



**AGILE CHANGE**  
*management limited*

# Emotional Resilience for Change Managers and Change Agents

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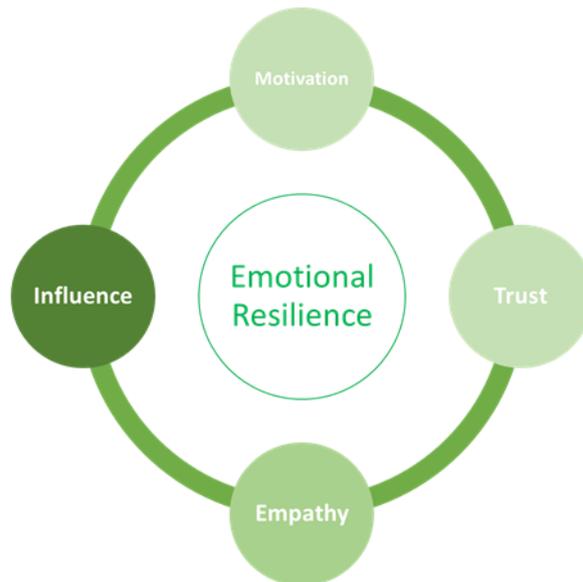
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## Executive Summary

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Change is not easy. It threatens established patterns of behaviour that we are comfortable with. Even if we welcome the change on an intellectual level because we think that what is currently happening is not right, breaking our habits, unlearning what we do today and building new routines is stressful. Change cannot happen in isolation from other people, it is a team sport, which means we need to manage our own emotions about the change whilst being affected by the emotions of everyone else caught up in the change.



A common thread running through all those successfully coping with change is emotional resilience. This resilience includes an ability to keep going despite setbacks, overcome doubts and keep trying however many things go wrong. Research shows that emotional resilience can be developed. This paper explains a broad range of tricks and techniques that I use to develop my emotional resilience and cope with the changes that I am leading and that I am affected by. I hope you find it useful.

## Change triggers stress

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Recently I have been supporting a very challenging group through a complex change that has significant impact on each of those involved. This has given me plenty of opportunity to consider what helps me to cope and talking with others has given me other coping mechanisms.

I don't think the group I am writing about are unusual. I have been leading transformational change in organisations for over twenty years, which is plenty long enough to see the patterns that emerge when change is announced. These include:

- Aggression, expressed verbally in meetings, via emails and phone calls
- Lots of criticism of colleagues, managers and 'them' i.e. whoever is perceived as the architects of the change
- Threats of resignation and/or refusal to undertake certain tasks

- Win-lose situations where one person only feels they are getting ahead if they marginalise or disagree with the contributions of everyone else.

## Why we need emotional resilience

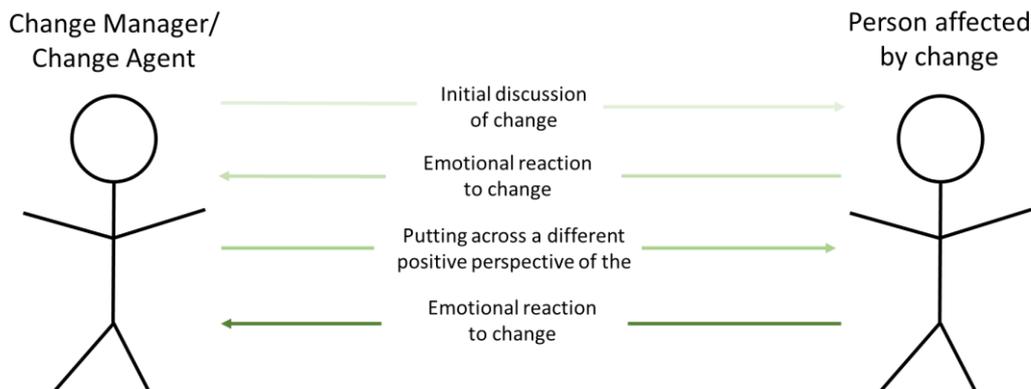
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Emotional resilience is a core skill that underpins all the communication we do as Change Agents and Change Managers.

Change triggers emotional responses and as the list above suggests, these are often negative responses created of fear about the impact of change. We need emotional resilience because as the person explaining change to others, we are the recipients of their emotional reactions to the change.

We also need emotional resilience because as we continue to work with those impacted by change we have to put across a different perspective to the negative views that they might have. This means we must be ready for the emotional reaction generated by this different perspective. In my experience, it takes courage to put across the advantages of change because you have to be ready to be shouted down and still keep going!

Emotional resilience underpins the skills needed to help ourselves and others make the transition to new ways of working. Change triggers emotional responses and as the list above suggests, these can often be negative responses bourne of fear about the impact of change.



Last week I had had 3 straight days of 'change agenting' where I had been helping the group to move slowly towards the acceptance of their new operating model and their individual parts to play in making it a reality. On the Thursday morning I woke up so overcome with stress/anxiety about dealing with them for another day that my resilience was tested to the full. I used a mixture of the techniques listed below to help me to cope. Hopefully these will give you some ideas for developing your own coping mechanisms.



## Techniques for developing emotional resilience

### Doing some work that I enjoy

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I love communicating whether through writing articles or presenting to others. I am a typical extrovert so the way I make sense of the world is to try and explain it to others. I also really enjoy creating new pieces of work, developing new ideas and creating something original. What I really don't enjoy is finishing off the last few details or going back and making corrections.

A quick fix for my own motivation is to set aside a bit of time to create something new, which also ties back to my achievement motivation. This resets my ability to cope with the reactions of others, because I feel I have achieved something I can be proud of or that fixes a problem I was worried about. My satisfaction with my own performance allows me to re-engage with those I need to support emotionally because I feel confident in what I have done.

### Do the quickest, most valuable thing first

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I am achievement motivated, so I like to tick things off against my To Do list to reassure myself that I am making progress. I get great satisfaction from finishing a piece of work as it is a clear measure of my productivity.

When I am stressed, I need the positive reinforcement that getting stuff done provides. However, just doing something/anything isn't enough, it has to be something valuable. That means it is something that clears up a problem or gives me something useful to share with others. To destress, I want this fix as soon as possible so I look for anything that will only take 30 minutes to sort out. This gives me an opportunity to build my own confidence because I know I have done something useful, so whatever emotional reactions I now need to deal with, at least something useful got done as well.

### Compartmentalising

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Sometimes it helps to remember that the emotions coming my way are not mine. The reactions are not necessarily about the change itself, so I shouldn't assume every aspect of the change is wrong. The emotion is an expression of the impact of the change on the person affected. It's their battle, not mine so whilst I can empathise and appreciate why they might be feeling the way they feel, I also need to remind myself their views are not my views.

I find it helps to visualise packing their reaction up into a box, and putting it next to other boxes representing others impacted by the change. It helps to demonstrate that the reaction that is causing me so much stress at the moment is just one of many, and I can return and open that box when I feel stronger and more able to cope.

### Contextualising

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Before I engage in any work I like to put things in context and think about how one change fits with other changes. Seeing the connections between one piece of work and another inspires me because

I can see a broader range of benefits than for just the individual piece of work and I can see how the change contributes to a bigger vision, which makes it more valuable.

It's no surprise that when I am stressed this is exactly what I try to do. Last week when everything was getting on top of me, I could hear myself saying under my breath 'this is not the only initiative, look at the bigger picture'. Just by seeing the change that was causing all the stress as part of a wider network of initiatives, it helped to reduce the pressure.

### **Talk to a trusted adviser**

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Everyone needs to vent but as a Change Agent/Change Manager it is important that I always appear positive about the change I am involved in. It is not my job to sell the benefits of the change (that should be the Sponsors job) but I shouldn't spread negativity, pessimism or disenchantment. I should always look for the opportunities that change will bring, the potential benefits and improvements that can be realised from working in new ways. After all, as humans we are programmed to look for the negatives first so our stakeholders don't need us to add our negativity to theirs.

Sometimes though we are negative about the change. A 3 hour meeting when everyone discussed the problems that the change was causing or a workshop where the participants shared examples of how the current systems and processes are much better can wear anyone down.

But you cannot drop your guard with your stakeholders so you must find a sympathetic ear away from the change. It probably goes without saying that they need to be discrete and maintain your confidentiality at all times. Even better if they gave a good sense of humour and can make you laugh once you have had a good moan.

### **Meet up with others**

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Pressure comes from feeling I am the only one who can solve me issues. Sometimes the most important stress reliever is to hear someone else say that they have had similar experiences. Having a peer group of people who have similar responsibilities and can empathise with my situation can provide great reassurance. This reassurance builds my confidence and stops that internal voice that tells me that I am failing. This is different from having someone to vent your feelings with, because I think the resilience comes from knowing that others have faced similar resistance and have found a way forward.

### **Remind yourself of the why**

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Resilience is connected to motivation. For me, motivation comes from reminding myself about why the change is important, useful and relevant. I start with thinking about the benefits to the organisation - financial, strategic, regulatory. Then I look for associated benefits generated by the wider context of the change and how it fits with other things we are doing. I consider how working on this change positions my knowledge for the future: is this something that others are doing so I



am making sure I will not be left behind or is this change something totally new that is giving me an opportunity to be innovative?

If none of these motivations work, I look at who I am working with and think about the friendships I am building or the chance to learn new things from others I respect. I look at the circumstances e.g. is this work giving me some chances to work from home or do less travelling?

### **Set aside time for you**

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As a change agent, it is my job to share information, help stakeholders liaise and build relationships with each other and keep asking questions and listen to conversations so I know what is happening. All of this requires me to focus on the change agenda and the views and ideas of others. However, if I am to maintain this focus on others I need to balance it with time spent on developing my ideas, my point of view and my priorities. I don't think creating this balance means a 50/50 split of time and energy but it does mean putting some time aside (5-10%) to check in with myself.

### **About the author**

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I have been responsible for the successful delivery of effective change and for creating environments that support transformational change for over twenty years. I have an impressive track record of successful consulting assignments and I am an acknowledged thought leader in Change Management.

I am the Co-Chair of the Change Management Institute UK and a respected author of text books and articles on change, project and programme management. I am a talented communicator with a reputation for delivering complex information with humour and passion. I draw on my wealth of practical experience to illustrate concepts and to engage my audience in lively debates on advantages and disadvantages of each approach that I outline.

To access more resources about change management connect with Melanie on LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/melaniefranklin1/>