

Pursuing Change

By Michelle LaBrosse, PMP®, Chief Cheetah and Founder of Cheetah Learning, and Kristen Medina, CAPM®, Co-Author

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “change”? For many of us, words like “anxious”, “overwhelmed”, or “unknown” pop into our head. Why is it that changes and transitions bring on so much negative energy? One hypothesis is that we may be wired to fear change. Imagine our ancestors in nomadic times as they assessed their surroundings for any sign of change and possible danger, as the two most often went hand-in-hand. Perhaps our DNA is to blame for associating “same” with safety and “change” with danger.

Change is a hot topic for PMs right now. Agile takes a different look at change from traditional project management. Instead of simply managing change, Agile aims to pursue and embrace change, using change as a source of strength throughout the project lifecycle. Another change element that is on the minds of PMs this year is the changing of the PMP Exam (from the PMBOK Guide Fourth Edition to the Fifth Edition), which starts on July 31.

To thrive in business and in life, we must learn to not only embrace change, but to pursue it and learn to capitalize on it. When we pursue change rather than running away from it, we can proactively stay engaged, habitually question the status quo, and ensure that we are staying on top of our game. Here are the top five ways that you can use to help you to let go of your fears and pursue change with abandon:

1. Love Uncertainties - I am a risk-taker, and some even consider me to be a daredevil (while driving around on my Harley, I sometimes feel like one). And while I love uncertainty, I make sure I’m prepared for the risks that I may encounter. For instance, before I bought my Harley 1200 CC Sportster, I gradually worked my way up to driving such a big machine, starting out with a small 200 CC scooter, then graduating to a 500 CC scooter. I also took a motorcycle safety class to help me make the transition from an automatic scooter to a manual clutch motorcycle. When I got the Harley, I also bought the best gear so that I could protect myself in case I took a dive. This still didn’t protect me when my 600 pound Harley fell on me in a simple slide out as I was leaving a parking lot, but I learned and put engine guards on the bike so that it would not fall right on me again. Every time I go out on my Harley, it is an adventure. While I love what I encounter, I make sure that I am as safe as I can be.

Life is filled with uncertainties. To fully embrace life, I love uncertainties; they test my metal when I get into situations where I have to figure out new, creative ways to maneuver through them to a successful outcome. Time and time again, I discover, much to my delight, that the riskier the situation, the more uncertainties there are, and the greater the rewards.

2. Accept your Internal Strength to Weather Change. One of the biggest reasons why people fear change is because they think, “Maybe I can’t handle this new situation.” The reality is that human beings are pretty darn adaptable. If you’ve ever jumped into a pool of really cold water, you probably felt a terrible shock at first, and thought, “This was a terrible idea – why did I just do that?” That is our physical reaction to change – your body was shocked from the cold water and, at first, rejected it. Then, as you swam around, the temperature began to feel invigorating and it turned into a great experience – one that proved your internal strength.

The pool water did not change – you became accustomed to the temperature. Instead of resisting these types of experiences, try to find every “cold pool” (figuratively speaking) within your reach, and dive in. These cold pools in our life come in many different forms: reorganized division at work, a move to a new town, or a new group of friends. While you may fear jumping in the cold pool that you are facing, know that you can handle it, and more than that, know that you will thrive and be glad that you jumped into it in the first place.

3. Tackle Tiny Fears. Our minds are pattern-seeking, habit-forming, information-processing machines. Whether we are conscious of it or not, every day we are programming ourselves in ways that can either empower or disempower.

If you have a strong change-fear connection, here is an easy way to start to reprogram your mind for a different response pattern: Each day, do something small that frightens you just a bit. Maybe talk to your boss about that trip you want to take this summer, but are afraid to bring up. Or present your change idea to your team of colleagues that you have been too afraid to talk about due to fear of rejection. By tackling these small fears, you will realize that the thought of the action itself is more fearful and stressful than the actual action. This is how change is as well. When you can see your fear for what it is (oftentimes over-exaggerated), you can better pursue change in a way that helps you grow personally and professionally.

4. Communicate Through Change. We tend to fear what we don’t understand. If you are the one initiating a change, make sure to communicate the purpose of the change to all stakeholders, and get their buy-in. Conversely, if you don’t understand why something has to change, don’t be complacent; ask questions until you get the answer. When we have a clear understanding of why someone is pursuing change, we can better get behind the change effort.

5. Stay Positive. When considering whether or not to pursue change and the subsequent unknown outcome, we are faced with a risk that this outcome might be bad. What we often overlook is that the outcome may very well be an improved condition over the previous state from before the change. Being positive will not only help ease your fears, but will also help a positive outcome actually occur as it will free you from “fear paralysis” and will help you to pursue positive change.

Project Managers – pursue change in your life today! Whether it is in your personal or professional realm, you can make great waves when you are one of the few people that not only accepts change, but proactively pursues change to create better outcomes for everyone. “Business as usual” has never produced greatness. Push the boundaries of what is possible, and discover true greatness when you actively pursue change.

About the Author:



Michelle LaBrosse, PMP, is an entrepreneurial powerhouse with a penchant for making success easy, fun, and fast. She is the founder of [Cheetah Learning](#), the [author](#) of the [Cheetah Success Series](#), and a prolific [blogger](#) whose mission is to bring Project Management to the masses.

Cheetah Learning is a virtual company with 100 employees, contractors, and licensees worldwide. To date, more than 50,000 people have become “Cheetahs” using Cheetah Learning’s innovative Project Management and accelerated learning techniques.

Recently honored by the Project Management Institute (PMI®), Cheetah Learning was named Professional Development Provider of the Year at the 2008 PMI® Global Congress. A dynamic keynote speaker and industry thought leader, Michelle was previously recognized by PMI as one of the 25 Most Influential Women in Project Management in the world.

Michelle’s articles have appeared in more than 100 publications and websites around the world. Her monthly column, the [Know How Network](#), is carried by over 400 publications.

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