Plus ça change, plus c’est même change. This French proverb, “The more things change, the more they are the same,” captures two elements of change that seem opposite and contrary. Change is inevitable and it is persistent. The inevitability and persistence, apparently notions that are so opposed to each other, actually fit together. This is one of the main points made in Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch’s (1974) classic work on change.

Inevitable means that no matter what you do, you cannot change what is happening. Night follows day. Seasons sequence yearly. Death follows birth. Administrators find new things to add to their domain. Inevitable means that you are not in control. With persistence, however, control is in your domain. The point made in November’s Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services (JPN) editorial (Smoyak, 2012) is that psychiatric nurses need to be persistent, as well as persuasive.

Managing change is simply knowing when to accept the inevitable and when to identify something about which to be persistent, and thus create change. Wilensky (1983) offers sound strategies for planning and understanding change. He offers ways to categorize goals, showing how perceptions of problems first need analysis before planning can be successful. Many of the articles in JPN start with the identification of a clinical problem and go on to explicate how solutions were identified and tested. Sometimes research projects are described, whereas others are simply evidence-based practices put in place.

The New Year is a time for change. Almost everyone makes some resolutions, thus acknowledging that personal change is in order. The intention to change, and the reality of executing change, may be far apart. As you are reading this, you may have already broken a few of your own resolutions.

A significant change has occurred for JPN. Karen Stanwood, ELS, who has served as our executive editor for 13 years, is taking on other responsibilities at SLACK Incorporated. Aileen Wiegand, ELS, is the journal’s new executive editor. Other support staff remain the same. Our intention is that this major shift will be seamless, and that you, as our readers, will see no difference in the quality, diversity, and very current topics and issues that we cover in the editorials, main articles, special sections, and news. The more things change, the more they are the same.

Change can be positive or negative, welcomed or not, anticipated as dreadful or potentially pleasant. The inevitability of change comes into our attention daily, sometimes many times each day, depending on the nature of our work. Change comes in the form of directives, memos, e-mails, telephone calls, or encounters with new clients, staff, students, and others in our domain. Unexpected announcements by family members about a change of plans or new realities are usually accompanied by a dose of anxiety. A phone call at 3 a.m. (unless you are working nights) is rarely a pleasant event.

Another dimension of change is ownership. Ownership, as a concept, has interesting consequences in the world of work and play. Territoriality is a version of ownership. I work at a university, and I am careful to remind myself and others that I do not own “my office.” It is owned by Rutgers and the State of New Jersey, not me. Therefore, other staff and students should feel welcome to enter it and work in it. I have joked about the fact that I probably hold the record for the number of times I have changed offices at Rutgers. The longer one remains in a place, such as an office, the more it feels as if one owns it. Expected change offsets potential accompanying anxiety.

Of the many articles and books that have been written about change in the past half century, Watzlawick et al.’s (1974) four steps to manage situations where change is needed remain the clearest and most useful:
1. “A clear definition of the problem in concrete terms” (p. 110). The idea for a new goal or needed change may start with one person but needs to have “buy-in” from those who will be affected by the change, or who will be in charge of implementation.

2. “An investigation of the solutions attempted so far” (p. 110). Listing the solutions tried, clearly and succinctly, with timelines, is important. The list should include “Who did what, when?”

3. “A clear definition of the concrete change to be achieved” (p. 110). A good plan would be to spend a few weeks, beforehand, reading some of the classic works on change (Benne, Bennis, & Chin, 1985).

4. “The formulation and implementation of a plan to produce this change” (p. 110). Note that change is best managed thoughtfully and carefully, giving enough time for each of the steps.

In a chapter on “The Terrible Simplifications” (pp. 40-46), Watzlawick et al. (1974) caution against denying the existence of problems, or insisting on easy solutions. Denial of problems sometimes includes attacks on those who share observations that situations need to be addressed. They state, “One way of mishandling a problem is to behave as if it did not exist” (p. 46).

Another caution, when analyzing what might need to be changed, is to remember that systems analysis prevents simplistic notions about both problems and solutions. When considering item 1 above, the definition of the problem, from each of the members or units of a system, is essential. The situation looks very different from the father/husband’s, mother/wife’s, grandparent’s, child’s, or adolescent’s views. If the system is a work setting, the same caution applies.

Staying centered and productive, then, is to realize both the inevitable and persistent aspects of change. Be in touch with what you cannot change, and what you can. Choose wisely.

Happy New Year.

REFERENCES

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