



## **The Constant Fear of Change: Why people and organizations have it, and what to do about it?**

*By Michelle Ray, Leadership Expert*

*“Our dilemma is that we hate change and love it at the same time;  
what we want is for things to stay the same but get better”—Sydney Harris*

Being on the precipice of change and feeling trepidation, determining whether or not the fear is real or self-manufactured is the first step. It may mean doing nothing about our careers, businesses, or a personal matter for now if the timing doesn't feel right. Or, it may propel us to move in a new direction.

Fear is a natural emotion. We all possess the innate ability to harness the fight or flight response as a means of protecting ourselves from a threat; whether that threat is real or perceived. On the other hand, the fear of change involves a different state that I describe as the “fright” response. We don't simply retreat from it; we are often so terrified by the prospect of change that we allow the fear to become all-consuming. As a result, we stay stuck...because staying stuck is easier than creating change.

The same can be said for organizations of every description. Operating in a perpetual state of economic uncertainty causes many leaders to remain fearful of change. The trickle-down effect has numerous, negative consequences. Teams are expected to remain productive while their organization is in a state of flux; managers expect them to perform and keep their business profitable.

Consider the NHL trade deadline that just passed with relatively few changes being made to the composition of the majority of teams. Was it because of a shorter season, or was it because the status quo was a safer bet? Only a handful of managers decided to boldly take risk, while others engaged in a flurry of activity in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour; ultimately opting to leave things be. As a hockey fan watching the drama unfold, I was bemused by the manner in which team managers and coaches rationalized their decision-making processes; in essence, why many chose to do nothing when they could have chosen change.

### **Willingness to risk**

A recessionary environment exacerbates the feeling of helplessness, as many people believe that they cannot escape their situation. During volatile economic conditions, it is no wonder we may feel stuck; taking the leap of faith when there is no safety net feels overwhelming. Yet, examples abound of entrepreneurial ideas that are flourishing. Such individuals recognize that the first step in creating change is developing the willingness to risk. It is impossible to create personal and professional change

without *movement*. A lack of willingness is linked to fear. Those who acknowledge and embrace the unknown do not balk at uncertainty. They are ready to stand out from the crowd and recognize the opportunities that come from creating change.

### **Reframing reality**

When we become overwhelmed by disillusionment and feel defeated by unpredictable circumstances, this is the precise moment to recognize our capacity to overcome despondency and begin to project different outcomes. Examples abound of people who seized opportunity in a down economy by redefining their entire approach while others continue to either stand still or focus on escalating doom and gloom. Yes, it takes energy. However, the difference between the two approaches begins with attitude.

### **Understanding the fear of loss**

When change happens, what are we afraid of losing? Income? Security? Benefits? Identity? When leaders understand that this is precisely the reason for individuals retreating from slightest hint of organizational change, they will find that by *first* demonstrating genuine empathy, people will be more accepting and prepared for change.

### **Self-doubt is the Core of Your Fears**

Boom/bust economic cycles are nothing new. Nor are the cycles of a personal nature, i.e., the inevitable peaks and valleys of life. It *is* productive to experience the “valleys.” I wouldn’t trade mine, even though I can say categorically that they haven’t been enjoyable. Nonetheless, how do I keep growing? Challenge is an essential ingredient of leading oneself. Feeling fear is a natural emotion and only you can decide where your hunch is leading you.

### **Choosing to take the lead**

When your desire to create change is greater than your desire to repeat patterns that yield the same results, you will be ready to let go and respond differently to the negative thoughts and influences that affect you, both consciously and unconsciously.

As a global citizen within a world economy, no group is immune from the aftershocks felt from the latest “great recession.” However, there is one stand-alone choice that any one of us can make at any time. When facing overwhelming frustration and disappointment that comes with the rude awakening of so many factors being out of our control, we always have the choice to lead ourselves first.

### **About Michelle Ray**

Born in Australia and now residing in Vancouver, Canada, Michelle Ray is a leadership and workplace motivation expert who demonstrates a deep understanding of internal team dynamics, interpersonal communication, and personal accountability. For the past eighteen years, Michelle has worked with hundreds of leaders and their teams by helping them create effective business relationships and positive workplaces. Her blog contains excerpts from her newly-released book: *Lead Yourself First! Breakthrough Strategies to Live the Life You Want*