



Cadmus Compass Series: *Leading your organization in times of change*

Leading by example: cultivating wellness during times of change

By Loretta Cooper, Senior Specialist, Cadmus

Change is absolutely inevitable, and yet for many of us, navigating change with grace and professionalism is challenging. As a leader, navigating your personal reaction to change is critical as you shepherd your teams through times of disruption. Especially when change is accompanied by significant measures of uncertainty, it can carry a heavy sense of dread for us as well as our teams. This reaction isn't a character flaw—it's simply how our brains are designed to function.

Our brains are pattern-seeking machines that thrive on predictable routines. When change disrupts these familiar patterns, our neural systems interpret the unknown as potentially dangerous. This evolutionary programming served our ancestors well, but in modern life it can leave us feeling anxious and overwhelmed precisely when we need clarity most. The best response to this sense of dread is to look for ways to build (or rebuild) structure and stability—even if it means starting small.



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Creating your own stability

One of the underappreciated gifts of change is that it reminds us that much of life is outside of our ability to directly control. That can be especially challenging as a leader when people are looking to you for answers. Yet, even in times of massive change, there are always areas where we retain our personal agency. Here are some attainable starting points:



Curate your routine

When things feel unsettled or uncertain, simple daily routines become more important than ever. This includes the basics like good sleep, daily exercise, limiting alcohol and sugar intake, and if you don't have a mindfulness practice, there is no better time to start.

Don't be intimidated by the hype; mindfulness is simply turning away from all the external stimulus around us (looking at you, iPhone) and turning inward. Follow your breath, notice your thoughts. Allow "what is" to just be there.



Pay attention to what you're paying attention to

A lot of what goes on passively between our ears during the day is not helping us succeed. Tune in to your self-talk and without judgement, notice if the dialogue is encouraging or if you are stuck on the gerbil wheel of the same problem or conversation.

These mental habits impact our emotional state and decision-making capacity.



Limit social media and news

Unless you are a highly paid influencer, there is nothing happening on social media today that is going to significantly support your personal goals or move you toward positive outcomes. Be informed, but judicious about your sources and online tools.

Building your attention muscle

Our ability to focus on complex projects and topics can be significantly diminished by the stress and disruption of change. Now more than ever it's important to take small manageable steps to rebuild the muscle that is our ability to focus and attune to work:



Set small goals:

Large strategic plans and priorities may seem unattainable and up for grabs during times of uncertainty. Instead, focus on what you know matters most right now. Set small, actionable goals and move yourself and your team toward those accomplishments.



Manage your time:

Break your calendar into what Cal Newport, the productivity expert, calls “deep work” and “shallow work” and structure your workday accordingly:

- Shallow work is comprised of things like responding to email, slack, team chats, and scheduling. These should mostly be handled in small bursts on the periphery of your day.
- Deep work requires focused thought and concentration. Identify and protect blocks of time when you can sink into complex projects like writing, strategic planning or problem solving. Set the expectation on your calendar that you are working but not available for interruption during this time.
- Start with shorter deep work sessions (nothing over 90 minutes) and gradually build up your focus and stamina. This exercise will rebuild your ability to concentrate on complex topics. It is like a muscle that needs (re) training.



Create a phone-free zone:

Put your phone on silent, in-flight mode, or away entirely. Researchers find your phone becomes a distraction when it's next to you, even without notifications on.



Implement a shutdown ritual:

Plan the following day by making a list of every unfinished task and goal you can realistically accomplish. I like to print out the following day's schedule and lay everything out for the next morning. This helps my mind disconnect from work for the rest of the day.



Moving ahead

Taking action in these areas generates a sense of agency and autonomy, creating a virtuous cycle of progress. We will never eliminate uncertainty from our lives, but we can develop the capacity to move through change with greater confidence and purpose. This will not only serve you but will serve as a model for your teams. I encourage you to speak openly about what works for you. Sharing these practices with your team will help them create their own structures to help them thrive in uncertain times—and ultimately shape the culture of your organization.

Loretta Cooper is a senior specialist at Cadmus focused on strategy and transformation. She is on a mission to help leaders develop workplaces where humans can thrive, work as cohesive teams, and enjoy their work. She is a trusted advisor and coach to successful leaders and executive teams for Cadmus' private and public sector clients. She has a proven track record of developing successful strategies for high visibility, transformational change initiatives to achieve results. Loretta holds a graduate certificate in Executive Coaching from Georgetown University, is a Master Practitioner of the Team Diagnostic Survey, and The Leadership Circle Profile. She served on the board of directors for the Washington D.C. Chapter of the International Coach Federation.

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