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Strategies for Navigating
Unplanned Change

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DEDICATION

To Gary, my everything.

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UNANTICIPATED CHANGE

Everyone can relate to change. The young flow with it and the old cherish the wisdom associated with it. Those new to being on their own embrace it and the middle-aged can be frustrated by it. Experts write about it, while those experiencing it revere it. Academics help others understand it within context and the successful demonstrate its authority through lessons learned. Leaders strive to understand it, and managers wish they did. Everyone agrees that there is much to be learned from those who have experienced unplanned,

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major life-changing events. One thing we know for certain as Heraclitus thought, “Change is the only constant in life.”

At the same time, major life transitions provide us with numerous opportunities to experience change. New relationships, moving away from home, or parenting offer challenges that influence how we think and feel. Break-ups, career changes, retirement, financial gains or losses, and natural disasters position us for learning and growth. Serious illness, issues associated with aging, or the death of a loved one, impact us profoundly.

Often the severity and scope of life events combine with our readiness to handle change, ultimately influencing how we transition through change and the value we take away from the experience. The severity, like so many profound challenges, may test even the strongest among us. And certainly, in the deepest struggles, many emerge stronger and more resilient while others seem delicate and damaged. With the emergence of wisdom and strength we can anticipate examples and lessons that others can benefit from.

Present times offer us profound life-changing challenges. The current global pandemic—which

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includes a far-reaching impact on lives in both the near and long-term—now encourages us to recognize life's frailties and our capacity for adaption. If there was ever a time in our history wrought with change that touched the lives of so many, not just a certain group, industry, or demographic but all ages, races, and socio-economic groups, it is now.

This book was written in the belief that we all have something to offer one another, and that we can learn with and from one another. The ability to adapt to change is important to help individuals develop personally and realize their potential while here on this Earth. Governments, social services, churches, non-profits, and community volunteers are but a few examples of the individuals prepared and willing to help others navigate change. Those who successfully navigate change, which is what this book is about, are individuals who accept the inevitability of major life changes and they embrace the challenges and triumphs associated with it, recognizing that their lives may be forever altered by it. They lean in toward change, believing in its power and promise.

But before I go much further, I'd like to say a

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few things about the context for select major life changes.

THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE

The chaotic times for navigating change can be better understood if we consider today's environment. That can be summarized under three major contexts: *complexity*, *rate of acceleration*, *anchoring*.

Complexity

Ipsos Group compiled a report¹ based upon some of the headlines from more than 370 questions asked across 33 countries, with the following macro forces highlighted:

- Geopolitical tensions are on the rise. With increased protectionism and polarization, nations and individuals are left to address the pressures associated with differing value systems.
- Growing inequality and opportunity continue to stress individuals and communities. The gap between the

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wealthy and poor continues to grow with rising costs making it particularly challenging on the middle-class.

- Technology tipping points are here—we are on the cusp of rapid technological change. We need to anticipate acceleration and prepare for exponential change in areas such as healthcare, science, transportation, communications, and energy.
- Healthcare is undergoing massive transformation. Bioscience, gene editing, and fighting disease through re-engineering are proving significant toward improving and extending life.

Perhaps even more concerning and exciting is that our values unite and divide us. These values are optimistic, radical, traditional, and pessimistic and they are expressed by individuals, organizations, and communities with broad implications.

People talk about the decline of traditional values and its impact on society. They reminisce about the good old days being the best of times. But what we too often overlook is that during the most challenging of times, tremendous opportunity

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exists—opportunities for learning, development, and life-changing progress.

Rate of Acceleration

This time in our history is marked by societal pressures, global challenges, and innovation. The rate of acceleration of the problems we face is increasing. While physical technologies continue to change rapidly, social technologies, such as the rule of law, government, etc., fail to match the pace of physical technological change often leaving us with major challenges to resolve. To illustrate, I noted the following topics were highlighted in the *Wall Street Journal* one day in March 2021:

- A Covid-19 pill showed promise in preliminary testing, reducing the infectious virus during a mid-range study.
- Pope Francis met with an Iraqi Shiite leader to build relations with Islam.
- Texas decided not to fix a \$16 Billion power overcharge.
- Senate Democrats passed a \$1.9 Trillion

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Covid-19 relief plan.

- The economy has grown faster than China's due to big tech and the pharmaceutical industry.
- Remote work is reshaping urban geography.
- Climate change emerges as a compliance focus for the SEC.

Other media outlets report similar developments daily. The rate of change and the associated accelerations have a drastic impact on how we work and live. They are extensive with both near-and-long-term ramifications for organizations, communities, and individuals. Societal transformation enables physical innovation. And physical innovation and societal transformation occur simultaneously.

For example, travel restrictions spurred a work from home trend and enabled countless businesses to operate during a global pandemic. And it was the technology that enabled work from home, that positioned businesses to realize that they are no longer constrained by physical boundaries. Leaders recognized the need to emphasize outcomes over

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time, empowerment, and the protection of data.

A metaphor for the times we have recently been living in, as far as trying to control the pandemic, is “Skate not to where the puck is but to where the puck is going to be,” as related to us by Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, when he quoted Wayne Gretzky. Dr. Fauci encouraged us to go where the infection was going to be, as well address it where it was. During the early days of the pandemic, he explained that serious mitigation needed to be a focus, or we would end up weeks behind. He stressed the importance of controlling the spread of the virus and he wanted to see the government take a proactive role in making that happen. We desperately needed to better understand where the infection was going if we were to develop efforts to stop it. After months of slow progress, it appears as if we have made a transition, and our focus is better aligned with that strategy. Trouble is too many initially desired relief from the disease, death, and despair but they failed to put in the effort to make meaningful, sustainable progress.

In some circles, acceleration has led to what appears to be a collective desire for the familiar—

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for comfort and security, which we now turn to.

Anchoring

Anchoring needs to happen more often. But it needs to happen in the right amount and context. We seek familiar and comfortable times and anchoring gives us a way to look back and learn. Through reflection we can experience anchoring and use the insight we gain as we navigate change. A global pandemic, unemployment, political tensions, social justice issues, and economic challenges take a toll on mental health and wellbeing. Individuals and communities are constantly dealing with a host of issues as they pursue improving quality of life. Economic development, while critical to communities, can bring forced change—change that isn't always welcome.

We are all influenced by our value systems and they are reflected in our level of support for change. Our values are demonstrated in our actions, support for others, and in our willingness to change. At times circumstances leave little time for analysis or delayed decision-making, there are times

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we must be decisive and fast. It is in these moments that our experience, intuition, and foresight come into play. They combine with our value systems. We strive to make decisions that we can be confident of, ones that reduce risk, and ones that increase the odds that we will achieve our goals or at the very least, avoid damage or pain.

Politics, global pressures, and economic opportunity have increased our tendency to cling to the familiar and secure—we want to be anchored to the people, places, and things that help us feel comfortable and safe. This can be quite helpful depending upon the circumstances. But it can also be harmful when protectionism is taken to the extreme or at the expense of others. Just as quickly as one might feel threatened, they can become amicable when they gain more information and insight. The paradox is how to feel anchored while experiencing growth and development. I'll explore that later on.

READINESS FOR CHANGE

Let's face it, few of us are ready for major, unplanned life altering changes. We may think we

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are but deep down we cannot be totally prepared for everything. We need to learn how to do our best and accept that it's good enough, knowing that we'll learn from each experience and maybe take a different course of action next time.

Without change, progress is impossible. Pause and reflect on that statement for a minute. It's in our nature to resist change. Socrates helps us direct our energy around change with his advice, "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new." When we get down to the bottom line, we must be willing and ready to change—and move forward and leave our past behind—to really make meaningful progress.

You need a mindset that is willing to embrace change. A mindset that wants to take the next step and move forward. To welcome change. A mindset that knows that you must, otherwise you will be stuck in the past.

This holds true for your personal and professional lives. When I think back about my life, I wouldn't be who I am today without being willing to change. This is true for me professionally and personally.

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Successful, satisfied people are those who understand and appreciate the need to change. Whether they go through major life transitions, or other less stressful changes, they respect that change must happen. Whatever the circumstance, they have a mindset that embraces the new while keeping the past in perspective.

How to Improve Your Tolerance for Change

I know change can be scary. I want to give you four practical principles that you can use to help yourself become more comfortable with change. Keep in mind, when I talk about change, I'm talking about both small and large change. What I'm referring to are principles that you can use in any situation to help guide you in your transition.

- 1. It must challenge you to change you.**

When it comes down to it, so many of us allow our fear of change to dominate our actions. The fear of what might happen overshadows the possibility of what could happen in our minds. Growth comes

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from navigating through challenges. You must be willing to be challenged.

2. **Change your thinking to change your circumstances.** For many of us, we strive to keep things as they are—familiar, safe, and predictable—that is until we want to change. Once we have decided that we are ready to change, that is when possibilities become reality. It is up to you to decide that you are ready for change and that it is time for change to happen.
3. **All significant change begins within.** Now I understand that this may seem a bit limiting but it is quite empowering. Certain changes do occur that drastically alter life as we know it. We tend to be reactionary in these situations and strive to return ourselves to the circumstances that make us feel more comfortable. Significant change occurs when you decide to proactively pursue change, rather than simply reacting to what has occurred.

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- 4. Don't underestimate your tolerance for ambiguity.** This may seem daunting. I believe that by putting yourself in situations where outcomes are unknown you can benefit developmentally. Once you realize how capable and strong you are, you find yourself quite empowered. From the empowerment you gain the courage to withstand challenging circumstances and navigate through change.

What will you change this year? I challenge you to develop a mindset that embraces change. You never know how rewarding and fulfilled your life can be until you do.

Key Takeaways:

- This time in our history is marked by societal pressures, global challenges, and innovation. The rate of acceleration of the problems we face is increasing.
- Those who successfully navigate change are individuals who accept the inevitability of

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major life changes and they embrace the challenges and triumphs associated with it, recognizing that their lives may be forever altered by it. They lean in toward change, believing in its power and promise.

- You need a mindset that is willing to embrace change. A mindset that wants to take the next step and move forward.

Try This:

- Ask yourself, “How might I benefit from this change?” “What are the potential negatives associated with not changing?”
- Practice techniques to improve confidence such as stress management, self-care, or volunteering.
- Imagine the possibilities associated with the future, write them down.

ⁱ Ipsos Global Trends 2020: Understanding Complexity