

## MANAGING THROUGH TRANSITIONS

Regardless of department, subject matter, or area of expertise, one of the most challenging parts of being a manager is handling the human side of the people we manage. We all bring our emotions, values, and past experiences with us to our jobs, and those things influence our reactions to workplace situations. This dynamic often increases in intensity as we navigate significant transitions in our work world. The odds are that you are dealing with one or more of the current transitions on campus, whether it is job mapping, physical relocation, or budget cuts.

What to expect:

### **Common Emotions**

It is often said that people don't fear change, they fear loss. That could be the loss of a job, a title, a supervisor, career opportunities, work schedules, etc. This fear often begets other emotions. Anxiety is probably the most common emotion during times of change. Living with uncertainty is not an easy task. Many employees become angry, a common reaction to the reminder that we are not fully in control of our circumstances. Another pair of common emotions during times of change is disbelief and sadness. These emotions are typical parts of the grief process, and significant transitions always involve leaving something behind.

### **Behavior**

We all utilize different coping strategies to deal with transitions and uncertainty. It is likely that you will see a range of behavior from your staff as you navigate changes. It is common for employees to become more vocal either in protest, to demand more information, or just to vent. Others may become more avoidant and isolate themselves choosing to focus on immediate tasks and block out the bigger picture.

### **Variability**

There are typically stages in our adjustment to changes such as denial, resistance, exploration, and acceptance. We rarely move through these stages in a linear fashion. So you may see an employee display a range of emotions within the same day or over a period of weeks. There is also variability between employees. Some employees may show little emotion in the early stages and demonstrate more intensity over time while others may do just the opposite.

Tips to handle:

### **Positive Attitude**

Managers set the tone as to how the work group will react to the stress and challenge of unwelcome change. Your presence, behavior, and attitude are critical elements in steering the group successfully through the transition. Make yourself regularly available and bring a positive attitude to help both you and your staff tackle the challenges.

### **Communication**

When employees are in a state of transition and anxiety, it is normal for them not to hear and take in everything you are telling them about what is going on. You cannot communicate enough and in too many ways and from too many sources about what is happening during times of difficult change. Employees who have useful information will feel less out of control and more empowered.

**Acknowledgement**

There is a common misconception that if you acknowledge that times are difficult or stressful that it will make things worse. The opposite is true. The more we normalize employee reactions, and let employees know that we understand they are affected by the changes, the more they will feel understood and cared for, and be able to function well. Remember to say thank you and acknowledge employees for their efforts. Recognition and encouragement goes a long way in challenging times.

**Permission**

Talk about how emotions can be more intense at times like this, and that we all need to be especially kind and patient with each other. Allow for others to spend more time connecting with each other about their experience. Be patient with employees who have intense reactions about what is happening, while maintaining limits for behaviors that cross a line of civility, respect, or danger. Whenever work demands allow, give everyone more flexibility to help them take care of themselves.

**Support**

Make sure you get the support you need to manage through these difficult times. It can be an exhausting task so be sure to find time to identify your own reactions and seek personal replenishment. CARE Services is staffed by licensed therapists who have additional expertise in organizational dynamics. They can provide consultation to managers about how to help with a particular individual or an entire workgroup. Managers can also refer employees for free and confidential help.