

Sadie Restorick, Co-founder of international training consultancy Wellity Global, explains how leaders can navigate through these changing times and tides by supporting their teams

# LEADING THROUGH CHANGE



1 in 3

employees report mental health challenges related to workplace change and uncertainty (Harvard Business Review, 2023)

40%

of adults globally experience increased anxiety because of constant change and the rapid pace of life (World Health Organization, 2023)

“I

t's our job to create healthier and happier workplaces,” says Sadie Restorick, Co-founder of international training consultancy Wellity Global.

The organisation works across 80 countries and offers training on around 450 topics, including leadership, mental health, neurodiversity, financial health, burnout prevention and digital addiction, while Sadie is a published academic specialising in work-related stress.

“I’ve trained more than 100,000 people to help individuals enjoy their working lives and organisations to create that positive working culture so that people give everything they can but also get back from their work as well.”

Sadie refers to change over the past five years as “kind of a constant” and refers to the changes our workplaces are currently witnessing in the form of restructures, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and changing technologies and work location. “As the Deloitte figure (page 23) shows, employees don’t necessarily feel that they’ve got the tools, the resources or the knowledge to navigate all this change in their working lives. And this does have an impact on mental health. We have nearly one in three people presenting with mental health challenges, which are related to all this change and uncertainty. And we know when we look at the work-related stressors established by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) that change is a big one. It’s not necessarily that change is happening, it’s how well or how poorly it’s being communicated.

“We need to think about long-term sustainable practices to look after ourselves, to look after our colleagues and our teams, to look after our health. It’s not a short-term burst but something we need to think about with long-term strategies.

“But the problem with that analogy, particularly from a psychological perspective, is that with both a marathon and a sprint, there’s some form of finish line. And I feel that a lot of us are in a maze right now. We think we’re moving forwards and making progress and we hit a dead end or realise we’re going back the way that we came and it’s like we are losing progress.”

Sadie explains that, when we’re not heading in the right direction, it’s really demotivating. “When we must constantly navigate that level of change for so long, it makes us feel

that we’re on an unsteady footing and things feel quite unstable. It makes us more prone to negative thinking. It makes us feel more stressed and this really does have an impact, which is why it’s so important that leaders are able to understand the different ways that we can adapt in situations and role model those behaviours, but can also help other people around them to adapt.”



Sadie Restorick

## ADAPTABLE TO CHANGE

Sadie refers to Charles Darwin, who said: “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, but the one most adaptable to change.” She explains: “Those are the people who are going to survive and thrive into the future. Adaptability is an important modern-day skill set.”

According to the Adaptability Advantage Survey in 2024, 80 per cent of professionals who describe themselves as adaptable report higher career satisfaction and better wellbeing. Gallup also found that 70 per cent of organisations say a resilient, adaptable workforce is key to remaining competitive.

Sadie says: “Having this cognitive flexibility and enabling ourselves to take a moment to think through the next step is vital – ‘what does this mean for me?’ Being able to consider what change means for the individual and organisation before reacting means that we can think in a more adaptive way.”

On a recent IIRSM professional development webinar, Sadie explored this topic in detail, asking participants: ‘Is change something that is good or bad for our psychological state, for our mental health?’ Many responded that

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change could be good if people felt equipped to deal with it.

Sadie agrees: “Fundamentally, it is good for us if we know how to manage it and if we have the right coping strategies and can deploy techniques that are good for our minds and levels of resilience. Somebody attending the webinar suggested that we are programmed to not like change and this is very much the case. But the key thing we need to remember here is a beautiful thing called ‘neuroplasticity’, which allows the brain to form new neural pathways and adapt to new situations.”

In fact, the relationship between cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and neuroplasticity means that the work you do in changing your thoughts also physically changes your brain. Sadie explains: “It takes practice, but a lot of it comes down to how we perceive the situations that we’re in, what we’re telling ourselves and what message we’re giving ourselves about a situation. The brain is very, very good at adapting, but it can sometimes feel scary.”

The amygdala plays a crucial role in the stress response, acting as an early warning system for potential threats and triggering the body’s ‘fight-or-flight’ reaction. “The brain tries to protect us from harm. When it comes to thinking clearly and coping strategies – those are not deployed when we just want to protect ourselves and we find it difficult to think because we are only focusing on getting through the situation in the present moment. When we constantly feel like we’re firefighting, we don’t have the ability to step back and think about the positives of a changing situation,” explains Sadie.

“It’s often the case when your mind is wandering that you’re operating out of something called the ‘default mode network’. You are engaged in internal thought processes – overthinking about a change situation, what it means, what could happen, catastrophising, fear casting and thinking the worst. And this can really put us in quite a negative spiral, like a record is playing and it’s stuck on the same song. It can be hard to break that loop and start thinking of a more optimistic message.

“This affects our perception of the change situation and what it means for us. And this makes it difficult for us to have that level of optimism and hope and assurance in a situation. We can get stuck in a mental tug-of-war – the change is good for me and there’s a reason for this being done, but I just feel uncomfortable with this. So, we give ourselves a hard time because the change is something that we fear.”



## TIPS TO HELP PEOPLE MOVE THROUGH CHANGE

Provide constant and regular communication so that people feel part of the process. Create ‘predictability anchors’ – what do we know and what can we stick to? What could we ask for people’s involvement in? If people have some autonomy and influence over what’s happening, that completely changes their relationship with the change experience.

Storytelling success can help demonstrate the benefits of change. Why are we doing this? What is the thought process behind the change? Excite people about the vision and celebrate the small wins.

Understand that people have different needs during times of change and adapt that accordingly. Should a communication be an email, a team announcement, one-to-one meetings?

Take care of yourself too. It’s difficult to lead and be resilient and

be role models if you’re not taking care of yourself. Stop and take a moment and ensure that you are being logical and rational rather than reactive in a situation.

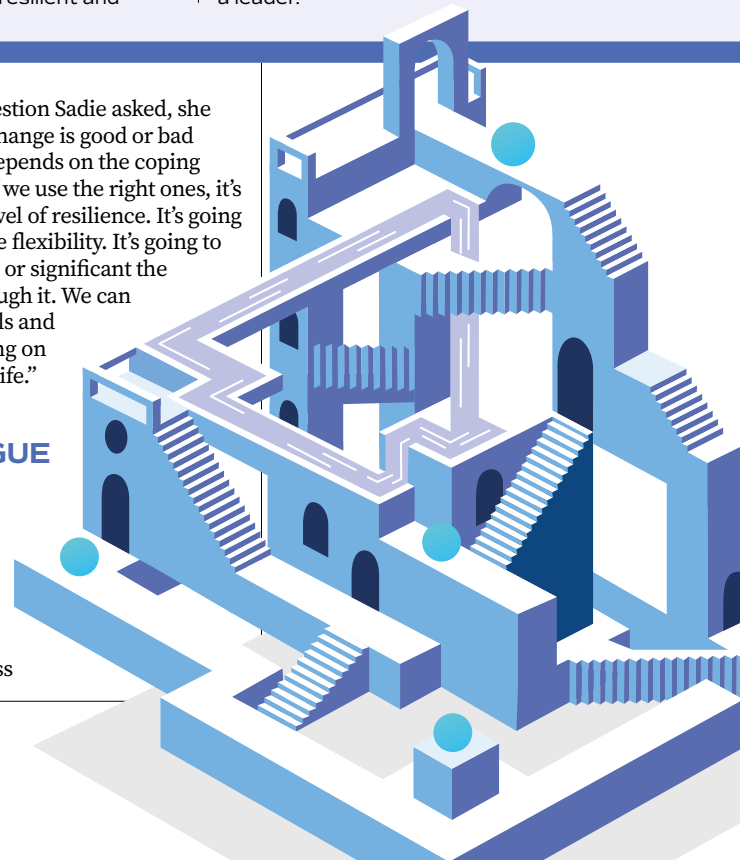
Be honest. Acknowledge the impact this might have on people psychologically and on workload capacity. Think about the actions for people and the decisions or changes that are needed as a team. What impact will this have and what do we need to do to help with that?

Invite interaction and create psychological safety so people can talk about what’s happening. Ask people how they feel you can support them with the change. We are still focusing on team priorities and tasks and inviting questions around that side of things, but can emphasise accessibility, availability and accountability for you as a leader.

Going back to the question Sadie asked, she explains that whether change is good or bad for our mental health depends on the coping strategies we deploy. “If we use the right ones, it’s going to increase our level of resilience. It’s going to increase our cognitive flexibility. It’s going to prove to us however big or significant the change that we got through it. We can do it. And it gives us tools and resources to keep leaning on as we move forward in life.”

### A TIME OF CHANGE FATIGUE

Sadie says that this is a time of “change fatigue” and points to a Gartner report that found employees’ ability to cope with change is 50 per cent less





than it was pre-pandemic. She adds: “When we compare the difference between day-to-day changes that leaders might think are quite minor and trivial, they have 2.5 times the impact on our change load capacity than major transformations because they have a cumulative effect.

“When there is a big organisational announcement, we tend to be better at understanding that we need to communicate. But it’s the little things that chip away because we diminish them and think they are not that significant or have a direct impact on our teams. But it’s still constant change that we’re having to navigate and think about. And that pulls on our cognitive load because we’re constantly having to adapt and think, what does this mean for me? That’s draining.”

Sadie refers to the Kubler-Ross Change Curve model, which walks through the different emotions that we move through during times of change. “It is not linear,” she explains. “It’s not the case that every single person will move through these different phases in the same ways.”

Initially developed to understand the grieving process, it’s been adapted to explain how people react to organisational or personal transitions. “Any change really can elicit that sense of grief because we’re moving forwards and something that we used to know – the way that we worked, the way that we interacted, the way that we communicated – might be gone forever.

“What’s key with this when we’re talking about leadership support and how best to lean in and support your people and have conversations with your people is understanding you can have a collective team and every single one of them could be at different points. And this means not only have you got to adapt your approach in how you communicate, particularly in one-to-ones, but you also have to be mindful of the fact that our teams are in different places around how they feel about this change that could naturally create quite quickly kind of voids between them and tensions between them. Morale is going down and rather than leaning on each other, they could be going in the opposite direction.”

Sadie explains that a change curve helps leaders to support their teams by encouraging people to feel validated but also to help them show more compassion to each other during times of change.

Taking the integration of AI as an example, she says that people might be worried about their jobs. They might then have a little “peak of happiness” in which they see AI as an opportunity. This might be followed by fear or denial. “What we want to do is give people the reassurance, knowledge and information to get them thinking that this sounds like a good new system for improving efficiencies and how



# 87%

of global organisations expect major disruption within the next five years (McKinsey, 2024)

# 75%

of workers globally report significant workplace transformation, including the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), automation and work location (Gartner, 2024)

# 59%

of employees feel unprepared for the speed of change in their careers (Deloitte, 2023)

we service our clients. When people are at that point, they’re great advocates for that change with other people,” says Sadie.

“Most change initiatives fail because there is not enough communication. There must be a constant flow of information, even if you don’t have the answers yet. Having open, transparent communication and inviting questions is so important.”

Psychological safety is vital too, Sadie explains: “People need to hear heard, valued and acknowledged for their contributions and suggestions. They need to be able to speak openly without being judged. When an employee experiences low trust in their leader, their capacity for change is drastically cut. When there’s trust in a leader, it creates the stable foundation for employees and their organisations to adapt and thrive in times of change. People are going to look to the captain and have faith that they are going to lead them through those changing and challenging tides.”

Sadie refers to the Leadership Paradox Wheel from the Center for Creative Leadership, which considers leadership trust to be reciprocal and created incrementally. Within organisations, change happens on two fronts – the structural/business side and the people/psychological side.

“Leaders need to get the balance right. It’s like any muscle in that the more we work it, the stronger it becomes,” she adds. ♥

Watch Sadie’s IIRSM professional development webinar, ‘Leading through change – How leaders can support their teams in uncertain times’ at [bit.ly/sentinel-leadingchange](https://bit.ly/sentinel-leadingchange)

