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Understanding change in the University workplace: are metaphors of bereavement helpful?

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Abstract

This article considers the difficulty of implementing change in a university workplace and discusses the popularity of ‘the Valley of Despair’ change curve as a way of predicting and managing resistance to change. The Valley of Despair is based on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s (1970; 2005) work with the dying and bereaved, and posits that people going through change will experience a predictable series of emotions: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (a sequence often termed ‘DABDA’). Questions are raised about both the validity of this model and its value as a lens through which to view change in the Higher Education sector. It is suggested, however, that other metaphors of bereavement may provide helpful insights to those hoping to guide university staff through change.

Keywords

Change management, DABDA, mourning, loss, Covid-19

Word-count (excluding references)

2975

Introduction

Higher Education is in a state of rapid and radical change. Recent years have seen rising student numbers, an increasingly international marketplace, new funding strategies and a new focus on delivering the kind of learning outcomes that employers value with maximal efficiency (Trowler 1998; Clarke 2013). In 2020, the need to change was accelerated by COVID19, which closed lecture theatres and demanded new – socially-distanced – ways of working. In response to these various pressures, universities are introducing new technologies, new processes, new management structures and new ways of teaching and communicating. Yet universities, as Rogers (2019) points out, are culturally resistant to change. In this context, it has become imperative to train managers to deal with adverse responses to change initiatives.

Change in the Higher Education Sector and the ‘Valley of Despair’

The change management resources offered by many universities explain resistance to change using metaphors drawn from studies of bereavement, with the ‘Valley of Despair’ change curve, based on the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1970), being particularly popular. A guide provided by the University of Exeter (2020) explains

Kübler-Ross proposed that a terminally ill patient would progress through five stages of grief when informed of their illness. She further proposed that this model could be applied to any dramatic life changing situation ... The curve, and its associated emotions, can be used to predict how performance is likely to be affected by the announcement and subsequent implementation of a significant change.

The guide concludes that ‘knowing where an individual is on the curve will help when deciding on how and when to communicate information, what level of support someone requires, and when best to implement final changes’. Similar advice appears in management

resources from Manchester Metropolitan University (2020) and the Universities of Leeds (2021), Sheffield (2021) and Bath (2020), while staff at the University of Greenwich (2020, 2) are advised that the sequence of emotional responses to change has a neurological basis.

The Kübler-Ross change curve has been used to analyse change processes in HE by Herrera et al. (2020) and Rodriguez-McClellon (2020), while Malone (2018) uses it to explain students' resistance to the flipped classroom. It has also been used extensively to examine the way in which staff or students first resisted, and then adapted to, online study during the Covid-19 pandemic (Findyartini et al. 2020; Kee 2020; Shavrovskaya and Pesha 2020; Stuart et al. 2020; Tempski et al. 2020). The wider impact of Covid-19 has also been explained with reference to the Valley of Despair. The mental health issues arising from the pandemic have been described as 'a mass grief reaction, with phases starting with denial, followed by anger....' (el-Guebaly 2020), while health workers battling the pandemic are claimed to be 'going through their own stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression' (Gujral, Rushton, and Rosa 2020). It is also frequently argued that providing appropriate support depends on determining the point on the change curve an individual has reached (e.g. Wang, Jiang, and Cheng 2020; King 2021).

Despite the popularity of the change curve, there are reasons for caution. Evidence that change *is* experienced as a 'Valley of Despair' is surprisingly weak. Furthermore, the 'Valley of Despair' model carries traces of its therapeutic origins, there is an implication that those journeying through grief should receive help and support, but it can be unclear – in a workplace environment – who should provide this or what it might entail.

The Identification of the Valley of Despair

As noted earlier, the ‘Valley of Despair’ was identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1970) when studying the experiences of the dying. She argued that, on learning death was imminent, individuals experienced a distinct set of emotional responses; denial, anger, bargaining, despair and – ultimately – acceptance; an emotional journey sometimes described using the acronym ‘DABDA’. It was not until 2005 that Kübler-Ross extended her 5 stage model to the ‘grief processes’ associated with bereavement (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005)¹, but the idea that these distinct stages of resistance and adaptation characterise responses to workplace change emerged in the 1980s (University of Exeter 2020) and has become one of the key assumptions of change management (Fisher 2012; Cameron and Green 2019, 32).

The employee, faced with a change in organisational structure or operational process is claimed to pass through all the DABDA stages. Their emotional journey is plotted over time by ‘graphs’ which show a staggering descent into despair, then a tentative and gradual recovery. Such pictograms combine the authority of boardroom analytics with the mythical appeal of the journey through adversity to fulfilment. These figures present a useful warning to managers that change may trigger disruptive emotions in their team, and they may also help staff affected by change to understand that their own reactions are natural and time-bound (University of Exeter 2020), but there are good reasons to be cautious about applying this model to change in the Higher Education environment.

¹ For detailed criticism of this translation see Corr (2015)

Limitations and Criticisms of the Valley of Despair

Four types of criticism may be levelled at the DABDA model. First, there is no evidence of its validity; second, it is self-contradictory; third, assuming the existence of a predictable emotional journey can lead to poor management decisions; finally, the model tends to obscure some of the distinctive factors which both characterise and complicate change in Higher Education.

An un-evidenced principle

First, it is important to be clear, that the existence of ‘stages’ in acclimatisation to death has not been clinically proven. Kübler-Ross (1970) illustrated each stage with a clinical description of an individual patient, but ‘evidence that the same person passed through all the stages was not offered then and still has not been offered’ (Kastenbaum 1998, 112). Further, as Littlewood (1993) points out, medical staff who work with the dying are frequently unable to agree what ‘stage’ an individual patient has reached. Corr (2019, 407) summarises the problems succinctly: ‘widespread acclaim in the popular arena contrasts with sharp criticism from scholars and there is no evidence that this model is employed in contemporary hospice programmes that have caring for the dying as their primary focus.’ The extension of ‘stage theory’ to the care of the bereaved has also been extensively criticised with Stroebe et al. (2017, 456) insisting that ‘there is no scientific foundation, and decades of research have shown that most people do *not* grieve in stages’.

The extension of the model to other change-contexts is largely untested, with writers tending to imply that they are simply adopting the principle that Kübler-Ross ‘established’. Fisher (2012: Q&A), for example, argues that his personal transition model² does not require

² <https://www.businessballs.com/freepdfmaterials/processoftransitionJF2012.pdf>

experimental testing because it draws upon Kübler-Ross's work, while Belyth (2015) airily states that the Kübler-Ross change curve has been found to operate 'in a majority of cases and situations relating to change'.

The wide-spread acceptance of the DABDA model in the absence of strong data, suggests that 'it meets social or emotional needs rather than scientific criteria' (Kastenbaum 1998, 112) and offers a mythical rather than a clinical description of human behaviour³, depicting 'a journey from tragedy to triumph ... rather than simply describing the evidence as it presents itself to us' (Corr 2019, 411). There is nothing wrong with using myths to guide behaviour⁴ but caution should be exercised if (*when*) the 'Valley of Despair' is presented in pseudo-scientific terms, which imply both that the model is based on extensive scientific research and that the response described has biological origins; that it is, perhaps, a stimulus-response akin to 'fight or flight' – neither of these things are true.

A self-contradictory principle

The way in which the DABDA model is presented as both normative and indicative is also deeply confusing. Bowlby (1980, 85) warns that stages 'are not clear-cut, and any one individual may oscillate for a time back and forth between any two of them'''. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005, 7) strike the same cautionary note, insisting that the stages described 'are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or in a prescribed order'. Yet if these caveats are taken seriously, they shake the entire foundations of the DABDA model; for if the stages are neither linear nor predictable, can they really be said to be stages at all? (Friedman and James 2008; Corr 2015 , 234)⁵.

³ See also Klass (1982)

⁴ Jesus's parables are great examples of instructive story-telling.

⁵ For a more thorough discussion see Stroebe et al. (2017)

An unreliable guide to management decisions

According to Walter (1999, 162) the 'stages' identified were simply attempts to describe complex phenomena in short-hand terms. He notes, however, that problems arise in clinical settings when inexperienced doctors and nurses 'remember the neat pattern of stages and phases and forget the caveats about it not being a simple linear process'. This risk is also present when managers are trained to use the 'Valley of Despair' in workplace change-management. Kennington (2020), who interviewed managers in Higher Education about their experiences of change, recorded several instances where problems had arisen or escalated because managers had inaccurately predicted or wrongly interpreted the emotional responses of their staff.

There is also a risk that reliance on a change curve might tempt managers to treat any negative emotions expressed by their team as 'symptoms' rather than as feedback on the change process, which might in fact be useful. It is interesting to note that the patient Kübler-Ross (1970) uses to illustrate anger, is angry for legitimate and important reasons. 'Sister I' is angry because dying patients have to wait until staff meal-breaks are over before they receive pain relief, and she is angry that, even when a patient has only days to live, medication is restricted to eliminate the risk of addiction (57f). Although Kübler-Ross maintained that Sister I used problems on the ward as an excuse to vent personal and *irrational* anger (234) there is evidence that the publication of Sister I's testimony has been instrumental in changing attitudes to pain relief for the dying (Newman 2004).

An unhelpful principle in the HE workplace

There are two key reasons why the DABDA principle may be inappropriate in the university workplace. First, as noted earlier, there seems to be an implication that people going through a change reaction should be helped and supported, but the diffuse nature of both management and staff support services in most universities makes it unclear who is responsible for this. Moreover, while suggesting to staff that their colleagues are going through a grief reaction may offer them a new perspective on the situation, it does not make it any easier for them to offer support. It is even possible that normal empathetic responses to a colleague's distress might be hampered by the assumption of a 'grief curve'.

Secondly, the DABDA curve imagines change as the transition from one stable situation to another fixed – though unwished for – normality; while this occasionally happens in HE (for example when restructure brings redundancy or a significant and undesired role change) HE staff more often labour in a situation of unceasing incremental change coupled with rumours or promises of change which often come to nothing. Changes in legislation, new quality initiatives, competition and – more recently – Covid-19, have necessitated changes to rules, processes and IT platforms, meaning that administrative systems and structures are in a perpetual state of flux. This kind of change is often exhausting and can increase workload to the point where there is no space for reflective thought or positive engagement with change processes (Brand 2009, 88). On the other hand, universities' strategic change projects often stall, due to structural complexity, lack of clarity about strategic goals and the presence of many 'experts when it comes to arguing' (Meister - Scheytt and Scheytt 2005, 76).

Moreover, the fact that (administrative) agents of change in universities are often outranked by (academic) resisters can lead to battles of attrition rather than curves of acquiescence.

This distinctive experience tends to create ‘feelings of apathy and indifference toward change efforts’ within HE (Kennington 2020, 126); this is a very different paradigm to that envisaged by change curves and perhaps one where introducing the Valley of Despair, as a rather depressing metaphor for change, may further dampen any enthusiasm for innovation and provide an unintentional focus for resistance (Smollan 2014, 103).

Lessons learned from the Valley of Despair

The valley of despair/DABDA model is not without benefits: it usefully identifies a variety of emotions which may emerge in response to change and which are entirely normal. If this emotional range is imagined as a territory within which individuals may travel, rather than as a process, then emphasis shifts from mapping individuals’ reactions against an imaginal curve to seeking to understand their unique perspective on the change confronting them; this can be a very useful way to approach the change process. In addition, the popularity of the valley of despair appears to confirm that presenting change as a time of trial followed by a time of reward has a great psychological appeal. There are however more helpful lenses through which universities could review their change processes.

Alternative bereavement metaphors

If, while acknowledging the shortcomings of the DABDA model, we concede that change is a little like bereavement because something – working relationships perhaps, or the ‘old ways’ of doing things – is always lost, then other models of grief can be used to understand the experience of individuals affected by change. The insights of Peter Marris (1986) and Rudolph Neimeyer (2001, 2002) are particularly helpful. Both writers argue that loss and change threaten the way in which people understand and navigate their lives. Marris (1986, 4) uses the term ‘structures of meaning’ to describe private ways of understanding the world, personal perspectives which sustain both identity and the conviction that life is meaningful.

He argues that changes which affect roles, routines, and relationships, threaten both an individual's structure of meaning and the sense of self that flows from it. In a similar way, Neimeyer (2001, 2002) argues that individuals make sense of their life as if they were a character in a novel and changes which jeopardise the 'plot' can lead to existential crisis. For both Marris and Neimeyer, it is the perceived threat to personal world-views which lead people to vehemently oppose change; what manifests as anger and denial is in fact a lively defence of the way they have learned to make sense of the world (Marris 1986, 8). Significantly, this model is as relevant to incremental, low level, change as it is to cataclysmic change. Incessant changes to rules and processes erode individuals' structures of meaning and threaten their sense of professional expertise.

Clear examples of threat-response are often seen in the workplace. A staff member who is heavily invested in personal service may resist initiatives that try to standardise processes or increase efficiency. Their resistance is grounded in the sense that their historic service – of which they are rightly proud – is being discredited and their whole worldview called into question. Equally, a worker who is valued for expertise in a particular function may oppose changes to the system in which they excel, for their goals, their identity and their sense of personal significance, are all tied to these skills. Alternatively, staff may simply lose confidence in their ability to perform a job that they have been doing for years, because the context in which they do it has changed beyond recognition.

If this model is taken seriously and change is recognised as an attack on values, identities and ways of thinking about the world, then there are clear opportunities for senior managers, for team leaders and for colleagues to support individuals affected by change. Senior managers can help by telling a clear and inspiring story about the reasons for change. They can – for

example – reaffirm that the drive for improved efficiency is intended to ensure that excellent service can be delivered more reliably to more people. If the change can be presented as a journey from a proud history to a bright, or at least sustainable, future – with many objectives and values remaining unchanged – then the distress associated with an assault on personal values can be reduced. Inspirational leaders can also reassure individuals affected by change that their skills and expertise are not only still valued, but remain critical to the future success of the organisation. It falls to team leaders and close colleagues, however, to provide the grounded recognition of abilities and achievements that will prevent this from sounding like hollow rhetoric.

Conclusion

In conclusion, bereavement metaphors provide a useful reminder that negative reactions to change are likely and normal. They draw attention to the importance of story-telling at both institutional and personal level, for the presence of a good story, connecting the past to a vision of the future, can offer solace and sustain meaning through times of hardship and uncertainty.

The perception that change can be experienced as an assault on identity and values, may be more helpful in predicting responses to change than the DABDA curve; however, in an organisation as complex as a university, change management should always be approached using a range of models, with careful thought afforded to the ‘change exhaustion’ that affects so many staff.

Implications

The forgoing discussion indicates that university change managers should seek to:

1. engage staff in conversations about the needs, aspirations and constraints that drive and shape change processes
2. mitigate the effects of change exhaustion
3. respond compassionately to the impact of change on personal identity
4. create effective feedback channels which capture and address legitimate concerns

Good practice has already emerged in some of these areas. Process libraries help staff navigate new systems, online chat areas enhance peer support, and online tools can be used to gather feedback. The interpersonal aspects of leading through change are, however, much more challenging than the technical. While one solution may resolve a system problem, people require bespoke responses. Bespoke responses require time and this time must be budgeted for when planning change.

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