will be early adopters of change. You can leverage those people to your advantage by sharing information with them and enabling them to become proponents of your change initiatives. Their buy-in and support will positively affect others within the organization, which means your change initiatives have a higher likelihood of success.

Remember also that change is personal—and **keep personality in mind when you're communicating the information around the change**. For example:

- Are you sharing the information in a public space where people can form ideas out loud (favored by Extraversion types)?
- Do you also have a place where people who form questions after thinking about what you've said can submit and get written answers (favored by Introversion types)?

- Are you sharing information that's detailed and sequential (favored by Sensing types) as well as the big-picture view and how these challenges connect internally and externally (favored by Intuition types)?
- Are you including decision-making parameters that address questions around concrete data and logic (favored by Thinking types) as well as how these changes reflect your organization's values and affect people like employees and customers (favored by Feeling types)?

The bottom line is this: change is personal.

But change also occurs team-wide and organization-wide.

Understanding people's personality preferences and psychological needs can help. It can help you to give your employees or team members what they need to be in the best place possible, with the best mindset, when change is inevitable.

About The Myers-Briggs Company

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