



„And Suddenly, My Key No Longer Fit the Front Door“

What Change Processes Have in Common with Being Left Behind – and What Leaders Must Learn from It

By Christian Rook

The Moment, everything changed

The suitcase stood outside.
The door was locked.
The key—no longer fit.

No message. No conversation. No goodbye. Only the realization:
Someone had made a decision—and I hadn't been part of it.

That's how change feels when it's not inclusive but imposed. For many employees, a change process is not a new perspective but a **loss**. Not just the job itself is at stake, but what it *emotionally* represents: **security, meaning, belonging**.



1. Two Roles, Two Realities

Leaders who initiate change often have months or even years of preparation behind them. They know the reasons, have explored options, compared scenarios, weighed risks. For them, change is a **strategic step**—rational, deliberate, and often necessary.

For employees, however, that step often hits like a **tsunami**.

Swiss psychologist and consultant Hans-Peter Zürcher puts it succinctly:

“For the change agent, change is a step. For the changee, it's a fall.”

This emotional disconnect between sender (change agent) and receiver (changee), between the decider and the affected, lies at the heart of many failed transformation efforts.

2. When Communication Becomes Exclusion

By the time change is announced, much of it is already clear—if not completed—for leadership. But what marks a strategic shift for them often marks an **emotional crisis** for employees.

Here lies a common misunderstanding:

Leadership *thinks* it is communicating—but in reality, it is **excluding**.

It *intends* to motivate—but instead creates **distance**.

A statement like:

“We're standing at the edge—but if we implement this plan, we'll become market leaders,”

may sound reasonable to executives. But to employees who are losing their roles or don't recognize their place anymore, it sounds more like:

"We're breaking up—but hey, let's still be friends."

The reality of someone on the shop floor often has little in common with the optimistic mantras presented in company town halls.

Real change doesn't begin with strategy decks or manipulative language—it begins with listening, honesty, and relationship.

3. Emotions Need Leadership—Not Just Understanding

Change isn't just a cognitive task—it's an **emotional process**.

Neurologically, the brain processes change similarly to **grief**.

The five well-known phases described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross still hold true:

Shock – Denial – Anger – Bargaining – Acceptance

Some have already reached acceptance, while others remain stuck in anger—or are still in shock. Some recover in weeks, others in months. And some check out completely—**emotionally or physically**.

This is where **leadership proves itself**: through patience, presence, and **support instead of pressure**.

And one thing is clear:

As long as the workforce remains frozen in shock, resists change, or actively rejects it, both motivation and productivity will drop—significantly. For companies undergoing mission-critical transformation, attending to emotional needs is not an act of goodwill—it's a **business imperative**.

Because let's be honest:

The customer, who's been waiting far too long for a cleanly delivered product, rarely accepts "internal change" as an excuse.

Unmanaged change inside will be paid for outside.

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4. "Having said it" isn't the same as "Having understood it"

One of the most common complaints in change processes is:

"But I informed the team! about it"

But we know:

- **Having thought about it, does not mean it was actually said.**
- **Having said it, does not mean it was actually heard.**
- **Having heard it, does not automatically imply having listened to it.**
- **Having listened to it, does not mean, it was understood.**
- **Having understood it, does not mean they agree with it.**
- **Having agreed with it, does not automatically mean, they will implement it.**
- **Implementing it, does not mean, it will be sustained.**

Real communication moves through **multiple levels**—and each one can fail.

That's why true leadership means **more than sending messages**. It means checking in, **seeking resonance**, and **staying in dialogue**.

Communication is only successful when the intended message truly lands—**emotionally and cognitively**.

And it goes further: **effective communication requires agreement**. Both sides must mean the same thing. And align on what happens next.

5. Responsibility Before Vision

Change doesn't succeed through PowerPoint slides. It requires **ownership**.

Those who initiate transformation must understand the **emotional ripple effect** they create. Leadership today means:

- **Knowing you are the trigger**
- **Making your message truly relevant**
- **Building trust, not just momentum**
- **Fostering relationships, not just structures**

It's not enough to design a new system.

You have to carry the people through it—**humanly and emotionally**.

6. The Suitcase at the Door

The suitcase left at the door isn't a symbol of resolve.

It's a symbol of **a broken relationship**—and of leadership's failure to accompany people through transition.

If we want change to succeed, we can't just set the suitcase down and move on.

We must open a **dialogue**—one that acknowledges perspectives, situations, fears, and needs on both sides. Especially between **change agents and changees**.

Change doesn't start with vision. It starts with responsibility—for the emotions you set in motion.

Empathy is not, as Elon Musk recently said, „the world's problem.”

Maybe it's the **greatest opportunity for a successful after**.



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