

# "Change is Your Opportunity for Growth"

By Carole Spiers



The human response to the quickening changes in corporate life

Don't agonise on the brink. Grasp the nettle.....and control the inevitable evolution of your people and your systems.

## No such thing as no-change

Change is the lifeblood of business, and will always drive it. Those who doubt this are either too fearful of their position to focus on the true picture, or they are lulled into believing in no-change because it is easier.

Even when we are not directly motivated to try and keep present arrangements unchanged, we are always tempted to glorify some imaginary Golden Age when everything stayed put. Analysis shows there is no such thing. It is pure escapism, whereas the job of corporate management to assert and manage everyday reality.

The management of change is now a major ongoing responsibility throughout government, industry and the professions.

## How they'll all take it

When any big change is announced at work, there will be almost as many different kinds of reaction as there are team-members. Your job is to handle these reactions in such a way as to keep the team together and performing, and in

due course to perform better, thus validating the change.

It is to be expected that the older and longer-serving people may resent the change most. It disturbs the comfortable rut they've settled into. It may actually deprive them of specific rewards they were promised in exchange for long service. And being older, which usually means more conservative, they may simply be sceptical of the new system, and declare that no good will come of all this.

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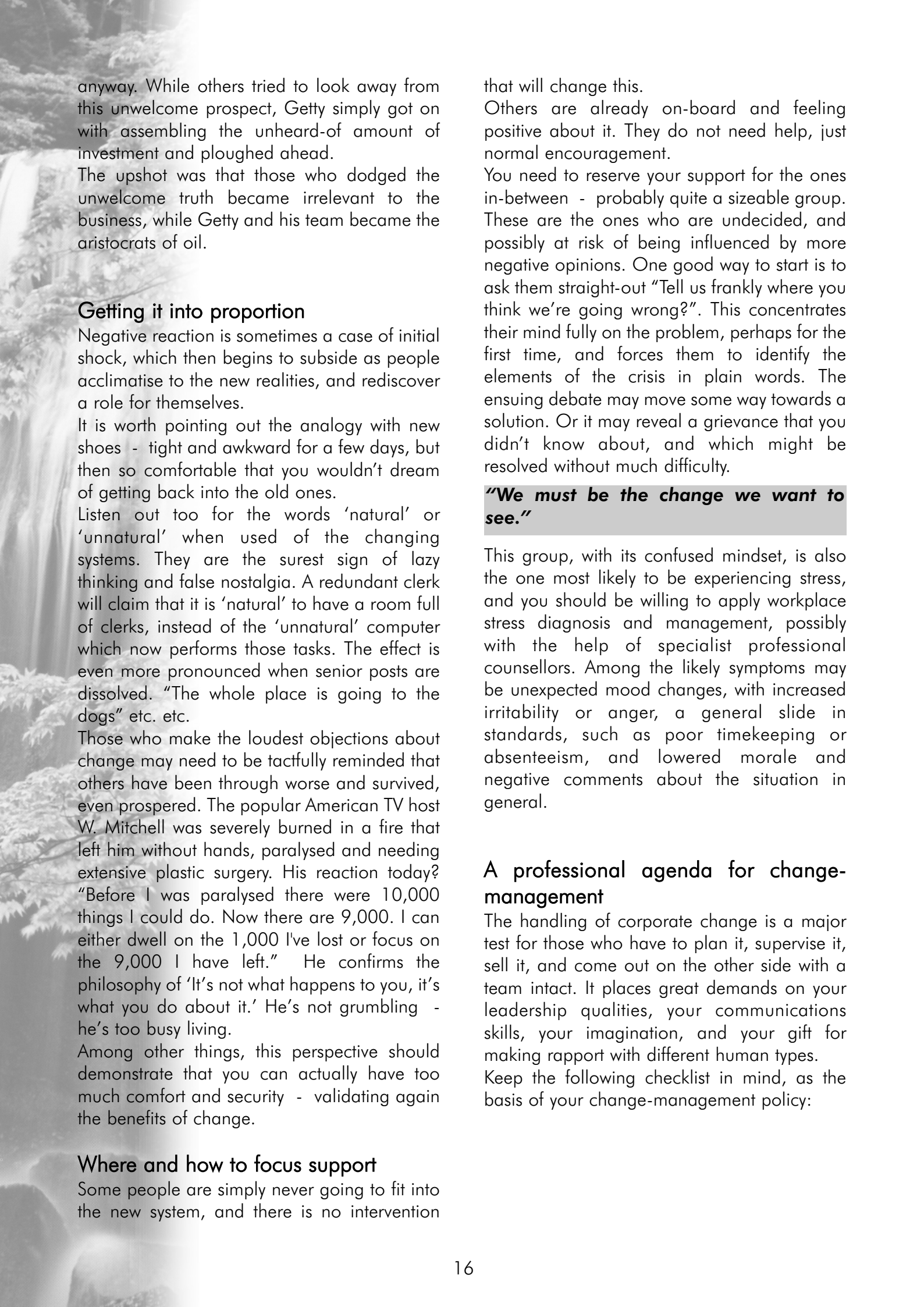
Another common reaction is apathy - a shrug of "so what?", a suggestion that nothing really changes. It is possible to see this as a good stoical philosophy, a sign of the unflappable person who will survive anyhow. Or you could view it as the negative, cynical reflex of someone who is not really interested in what happens around him. In these cases, you need to try to establish which.

Thirdly, there are the ones who welcome the shake-up, either because it directly benefits their category, or because they are the sort of people who naturally embrace the new, and thrive on challenge. These are your allies in the new regime, and they should be encouraged to air their views to those who are feeling less positive about the future.

## Grasping the nettle

The virtues of the big leap or the bold gamble as a necessary spur to success should be clearly emphasised. Simply there are times when an organisation has to grasp the nettle or go under.

Consider the late Paul Getty, once named as the world's richest man. His huge success in the oil business came directly from grasping the nettle of change. Unlike many Americans, he saw that the future of oil did not lie in America. It lay many thousands of feet below distant, hostile, largely unknown places, where vastly expensive teams would have to work in hot, humid conditions, living away from their families for years on end, under dangerous regimes, and with no guarantee of striking oil



anyway. While others tried to look away from this unwelcome prospect, Getty simply got on with assembling the unheard-of amount of investment and ploughed ahead.

The upshot was that those who dodged the unwelcome truth became irrelevant to the business, while Getty and his team became the aristocrats of oil.

### Getting it into proportion

Negative reaction is sometimes a case of initial shock, which then begins to subside as people acclimatise to the new realities, and rediscover a role for themselves.

It is worth pointing out the analogy with new shoes - tight and awkward for a few days, but then so comfortable that you wouldn't dream of getting back into the old ones.

Listen out too for the words 'natural' or 'unnatural' when used of the changing systems. They are the surest sign of lazy thinking and false nostalgia. A redundant clerk will claim that it is 'natural' to have a room full of clerks, instead of the 'unnatural' computer which now performs those tasks. The effect is even more pronounced when senior posts are dissolved. "The whole place is going to the dogs" etc. etc.

Those who make the loudest objections about change may need to be tactfully reminded that others have been through worse and survived, even prospered. The popular American TV host W. Mitchell was severely burned in a fire that left him without hands, paralysed and needing extensive plastic surgery. His reaction today? "Before I was paralysed there were 10,000 things I could do. Now there are 9,000. I can either dwell on the 1,000 I've lost or focus on the 9,000 I have left." He confirms the philosophy of 'It's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it.' He's not grumbling - he's too busy living.

Among other things, this perspective should demonstrate that you can actually have too much comfort and security - validating again the benefits of change.

### Where and how to focus support

Some people are simply never going to fit into the new system, and there is no intervention

that will change this.

Others are already on-board and feeling positive about it. They do not need help, just normal encouragement.

You need to reserve your support for the ones in-between - probably quite a sizeable group. These are the ones who are undecided, and possibly at risk of being influenced by more negative opinions. One good way to start is to ask them straight-out "Tell us frankly where you think we're going wrong?". This concentrates their mind fully on the problem, perhaps for the first time, and forces them to identify the elements of the crisis in plain words. The ensuing debate may move some way towards a solution. Or it may reveal a grievance that you didn't know about, and which might be resolved without much difficulty.

**"We must be the change we want to see."**

This group, with its confused mindset, is also the one most likely to be experiencing stress, and you should be willing to apply workplace stress diagnosis and management, possibly with the help of specialist professional counsellors. Among the likely symptoms may be unexpected mood changes, with increased irritability or anger, a general slide in standards, such as poor timekeeping or absenteeism, and lowered morale and negative comments about the situation in general.

### A professional agenda for change-management

The handling of corporate change is a major test for those who have to plan it, supervise it, sell it, and come out on the other side with a team intact. It places great demands on your leadership qualities, your communications skills, your imagination, and your gift for making rapport with different human types.

Keep the following checklist in mind, as the basis of your change-management policy:

1. **Be the change**

It was Gandhi who famously declared “We must be the change we want to see.” Now it’s up to you to symbolise the new system by your style and manner, and be a living, walking, breathing example of a bright future.

2. **Understand the effects**

Prove you can empathise with your team in their envy, confusion, bitterness, vulnerability and fear. That’s your best starting-point in helping them to fight down these negative responses.

3. **Establish a culture of trust**

Replace the ‘Us & Them’ mindset with a new spirit of ‘We’, and go on to build a culture of listening, debating and understanding, so removing one of the classic roots of conflict.

4. **Interpret dialogue**

Study the various theories of conversation, which can be profoundly illogical. Develop an ear for those unspoken words that may reveal important clues to intractable problems.

5. **Reinforce corporate goals**

Keep in mind the principal aims of the new changes in achieving corporate goals, and continue to assert these important strategies and the universal benefits they will yield.

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