Capability for Change

Use Neuroscience to Drive Change at Work

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E: admin@capabilityforchange.com **W:** www.capabilityforchange.com

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Introduction

Neuroscience is the scientific explanation of how our brains process information, take decisions and act. An appreciation of neuroscience enables us to understand the reasoning our brains apply to every situation. We can match our arguments to this reasoning, increasing the probability that what we ask of ourselves, and others will be actioned.

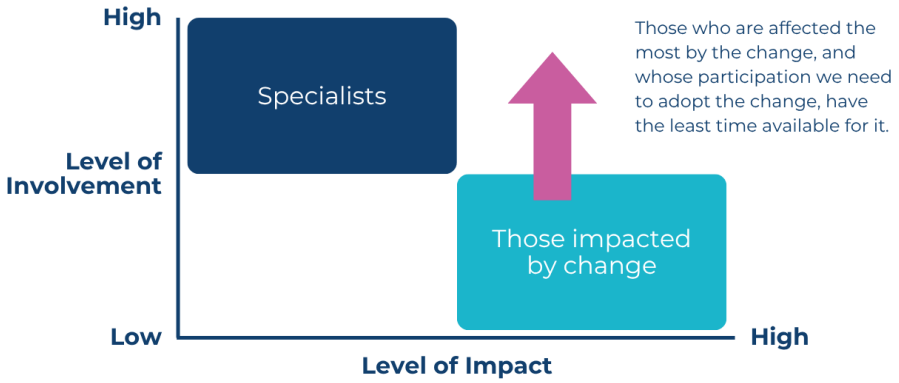
Neuroscience is an evolving practice, and every day we learn more about how our brains work and why we do the things we do. Research shows our brains are driven by a set of primary drivers, forces that trigger automatic responses.

In this paper, I explain what these primary drivers are, and describe how they can help us address our most frequently occurring problem in achieving organisational change, which is that there is so much change affecting so many people that we need share the work between all of us (even those who don't want to change).

We Have "an involvement gap"

Think of all the times you have said all the right things, talked to all the right people and still nothing happens. People tell you they agree with your points and they will be sharing the information with their teams – but they don't. They tell you they will definitely be attending your workshop - but they don't.

We have an involvement gap in organisational change. We have full time specialists, in roles including project and programme teams, product owners, product managers, change managers, business analysts, who are all creating the changes that are designed to achieve the organisational objectives. There are those who will have to work in new ways – but they already have full time jobs and can only give some discretionary time to making change happen.

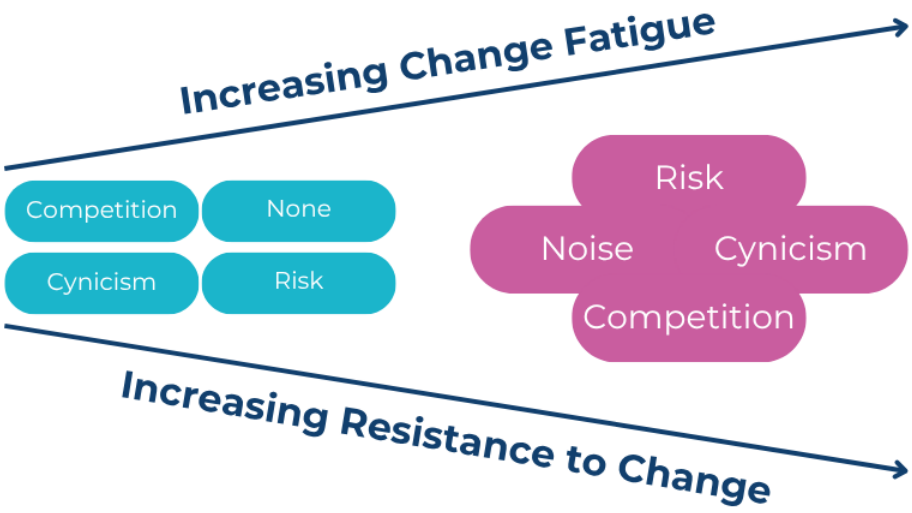


But….there is too much change for it to be achieved by only a small team of specialists. We need our stakeholders to act. We need them to be part of the resource pool for change. We need to mobilise all those affected by the change, generating their participation in creating, practising, and adopting new ways of working.

This is a big ask, because there are plenty of reasons why they don't want to get involved.

- Change is risky
- Too much noise, not enough being heard
- Increased cynicism
- Competition for the same resources

These factors taken together feed each other, strengthening the reasons for avoiding the change:



Change is Risky

We need people to abandon existing patterns of behaviour, well understood activities that have become routines or habits. We are asking them to take the risk of doing something new, that is unknown and has uncertain results.

This is risky because new means untried and untested, so we might be successful, but we might not. When we are unsuccessful, we experience the pain of getting things wrong, which makes us feel bad. This feeling is unpleasant and we naturally try to avoid it. We use phrases like change fatigue and resistance to change to describe the response to these risks.

Too Much Noise, Not Enough Being Heard

Greater levels of interconnectedness between changes result in more side effects and consequences upstream and downstream from the initial impact. This generates a high volume of peripheral stakeholders, who need to know about our changes, so they can assess the impact and adjust their work.

This increases the total volume of change communications that everyone receives, increasing the level of noise that prevents our messages being heard.

Increased Cynicism

In my experience, the level of cynicism about the importance of our change messages has increased. There are so many recent change initiatives that our stakeholders can point to as examples of changes that have not worked or that have not delivered their expected benefits. Gartner research in 2019 identified that organisations had undertaken 5 major firmwide changes in the previous 3 years and nearly 75% of them expected to increase the amount of change they would do in the next 3 years. Anecdotal evidence supports this, as the global thought leadership group I chair, the Continuous Change Community, regularly identifies the huge volumes of change taking place in their organisations as a cause of workplace stress.

With so much change not delivering the expected benefits, stakeholders have the evidence they need to question if our change is necessary, if it is practical, if it is really going to work.

As a result of this cynicism, our messages about the change are unlikely to be taken at face value. They cannot just be statements of the scope and content of the change, or reasoned arguments for why the change is needed. Instead, we need to create an emotional reaction, a real desire to want to achieve the change.

Competition for the Same Resources

There are so many changes taking place, those that we need to engage have plenty of other priorities to claim their time. This means there is a competitive element to our communications. By engaging my stakeholders, and getting them involved in my change, they are effectively deciding not to participate in other changes. To achieve their participation, my communications have to inspire their interest and their decision to get involved.

This is a big ask when we reflect on the current participation levels for all types of communication. Research from digital marketing shows that response rates to emails can be as low as 1% and as high as 25% - if you think that a quarter of your respondents opening a message from you is good!

When I am inviting people to workshops to help co-create change, even when I know people want to be involved, the top rate of attendance is 80% but can be as low as 40%. The explanation given for non-attendance is always “I had another meeting”.

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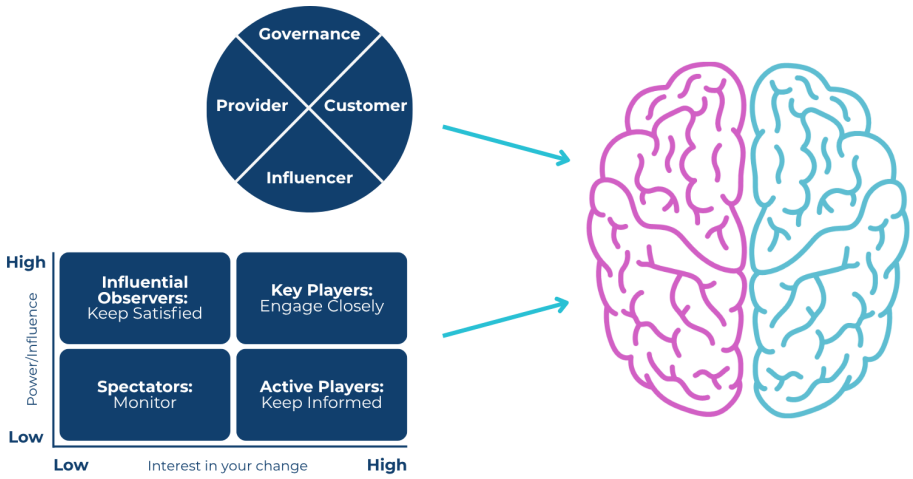
Current Stakeholder Analysis Doesn't Work

Current models of communication rely on analysing the audience using their roles in the organisation, their areas of responsibility, estimating how much impact they will experience based on what they do and how much the change affects their work.

We analyse their level of power and influence over the change, and by how much they are impacted and give more detailed information to those with high levels of interest and influence, and less to those that are observers rather than participants of the change.



Analysis based on hierarchical position, formal reporting lines and role descriptions isn't wrong. It can help us identify core information that needs to be shared, shaping the content of our messages and it can help us identify who we need to be communicating with.

Where this approach lets us down is that the content is not enough create engagement and motivation. Describing the scope, the content and the benefits of the change doesn't lead to action, because it doesn't create an emotional reaction. It creates "logical agreement" which is a response where our brains can acknowledge that what is being asked fits with the structural conditions surrounding us: our role in the organisational hierarchy; the processes we follow; the rules we apply.

Increasingly, this "logical agreement" is weakening, because these simplistic models based on hierarchical position and formal reporting lines don't fit our more agile world, where there are flatter structures, and greater empowerment and choice for what people get involved in.

Using existing stakeholder identification and analysis techniques mean our communications inform, but as we have already argued, there is too much competition for people's attention just to inform, we need to generate participation and ownership.

It is the brains of my stakeholders that drives their behaviour, not just their job title, and therefore it their brains who are my major customers, because it is the brain that decides to act!

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Negative Effects of Failing to Connect

We are all under pressure, with too much work and not enough time to do it all. We want to know that what we are doing is proven best practice, that what we are doing is going to work. We want to achieve results first time, every time.

Like you, with so much competition for the time and attention of my stakeholders, I cannot afford to waste the few opportunities I have to communicate with them by saying the wrong thing:

- Giving information when I really need to ask them their views
- Getting the tone wrong
- Not getting to the point quickly enough

When our communications don't engage people, it can be humiliating because we can see and feel the immediate failure of our actions. I can be sharing what I think is important information. I feel I am presenting it in a way that is captivating and engaging. However, the reaction from all those on the Teams call with me, is apathy. In fact, it is worse than that, because I have lost their attention and I know that they are using the time to do sort through emails, and do other work. There is no hiding from the immediacy of this negative reaction. I am experiencing failure in front of others, not quietly on my own but instead it is there for all to see and I can feel their embarrassment for me as well as my own mortification.

Social connection is a primary driver in the brain, and we feel it deeply when we fail to achieve it. This failure to get the buy-in from others when we are communicating is a direct lack of this connection. We are temporarily socially ostracised. Our audience don't notice that is what they are doing to us, but that is the effect their lack of engagement has on us. It is embarrassing when others are ignoring us, but it goes further. It threatens our sense of status, we fear we are viewed as silly, people don't respect or value us.

I know when I am talking about not connecting with my audience that it is toe-curlingly embarrassing. I know I might as well shut up, because I am wasting their time and mine. Discovering neuroscience, learning how the brain works, learning what stimulates positive responses, what triggers our willingness to take action has reduced the number of times I get it wrong, and that feels good.

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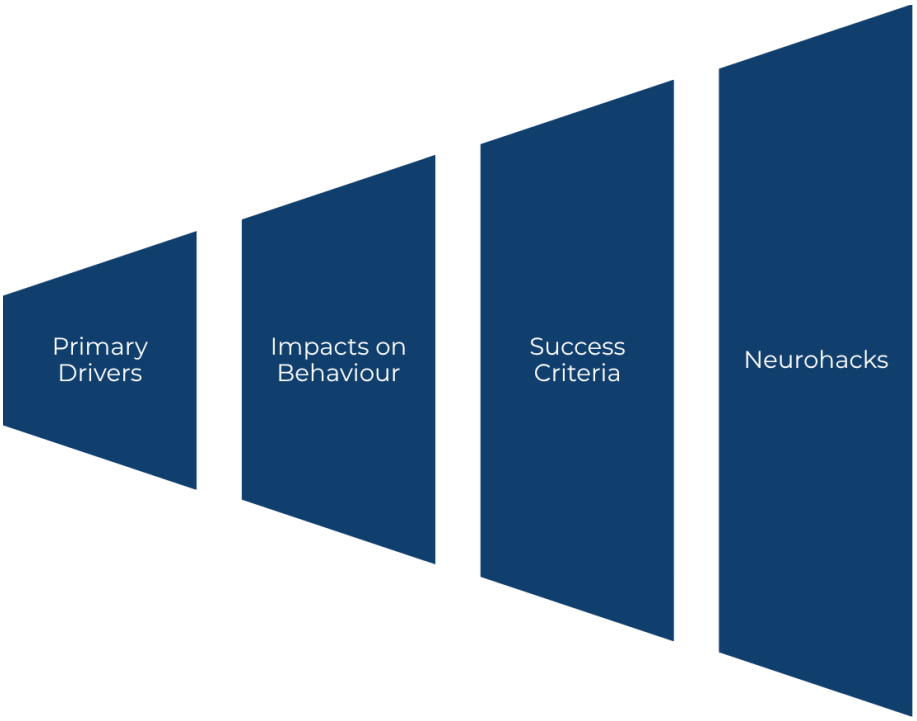
Neuroscience is the Smart Solution

There are vast amounts of research on how the brain works, and by applying this to how we engage our stakeholders in change, I believe we are meeting an increasing demand for evidence-based approaches. Via social media and other channels, we are deluged with the views and opinions of so many people. For every problem, there are lots of suggestions for how to tackle it.

I think this is triggering more requests for “evidence-based approaches”. Examples of positive outcomes elsewhere are useful, but I am not sure it is enough. People want reassurance that what they are going to spend their valuable time on will work, and it is the empirical research that provides that reassurance.



My system for neuro-driven transformation™ starts with the primary drivers, identifying the impact they have on our behaviours. I use this understanding to define criteria for effective communications and interventions with my stakeholders. I have developed (and keep building) a directory of neuro-hacks that I can use to stimulate required behaviours.

Primary Drivers

Primary drivers are automatic responses by the brain, triggered by the situations we experience. These automatic responses have an impact on how we behave when confronted with change at work.

Basing our communication on the primary drivers in the brain creates a natural, seamless connection between what we are saying to our stakeholders and the desired response that we need to achieve to progress our change initiative.

We create automatic engagement, by cutting out noise and distraction, reducing the amount of processing that our brains must do. Our messages go straight to the short-cuts that our brains use for processing information. By presenting information that directly matches these short-cuts, we trigger action.

These primary drivers are:

- **Connection** – social interaction, being part of communities, having the support of others
- **Predictability** – the desire to know what is going to happen next
- **Choice** – the need to be in control of what happens to us
- **Equality** – our need to ensure that we are not disadvantaged compared to others
- **Respect** – the importance that we have relative to others
- **Growth** – the pleasure we experience from increasing our capability and what we can achieve by using these capabilities

By addressing primary drivers, we can create one of two responses, both of which drive action:

- **Threat response** – we are driven to avoid something that will disadvantage us or cause us harm
- **Reward response** – we are driven to do something because we can gain benefits which creates an inner motivation for us

Threat Response

When the brain perceives a threat, the sympathetic nervous system is activated to initiate what is often referred to as a “fight or flight” response. Cortisol is released, a hormone that increases blood sugar and suppresses the immune system so energy can be redirected to address the perceived threat. Of course, this is very useful when there is a genuine physical threat, but unfortunately in our working lives, this threat response is turned on almost permanently.

When we fail to meet the needs of our primary drivers, we create a threat response, because our brain is warning us something is wrong, we are not getting what we need.

Reward Response

When exposed to a stimulus which is rewarding, the brain responds by releasing an increased amount of dopamine, the main neurotransmitter associated with rewards and pleasure. Dopamine helps us to be less stressed, which enables us to be more creative, more resilient, and less quick to judge, more willing to collaborate.

The opportunity for reward stimulates the brain to take action, it is a “pull” mechanism, pulling our stakeholders towards the desired action.

Success Criteria

To stimulate the response we need, we can apply criteria based on the primary drivers, to ensure that whatever action we take, it is meeting the needs of our brains.

If the criteria are met, we are creating the reward response, if the criteria are not met, we are triggering the threat response, which means we do not achieve our objectives, because we do not create engagement with our stakeholders, which means they do not participate in the change.

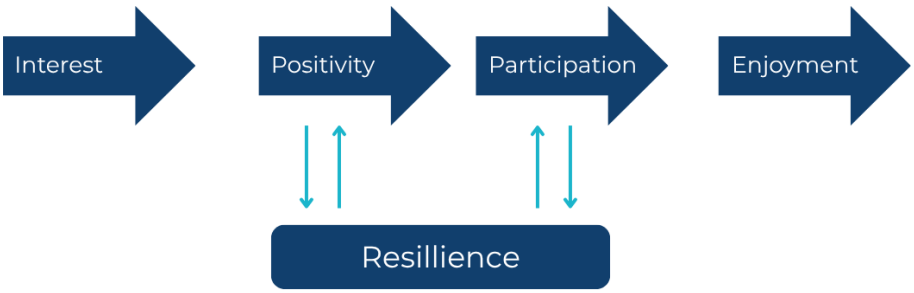
These criteria provide us with a checklist to evaluate our proposed engagements and interventions with our stakeholders using factors including the content, the tone of voice, the method of delivery and the level of engagement involved.

Neurohacks

To stimulate the desired action, I have developed these criteria into a series of neuro-hacks which are small, deliberate interventions to achieve a positive view of what I am asking my stakeholders to do.

I am using my understanding of neuroscience to create specific, focused requests that automatically trigger a response. This means I can reduce the amount of persuasion I need to apply, because I am asking stakeholders to take actions that their brains have assessed as sensible, logical reactions.

I have developed these neurohacks to stimulate stakeholder action from the start to the finish of a change. To do this, I have defined a 5-step behavioural change lifecycle model:



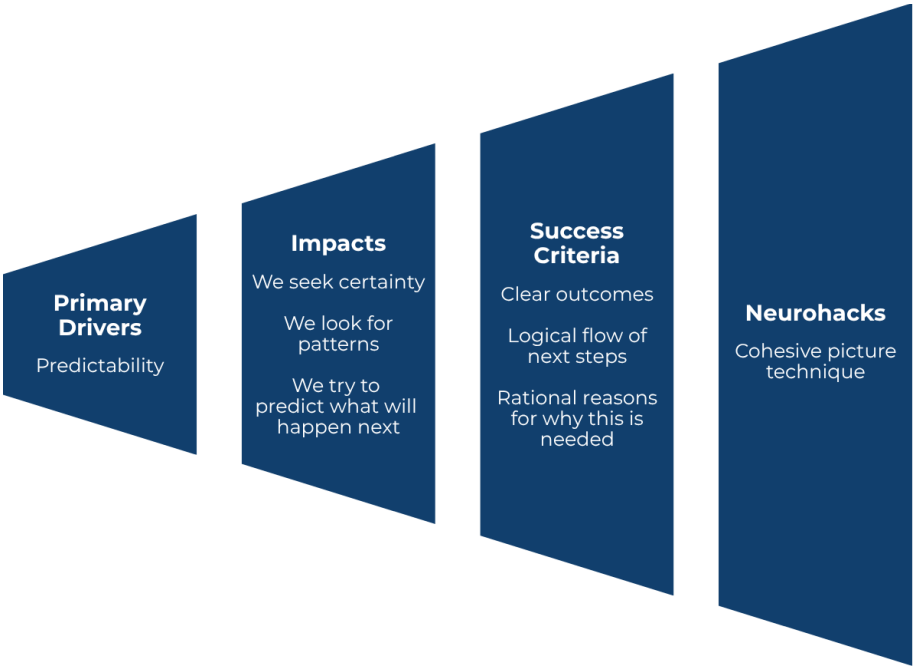
Each of the neuro-hacks trigger a response that drives the stakeholder to participate in the change. For example:

- **Interest** – take notice of the change, accept that it is going to happen
- **Positivity** – find reasons for supporting the change and understanding how it offers new opportunities and solves current problems

- **Participation** – identify what action to take and feel empowered to take this action
- **Resilience** – be able to keep going despite obstacles and set-backs
- **Enjoyment** – celebrate achievements and feel proud of what has been achieved

Applying the Neuro-Driven Transformation System

To illustrate how neuroscience can be applied to triggering participation in change, I am going to work through an example, from the impact of a primary driver through to the neuro-hack that triggers the behaviour we want.



Primary driver – predictability

Impact – understand the impact this primary driver has on our brains. We can define how we are affected by the need for predictability.

Our brains are driven to seek certainty as a protection mechanism. The surer we are that we know what is going to happen next, the more prepared we can be for it, therefore the safer we feel.

As a result, our brains are constantly trying to predict what is going to happen next. Our brains look for repeatable patterns and use experience to extrapolate what the next step is going to be. This cycle of analysis and hypothesis takes a lot of processing power, and wherever possible our brains like to avoid this by relying on habits, known patterns of behaviour that deliver expected outcomes.

Change triggers the threat response by reducing predictability. We can create the reward response by reassuring our stakeholders that they change is completely aligned to what they are already working on, and that the scale of the change is minimal.

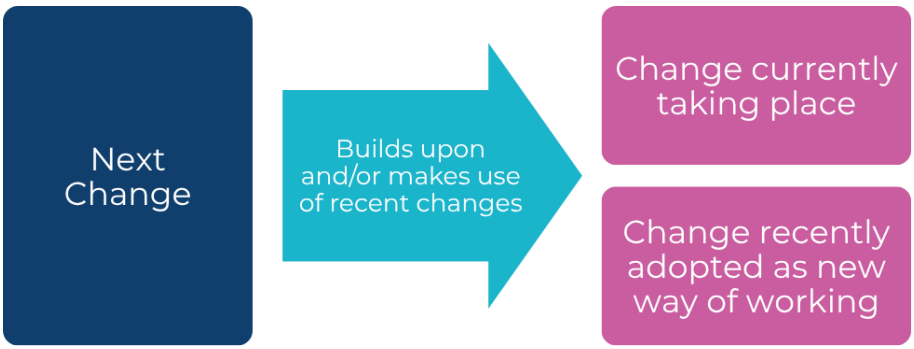
Success criteria – to trigger the behaviour we want, we need to ensure our communications to stakeholders emphasise certainty and predictability. With each statement that makes this connection between what we are asking for and this primal need in the brain, the greater the probability that our stakeholder will feel emotionally connected to what we asking for.

Use these criteria to shape your required action:

- Provide a clear and easy to understand description of what is going to happen
    - Use visuals as well as words
    - Describe the expected outcome to ensure people fully understand how they will work; who with; using which systems and processes etc
    - Give the background to why this is happening, demonstrating that it is an expected outcome, that there is a logical reason for it, extrapolated from evidence and data
- Describe the actions required in small steps
- Link each step to the one before it to create an explicit journey to follow
- Describe any assumptions that are made, so that you make implicit information explicitly clear

Neurohack – meet the success criteria and therefore trigger the primal urge for predictability using a "cohesive picture" technique. This technique meets the success criteria for achieving predictability by explaining the origin and relationship of your change activity to the other change activities that your stakeholder is in the middle of delivering or has recently completed.

This technique creates a sense of alignment, as your next request to your stakeholder follows the story that they are already familiar with. It is not creating an uncertainty by taking their work off at a tangent to where they thought they were going. In this way, your request fits an existing pattern. There are no shocks, nothing unexpected, it flows seamlessly into what they are already doing. Your action builds on and/or is an extension of what has already happened.



This creates a feeling that this change is not surprising, it is entirely predictable because it arises out of other changes that have already taken place. This technique also meets the criteria for other primary drivers; respect and growth. This demonstrates that we should seek out actions for our stakeholders which trigger multiple primary drivers, exponentially growing their desire to participate in our changes.

To work through a full range of these neuro-hacks and develop a plan of your own, take the Agile Change Coach course to build your skills or contact me to provide training to your team.

Conclusion

I think the application of neuroscience instinctively creates involvement and ownership of the change by those who must work in new ways. We can quickly inspire action rather than taking vast amounts of time to persuade people that what needs to happen is reasonable and is something that they should be doing. This reduces stress in the workplace, which reduces stress at home and stress in our communities. It creates a virtuous circle and an important coping mechanism. Incorporating science into the change management profession is an important development. If we can use our understanding of how the brain works to better target our communications and our activities, we can help people through transition more quickly and with less stress. I think this is especially important in a world of constant change because an ability to progress through transition quickly and with minimum effort increases the capacity and the capability within our organisations to thrive as the volume of change continues to increase.

About the Author

I am an acknowledged thought-leader in approaches for change and transformation. I work for many globally recognised brands across different industries as well as advising governments and public sector bodies on their approach to behaviour change. My passion is helping people cope and thrive with change at work, a role that becomes more challenging as the volume of change continues to increase. I am the author of 10 books, including the Agile Change Management Handbook and Neuroscience for Change at Work. I am the founder of the global Change Capability Community, and the Capability for Change survey.

I regularly run events including free online coaching sessions to transfer my knowledge and to share the latest approaches and ideas about change. View my website for more information or to register.

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