

VIDEO 2: THE KUBLER-ROSS MODEL

This is the second video in a series on the change process. In the first video, we saw that the change process consists of 5 steps and that success lies at the end of Step 5. If you get to that point you will be successful, every time.

We also saw that it's not only possible to move forward from one step to the next, it's also possible to get stuck on a step, and it's possible to move backwards to an earlier step. There are things that make it easier to move forward, such as understanding what the change process looks like and having high change fitness. And there are also things that contribute to getting stuck or moving backwards, such as skipping some of the tasks required in each step or skipping one or more steps altogether.

The Transtheoretical Model

The model we have been considering is called the Transtheoretical Model of Change and it was developed in the 1980's by 2 American researchers called Prochaska and DiClemente. Today, we are going to look at the Kubler-Ross Model and see how it relates to the Transtheoretical Model. But before we do, we need to make one more observation about the change process.

Load

Whenever we experience change, we are required to bear some kind of load. Sometimes the load relates to *learning* – we are required to develop new knowledge and skills that are required by a new situation. This often means we need training or mentoring to learn new things and develop mastery, usually within a given timeframe. This puts pressure on us to meet expectations and demonstrate our competency.

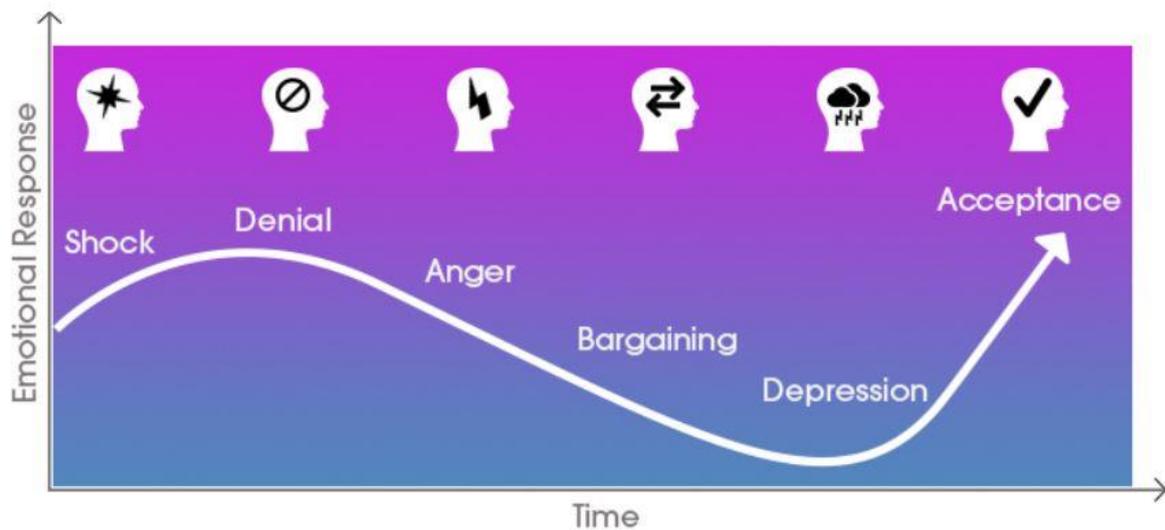
At other times, the load is mostly an *emotional* one. The change is such that we become emotionally exposed or vulnerable. This may have a positive connotation as in the case of falling in love where we open up to another person, or it may have a more negative connotation where we feel threatened by a change and left feeling anxious and fearful.

And there are other times when the load is mainly *psychological*. Change may challenge our sense of identity or our sense of meaning and purpose and we are left wondering who we really are, who are we important to, and what's it all about.

There's an important equation to note in relation to change - the bigger the load, the more difficult the change. Changes that require more learning, that bring out negative emotions, and that challenge us on a deep psychological level are more difficult than those requiring less learning, that bring out positive emotions, and don't call into question our sense of self and our worldviews.

With that in mind, let's look at the Kubler-Ross model.

The Kubler-Ross Model



There are various forms of this model, so you might be familiar with it in another form. The one shown on screen is found in the Change Management Body of Knowledge published by the Change Management Institute. It is also widely used in coaching and other business resources.

At the heart of the model is a curve that starts relatively low at the left, rises slightly before plunging to its lowest point, and then shows an upward trajectory on the right. The y axis is labelled Emotional Response and the x axis is labelled time. So, this is a model of an emotional response over time. The curve also has some words attached to different emotional responses that occur over time. These are: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

A Change Model?

This model is often referred to as a change model, but it is obvious that it doesn't refer to the process people go through to succeed at any kind of change. Instead, it refers to how people deal with an emotional load produced by a negative change they are dealing with. Like the change model we explored in the first video of this series, it describes a pattern in human behaviour. This is a pattern showing what is a normal human emotional response to a change that is unwanted, perceived to be negative, and in some way threatening.

Not every change carries an emotional load and for those ones that do, the emotional load is not always negative. For example, the change might be that you won the lottery, or received a promotion, or a fantastic job offer. A change like that is not likely bring up feelings of anger or depression. That would not be normal behaviour for such a situation.

Model of One Kind of Change

So, the Kubler-Ross model only applies to one kind of change – the kind that carries a strong and negative emotional load. Such change might carry other types of load as well. For example, a change

may involve a difficult learning process where it's hard to develop new skills and to understand new information. This often carries its own emotional load: you are shocked by how difficult it is, you get frustrated and angry about it, and maybe even get a little depressed.

But the Kubler-Ross model doesn't tell us much about how to succeed at change. It tells us what normal human behaviour is when we are forced to deal with a change that carries a strong emotional load, but that's about it. So, we need to be careful about how we use the Kubler-Ross model.

Not Expected

There is one other observation we need to make about the Kubler-Ross model. It begins with shock. This tells us something about the kind of change we're talking about here. The model tells us it's normal behaviour for us to be shocked when we encounter such a change. This indicates that it's change we did not expect. And the emotions that follow tell us not only didn't we expect it, but we don't like it.

As I prepare this presentation, the world is amid the COVID-19 crisis. None of us could possibly have anticipated how quickly normal life would change. Millions of people are out of work, state and national borders have closed, airlines are grounded, cruise ships are not permitted to dock, and we must all stay away from other people.

This is an extreme example of a change that carries a heavy emotional load. Everyone is shocked by what is happening and how it affects normal life. People can't see their families, they are afraid to touch door handles, they can't gather with friends at the club or go to a restaurant. There is a serious sense of loss and isolation. This is an unexpected, unwelcome, unplanned change that carries a heavy emotional load. And there are many people who are finding it difficult to cope and who are somewhere on Kubler-Ross's change curve.

So, we have seen that the Kubler-Ross is not a model of the change process, but how does it relate to the change process?

How the Model Relates to Change

There are 2 observations to make about this. An unexpected change doesn't give you any choice about moving from Step 1 (not even thinking about change) into step 2 (thinking about change). We are forced to start thinking about change because it has been forced upon us. People who were happily going to work a few months ago and now thinking about getting other jobs once this pandemic is over.

This means that a change we didn't choose causes us to think about changes we *will* choose to make going forward. The crisis has dragged us into Step 2 of the change process.

We saw in the last video that step 2 is about weighing up options, looking at possibilities, and dealing with how we feel about it all. It leads us towards making a commitment of some sort – either to move ahead with change and try something new, or to go back to what was our reality in the

past. We must accept something, or we will be stuck in the middle and unable to move on. We either accept change or accept our old reality.

In the current world crisis, perhaps many people long for their old reality. For some, this will not be an option and they will be forced to accept change, or get stuck, which is unhealthy in every respect. Others may be able to go back to life as it was, but at this point, no one can be sure.

Step 2 Work

What I am saying is that much of what Kubler-Ross talks about in her curve is emotional work that needs to be done in Step 2 of the change process. It may not only be emotional work – it may involve an educational and psychological load as well. But I think we should situate the Kubler-Ross model, for the most part, in Step 2 of the change process. That normal behaviour she describes leads to some form of acceptance – either acceptance of a new reality or, if it's even possible, the acceptance of a former reality.

We need to observe one more thing about change. It would be incorrect to assume that the only place where a decision for change is needed is at the end of Step 2. It certainly is needed there if we are to move into Step 3, but it is needed every time we feel like giving up and going home. The shock and denial and other emotions identified in the Kubler-Ross model can be found on any step of the change process. You can feel frustrated and depressed when preparing for change, or when you're dealing with failure and setbacks, or when it's taking so long and you're tired of it all. The emotional load of change can be felt anywhere along the journey. When that load is negative and difficult to bear, the Kubler-Ross model tells us that what we're feeling is normal. And that there is a road out. There is an upward facing arrow waiting for us, if we keep moving ahead.

High Emotional Load

So, what have we learnt about change? We have learnt that the Kubler-Ross model is not a model of the change process. On its own, it will not show you what to do to be successful at change. But it shows us what a normal pattern of behaviour looks like when the emotional load of change is high and painful. And it also shows us that there is a way through this process. This emotional load can be experienced at any step of the change process and it's one of the reasons why change is hard and many people don't succeed at it.

But by helping people understand the process that's going on, what is normal human behaviour, and there is a way through, you equip them for success. It may not reduce the emotional load, but it helps them understand what's going on and they have a language to position themselves on the journey.