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## OFF THE RECORD

# When Loyal Workers Struggle With Change

Veterinary professionals juggle chaos like pros until a new rule bulldozes their carefully scripted day.

BY STACEE SANTI, DVM

One of the favorite things I've always said about myself is that I love change. I embrace it. I practically high-five change on its way in. If it were me and change on a desert island, I'd be in heaven. I've always rolled my eyes a little when people say veterinarians are resistant to change, because if you think about it for more than five seconds, we change all day long. In fact, every 30 minutes, you get dropped into a brand-new escape room, otherwise known as an appointment. One minute you're talking about itchy ears, and the next minute you're diagnosing heart failure. Then you're trying to educate the Frenchie owners on why their dog needs a \$2,000 dental.

So, yes, veterinarians are good at change. But what we — or anyone else, for that matter — are not great at is having change forced upon us.

There's a big difference between navigating the unpredictable nature of medicine and being told, out of nowhere, that the way you've done something for 20 years is being replaced by a brand-new system, workflow, or corporate policy dreamed up by someone who possibly never spent a day in a veterinary practice.

That's when resistance kicks in. It's the brain saying, "Wait, you want me to dismantle expertise and go back to beginner mode?" That's a hard sell. It might also explain why your team doesn't jump up and cheer when you roll out a shiny new program.

### **Crying in My Coffee**

My resilience theory started to wobble when I made a routine grocery run and realized they were completely out of my International Delight White Chocolate Mocha creamer.

I've used this creamer for decades. If I go on vacation, I bring some with me. If I can't find it in my little town, I will drive to Walmart in the next town. I'm not saying I can't live without it. I've had to on rare occasions. Logically, I should have a backup option, but do any of them taste the same? Absolutely not.

I didn't panic at first. I gave it a few days. Still empty.

I drove to Walmart. Out of stock.

I drove to the next town. Out of stock.

I jumped on Amazon, placed the order, and felt immediate relief. Three days later, the order was canceled.

Oh, dear.

I talked to Paul, the owner of my local grocery store, who said he'd look into it. Then I did what any reasonable adult does when faced with uncertainty and a potential caffeine crisis: I turned to the internet. I needed to know if this was a temporary supply chain issue or if I needed to start moving through the stages of grief.

That's when I stumbled on a Facebook group called International Delight Support Group for Discontinued Creamer. And let me tell you, I was not alone. Hundreds of people just like me were trying to cope with the possibility that their favorite creamer was on the chopping block.

This made me think, why does change feel harder sometimes? Is it age? (I'm now in my fifth decade.) Is it something in the brain? Is there an actual scientific reason that even small changes can make fully functional adults feel like toddlers who missed their nap?

Turns out, yes.

### **Change Is Hard, Even When It's Good**

Your brain likes the familiar, even when the familiar isn't perfect. Humans are wired to stick with what we know because it saves mental energy and keeps things predictable. Routines are basically your brain's version of autopilot. Once something becomes a habit, you don't have to think so hard about it.

Change, on the other hand, wakes the brain up, forcing it to create new pathways, learn new patterns, and pay closer attention. Even when change is a good thing, it can feel exhausting at first simply because your brain is doing more lifting than it did yesterday.

Also, did you know that the average person makes tens of thousands of decisions each day? Not just big ones — should I fire this employee? — but tiny ones like do I answer this email now or later? Do I move that appointment or squeeze it in? Should I have a second piece of chocolate cake?

## LET'S DRINK TO THAT

According to Wired Me Cafe, "The 1980s and 1990s ushered in a new wave of innovation in coffee creamers. Brands like Coffee-Mate and International Delight introduced a variety of flavors, including hazelnut, French vanilla, and caramel macchiato, appealing to a growing audience of coffee enthusiasts."

Decision fatigue is real. And change adds more decisions to an already overloaded brain.

After learning all this, I ran a little experiment. I bought 10 pairs of the same leggings and 10 pairs of the same socks and was shocked at how much easier my life had become — one less thing to think about (and highly recommended).

### **Everyone Has a Secret Master Plan**

One of the biggest reasons people lose it when something changes is that they had a master plan for how the day was supposed to go. So when something unexpected gets introduced, like a vomiting dog added to the schedule at 5 p.m. or a new callback system launched on a Tuesday, it's not just a change. It's more like, "Wait, that's not how this was supposed to happen. You've hijacked my plane."

Our brains constantly forecast what's coming next because it makes us feel in control. Predictable feels safe. When reality goes off-script, people react to the fact that the version of the day they imagined just disappeared.

I've experienced it from the leadership side, too. In 2010, when visits were down, clinics were closing, and people were getting laid off, I worked tirelessly to find a way to grow my hospital's revenue. My plan? We would extend our hours and be open Friday night through Monday morning, taking emergency cases for the area. (I worked it out with the other clinics.) I arranged a night crew so that no one would work nights unless they wanted to. The only catch: Everyone would be required to work every third weekend.

As I write this, I'm still proud of my idea. It was a good one, but as it turned out, I was the only person who thought that. The staff was not wild about any of it. I spent a lot of one-on-one time with employees, listening, explaining,

and reassuring them that their lives were not over. Then I realized that my plan wasn't part of their master plan.

## **Sometimes Change Feels Stupid**

Let's be honest. Some changes are genuinely good, and some feel like they were made by someone who never worked a shift in your building.

For example, a corporation issues a policy requiring all narcotics to be locked up at all times. Sounds reasonable on paper until you have a seizing dog or a patient waking up and thrashing. And now, a team member is digging in your scrub pockets, looking for your keys, while you contain the sterile surgical field. Being a resourceful bunch, the team decides to keep the key in the lockbox all day, defeating the entire purpose.

That's why frontline teams get frustrated. Every change creates a ripple effect. You solve one problem and accidentally create three others.

## **We're Loss-Averse**

Humans feel loss more strongly than we feel an equivalent win. It's called loss aversion, and it explains why change is so uncomfortable. Even when a change comes with clear benefits, our brains focus on what might be lost:

- ▶ What if I can't learn this? (Loss of competence)
- ▶ I liked the old way. (Loss of comfort)
- ▶ This is how I've always done it. (Loss of identity)
- ▶ What if this makes everything harder? (Loss of stability)

As we age, we often become more resistant to change. Neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to form new connections, slows over time. It doesn't disappear; it just takes more effort. Older brains also rely more on efficiency and

## **WATCH AND LEARN**

Cognitive scientist Maya Shankar's TED Talk, "Why Change Is So Scary — and How to Unlock Its Potential," has been viewed more than 2 million times. Check it out at [bit.ly/4s3vA0c](https://bit.ly/4s3vA0c).



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habit because the shortcuts are deeply ingrained.

Dopamine, the chemical tied to novelty and motivation, also declines slightly with age. Therefore, change feels less like an adventure and more like work.

Plus, when you've lived longer, you've seen a few things:

- ▶ Failed software rollouts
- ▶ Bad leadership decisions
- ▶ Staffing shortages
- ▶ Corporate nonsense

Skepticism is earned. And most of the time, it's about bandwidth. You don't have to look too far to see that most humans are overbooked, under-rested, and running on fumes. Change requires cognitive energy, and if someone is already maxed out, even small changes can feel like too much.

## **Helping People Adapt**

The good news: Adaptability is not a personality trait you either have or don't. It's a skill. Here are a few tips:

- ▶ Name what you're feeling. ("I'm anxious because this is unfamiliar.")
- ▶ Focus on what you can control.
- ▶ Break change into microsteps.
- ▶ Know that the beginner phase is temporary.
- ▶ Keep routines stable where you can.
- ▶ Don't adapt alone. Instead, find the people who are changing, and stick by their side.
- ▶ Remember the bigger picture: better care, less burnout, smoother teamwork.
- ▶ Practice self-compassion.
- ▶ Most importantly, give it time.

Repetition is literally how the brain rewires.

At my clinic, we once reorganized the treatment area, making it objectively better. But the 3cc syringes moved from the drawer to an under-shelf bin. I subsequently opened that drawer about a thousand times out of habit. That's the brain at work.

Change is hard because the brain is designed to prioritize safety, familiarity, and efficiency, even over progress. The most loyal, experienced employees might struggle the most because they've mastered the old system the best.

The next time someone resists a new workflow or policy, remember that it's not personal and that they aren't trying to be difficult. It's biology, experience, and bandwidth. And with the right support, time, and leadership, even the creamer addicts among us can learn to adjust.

Oh, and Paul called. International Delight White Chocolate Mocha arrived, and he pulled it off the shelf for me.

Gotta run. See ya! **TVB**