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## Handling the stress of change

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When an unexpected situation arises during an activity, how you handle your thoughts and actions determines whether you and your group members become stressed-out or find a solution to the problem.

It seems that no matter how much we carefully plan events, things happen that are out of our control. From a DJ having his equipment stolen out of his vehicle on the way to your dance to a major snowstorm canceling your well-planned fundraiser, student leaders and their advisers must learn to adjust to the unexpected. Just as we teach young people about the ABCs of project planning, we must include the ABCs of dealing with change.

With every great project, there must be a system for dealing with change. Some refer to it as managing for the stressful moments of life, while others say "crisis time." The outlook of the adviser and the student leaders can determine the success of an event. Teaching young leaders how to deal with adversity, challenges, and change is the key to a successful program. Remembering that obstacles are only "opportunities in work clothes" is a perspective to embrace!

It is often our thoughts that create our feelings and result in our actions, so ask yourself, "what am I thinking about my current situation and how can I change my thoughts to be more productive?" Notice what thoughts enter and the feelings that are generated. At this point, ask yourself, "What is in my control?" Let go of what isn't in your control.

For example, weather is out of our control, yet many fret over the challenges of a possible storm. I choose to say "I have ordered beautiful weather for our event." The students laugh and we let go of the fear of poor weather impacting our event. Instead, we imagine just the right conditions for optimal success-and have alternative plans in case the beautiful weather arrives in another town instead of ours.

What happens when something unanticipated goes wrong? A carnation sale I once ran provides a good example. We counted the carnation orders (1,400), had the carnations delivered, and began tagging the flowers after school for next-morning delivery to classrooms. We were having a great time grouping the flowers by homeroom when someone noticed that we still had a stack of orders, yet only a few more flowers. For a moment, we experienced confusion and then panic. What happened? How could we be off in our count? What would we do?

This was the critical moment. I could have become angry, unsettled, and stressed out or I could find a solution to this challenge. At this point, tone of voice and my mind's reaction would determine the efficiency of the solution. My positive thoughts allowed me to develop a solution and think proactively rather than remain in the "we must have made a mistake" mode.

A call to the florist, a recount of sheets (we had Xeroxed order forms), lead us to discover that there was an error in the count. No time for blaming here, only solution making. Instead of panic, we chose to think we could find an answer. Calmly, we approached the florist. The result was a few dozen flowers purchased at the local grocery store at 6:00 a.m. and a wholesaler who drove back to the warehouse (two hours away) at 4:00 a.m. to accommodate our needs. When everyone arrived at school, the orders were filled, the local florist was our hero, and we actually had more flowers to sell on the day of delivery, thus increasing our profits!

Before an event, use your imagination to prepare for the outcomes you desire. Think about what might go wrong and have contingent plans. Think about all the parts that are needed for something to be successful and what might block the success. Keep the strategies for dealing with the challenges in a "just in case" folder. If you have imagined what might be the challenges, your mind is already finding solutions...just in case!

## Toolkit for Coping with Change

Just as you turn to your trusty toolkit to help fix mechanical problems, developing a toolkit for coping with change is a good idea. A toolkit for coping with change includes the following elements:

**Think positive.** Focus on the outcomes you desire and plan accordingly. When a challenge presents itself, strategize a solution. Throw away the words "I can't" and focus on what can be done to deal with the change.

**Accept what you are unable to change.** Focus on what you can influence. It is your perceptions that create the outcomes, not the behaviors or attitudes of another. If someone is blocking your ideas, think of how to help them see your point of view.

**Live in the present moment.** Let go of the challenges in the past, find the hidden lessons from those challenges, and seek to create a successful program. Adjust to the circumstances that you have currently, not what you wish you had.

**When feeling stress and turmoil, breathe and move.** Changing one's physiology, allows the body to relax. Even one minute of deep breathing an hour allows the body to rekindle its power. If you are working on a project and tension is increasing, change your position-stand if you are sitting, sit if you are standing. Do a "happy dance" (moving your body in silly ways) to release any tension that is building up.

**Create a circle of positive people.** Think of who you can connect with when life is challenging and reach out to them to help you deal with the change. Think of adults, friends, and others who are proactive, solution-- making people who can give you a fresh perspective.

**Affirmations.** Have a statement to repeat to yourself when you are feeling challenged. "I can do this;" "We can handle all the challenges;" "I have the solutions within my mind" are some ideas. By focusing on the possibility of solutions, the mind generates new ideas instead of getting stuck in the "we can't fix it" mode of stress!

**Rehearse stressful situations before they occur.** Practice your speech, prepare the artwork ahead of time, have extra supplies ready. If you have done a rehearsal in your mind, you will discover the smaller pieces that you may have forgotten on the day of the event. You are preplanning for success instead of responding to a stressful event as it creeps up on the day of the event.

**Ask, ask, ask.** Call other schools that might have done similar projects and ask "what worked?" and "what would work better?" (A nonjudgmental word choice instead of this was right and this was wrong). When you need permission for an event, ask "What would it take to make my request a 'yes' answer?" instead of "can we do...?"

**Worry release.** If you are worrying about something, ask yourself "how is this helping me?" You will usually say it's not helping, then laugh and switch your thought process to what is in your control.

**Calming moments.** Build into your project planning a calming moment before the stressful response happens. For example, build in time to celebrate along the way, time for a water break (soda increases the negative responses to stress), time to state what is working, and time to thank someone who has helped you. This allows your mind to focus on what is going well, instead of what is going wrong.

**E + R = O.** Remember it is the Event plus my Response that creates the Outcome. Ask yourself "what am I doing to deal with the change in a productive manner?" Think about ways you can respond to a challenging moment, not all the ways others are not responding to your needs. You can control your thoughts and feelings, not others!

**FEAR = Fantasized Experience Appearing Real.** Complete this statement when you are afraid of change. "I am afraid to " Now change the statement to: "I would really like to and I scare myself by imagining " Use your imagination to grow, not to limit yourself.

Calm the turbulent tiger inside. If you find yourself wanting to yell, or actually yelling, it is your body's way of saying "let me out of here." All of that internalized stress and repetitive thoughts like "if it doesn't go well, I will look bad; if we don't raise enough money, I will look like I didn't do enough," can build into an intolerable strain. When you feel a rage of anger come upon you, take a deep breath and exhale the pressure. Release the tension tiger from inside. Yelling only increases the stress level of those around you.

So take a deep breath, remember everyone cares, and talk in a calm voice. Life is unpredictable and it is up to us to be focused, organized, and ready to act when life presents us with a moment of Arrrgghh.

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