Organizations are changing at an unprecedented rate and requiring individuals to change with them. Change can be exciting and create opportunities for learning and personal growth. It can also arouse anger, frustration, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness especially in those who are not ready for change. Staff clinicians who learn to master the change process through gaining skills in proactive learning, collaborative teamwork, and stress management can increase their sense of well-being and security, and effectiveness in an ever changing workplace. They can also help their agencies cope more productively with changes, whatever they may be. To master change behavior involves traveling through a series of five stages: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. To master change employees need to know where they are currently in the stages of change for proactive learning, teamwork, and stress management, where they need to go next, and the strategies for how best to get there. [Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention 1:7–15 (2001)]

KEY WORDS: mastering change, transtheoretical model, stages of change, brief treatment.
their work environment the way scientists have come to view the world—as complex, dynamic, and unpredictable (Vicenzi, White, & Bergun, 1997). And they are being urged to take personal responsibility for gaining the skills to cope.

Employees are urged to “stay in school” and told that lifelong learning is the only way to remain competitive in the job market (Jones, 1995). They are being told to “add value” so as to prove their worth to an organization, to improve their job performance by practicing continuous quality improvement, to accept ambiguity and uncertainty, to alter their expectations, to learn new skills, and through all this to manage their own morale (Pritchett, 1994).

Employees who learn to master the change process through gaining skills in proactive learning, collaborative teamwork, and stress management can increase their sense of well-being and security, and effectiveness in an ever-changing workplace. They can also help their organization cope more productively with changes, whatever they may be. This paper will present first the general principles of mastering change and then will apply these principles to the specific challenge of helping professionals progress to providing brief therapy in place of long-term therapy.

Change is difficult (Abrahamson, 2000). Anyone who has tried to give up old ways and develop new ones knows how hard it is. There is a struggle with questions about whether or not the change is right, a struggle to build new routines one can work with, and a struggle with temptations to hold on to the past. Attempts to change can leave employees feeling overwhelmed and demoralized (Bronson, 1992; Johnson, 1998; Prochaska, Prochaska, & Levesque, 2001).

Change is especially difficult when others, like management of managed care organizations, tell employees they have to shift to brief therapy. For many who face imposed change, a first reaction is to get angry and defensive. Employees do not like feeling forced to do something they do not want to do—even when the leader trying to change them is convinced that it is in everyone’s best interest. In our personal lives, we often have the option of telling others to back off: “I’ll change when I’m ready, thank you very much.” However, in our work lives, options may be more limited: “Change—or be exchanged.”

Under what conditions does one feel free to change? Under what conditions does one feel coerced? The most obvious answer is that it depends on who initiates the change. When we initiate change, we feel free. When someone else initiates change, we feel pressured, coerced, or manipulated. But this obvious answer is not the most helpful. Feeling free is not necessarily a function of who initiates change. If the conditions are right, one can feel free to participate in changes imposed by others. Learning what these conditions are and how to create them is an important goal of mastering change. The most important condition is being ready.

Readiness for Change

Based on our research (Levesque, Prochaska, Hamby, & Weeks, 2000; Levesque, Prochaska, & Prochaska, 1999; Prochaska, 2000), we know that in most organizations less than 20% of employees are prepared to make changes that others want them to make. Agency and clinic staff are far more likely to change successfully if they see change as a process that unfolds over time. Change involves progression through a series of five stages: Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984; Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1995).

- **Precontemplation**—“Brief therapy is just a fad that will pass.” Precontemplation is the stage in which people do not intend to change their behavior in the next six months. This does not necessarily mean
that they whole-heartedly oppose the change; it means they are not ready to take action. When forced to take immediate action, Precontemplators are likely to experience change as imposed.

- **Contemplation**—“Is learning brief therapy worth it or not?” Contemplation is the stage in which employees are seriously intending to take action in the next six months, but are not prepared to do so immediately. They are more aware of the benefits of changing than Precontemplators, but are also aware of the costs. The costs of changing, including time, energy, fear of failure, fear of the unknown, and the hassles of learning new skills can create mixed feelings about change. And mixed feelings can lead to procrastination. Like Precontemplators, Contemplators can become resistant and defensive if forced to take action before they are properly prepared.

- **Preparation**—“You can count me in!” Preparation is the stage in which people are intending to take action in the near future. People in Preparation are convinced that the benefits of changing outweigh the costs. If only 20% of employees are prepared to make a change, it should come as no surprise that so many action initiatives fail. People in Preparation can become demoralized by all the resistance and resentment emanating from the rest of their colleagues who are not prepared to take action. This can lead them to doubt whether the change initiative is a good idea. On the other hand, they can be excellent role models for others participating in a stage-matched change program by making a commitment to the change effort and communicating that they are on board.

- **Action**—“I’m practicing brief therapy.” When staff members do make overt changes, they enter the Action stage. Although this is cause for celebration, it is too early to kick back and relax. Staying in Action is hard work. People need to work to maintain changes, resist temptation to return to their old ways of working, and to avoid relapsing to one of the earlier stages. The number one reason individuals fail in their change efforts is that they take shortcuts early in the change process, or are pressured to Action before they are adequately prepared.

- **Maintenance**—“It’s hard to imagine that long-term therapy was the rule rather than the exception.” Maintenance is the stage in which employees are sustaining their new ways of working. After a time, their patterns become more automatic. The main risks for relapse are in times of distress. Crises, conflicts, and unexpected consequences of the change can cause employees to seek the comfort of their old ways of working.

**Staging**

Employees can be staged using the following rules of thumb regarding a recent change initiative such as moving to brief therapy as a response to managed-care expectations. Employees are in:

- **Precontemplation** if they have no intention of taking action in the next six months,
- **Contemplation** if they intend to take action in the next six months,
- **Preparation** if they intend to take action in the next 30 days,
- **Action** if they made overt changes less than six months ago, or
- **Maintenance** if they made overt changes more than six months ago.

Mastering change requires that individuals recognize which stage they are in, and use stage-appropriate change strategies to keep them-
selves involved, open to new ideas, and moving forward. If they just sit while change happens around them, they may end up feeling isolated, miss opportunities for improving their work lives, stay stuck in the old ways of doing things, or increase risks of being exchanged.

Three Challenges: Proactive Learning, Collaborative Teamwork, and Stress Management

These three challenges—proactive learning, collaborative teamwork, and stress management—are common in the workplace (Burke, 1995). What is more important, however, is that these challenges help staff members cope more productively with changes down the line, whatever they may be. Proactive learning, collaborative teamwork, and stress management can increase one’s sense of well being and security, and effectiveness in an ever-changing world.

Proactive Learning

Employees have no choice but to learn if they are going to survive in the workplace. The deterioration of knowledge can damage an agency far more quickly than the deterioration of its buildings. In many fields, knowledge is increasing so quickly that half of what has been learned to date will be obsolete in less than three years (Senge, 1990).

There are two types of learning: reactive and proactive (Prochaska, 2000). Learning is reactive when the goal is to find immediate solutions to the latest crises. In contrast, learning is proactive when the goal is to anticipate and prepare for the future. For employees to respond effectively, they need to be skilled reactive and proactive learners. Proactive learners understand how and why things are done the way they are, keep track of what works and what does not, gain knowledge about other ways of doing things, change the way of doing things to reflect new knowledge, and share knowledge with others to solve problems.

As individuals gain and share knowledge, learn from others, and become creative problem-solvers, they become active participants in change. When they actively participate in learning, change does not feel imposed. They see the “big picture” and their important roles in it, and work becomes more meaningful.

Collaborative Teamwork

Managing change requires that people pull together to accomplish a common mission. Collaborative teams can be used in agencies to accomplish change. “Teamwork,” which to most people means “getting along,” and “being cooperative” is necessary for collaborative teams to function, but it is not enough. Collaborative team members share a common goal, brainstorm and solve problems, work together in a very focused way to accomplish the goal, and see how the goal benefits themselves, their team, and their organization (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

Change creates greater stress and conflict when coworkers are in very different stages of change. One of the benefits of collaboration is that it creates a common ground so that all participants can progress together. If employees are able to remain focused on the mission, solve tough problems together, and handle conflict as it arises, they can meet change with more confidence and contribute to their organization’s success. Those further along in the stages will need to help other participants prepare for action. Those in earlier stages are likely to feel some motivation to progress so they do not hold up the whole team.

Stress Management

Change is stressful (Conner, 1992). One of the best measures of stress is the amount of change people have experienced in the last year. Not
only can change be time consuming as staff members learn and practice new ways of doing things, change can be a hassle. By definition, habits are automatic and do not require much attention. As workers make changes, they are required to focus much more on their behavior as they evaluate, monitor, and make decisions. Change also brings uncertainty. Staff members become attached to old ways, routines, and work settings. With change, the familiar is replaced with the unfamiliar.

Although stress in a changing world is inevitable, employees have options on how to manage it. Stress management includes regular relaxation, physical activity, talking with others, making time for social activities, and reasonable self-statements (Davis, Eshelman, & McKay, 1995). To master change, workers need to assess the need for stress management, and develop strategies for reducing the impact of stressful changes at work. Learning to lower the stress load will enable staff to function and adapt more effectively.

Here is another way to view the three challenges described above:

1. **Proactive learning** allows employees to carefully plan and implement change before conditions in the outside world create an urgent need to respond. Proactive learning is one of the best ways to prevent downsizing. The more one grows, the more likely one’s agency will grow.

2. **Collaborative teams** can provide an excellent environment for learning and sharing information, and the kind of creative problem solving necessary in organizational learning. Well-functioning teams can also pull together in times of crisis to draw on a wide range of expertise to generate workable solutions. Teams can also be a source of support for employees having difficulty with change.

3. **Stress management** helps employees cope when change threatens to become overwhelming. Ideally, one would like to see change unfold in a systematic way that allows one to remain calm, confident, and optimistic. But this is not always the case. Most staff members need to reduce their stress to manage the impact of change, in part because there are always costs of changing.

To master change and move from Precontemplation to Contemplation it is important to increase Pros in the three skill areas. Table 1 shows examples of possible Pros for employees progressing toward practicing brief therapy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Pros for Employee Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proactive learning will...</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) keep me informed of advances in brief therapy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) allow me to share what I know about brief therapy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) help me become more positive about brief therapy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) help me be competitive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1994). So that the Pros of changing will start to outweigh the Cons, one needs to keep adding to the list of Pros. The contemplation stage is also the time to think about shrinking the list of Cons.

Table 2 shows some common Cons staff members have given for the three challenges.

It is important to think of the Cons of changing as temporary challenges rather than as permanent barriers. To make progress, the Cons of change have to shrink only half as much as the Pros of changing need to grow (Prochaska et al., 1994).

What do we have to give up when we change our old ways? Most behavior changes really do have some losses or costs that accompany them. Proactive learning can be time-consuming. Working alone creates more opportunities for personal recognition. Some people find stressful, driven lifestyles. There are ways to reduce these costs and losses by replacing them with better alternatives. Proactive learning can increase one’s value to the agency. Collaborative teams can accomplish more than any one person alone can. Exercise can make one feel energized so work gets done.

Sometimes shrinking the losses involves looking at things in a different way. For example: How does the cost of proactive learning compare to the costs of not being able to compete? How does the cost of getting individual recognition compare to the loss of shared problem solving? How does the cost of doing exercise to get energized compare to the health costs of too much stress?

To progress to the Preparation stage, employees need to take some small steps. Small steps can lead to big gains over time. Table 3 shows some small steps to take in moving to brief therapy.

Once an employee is committed to go to the Action stage, consider the activities shown in Table 4.

In the Action stage, an employee is making significant, regular changes that are obvious to everyone. Table 5 lists some signs of Action.

To progress to the Maintenance stage, an employee needs to substitute better alternatives when he/she is tempted to slip back to old practices. Dealing with the temptations by having other behaviors and thoughts available is an important tool. Table 6 lists some ways to deal with urges to slip back into old ways of practicing therapy. This approach substitutes more constructive thoughts or “comebacks” for thoughts that tempt one to slip back into old ways. This strategy is quick, free, private, and available anywhere, anytime.

Creating new ways of working requires time and patience. The new ways need to be practiced, over and over again. One of the reasons relapse, or going back to old ways, can happen so fast is that we can re-acquire old habits with just one slip or lapse. That is why it is best to cope with temptations as much as possible. Give a new skill like brief therapy the chance to be-

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**TABLE 2. Some Cons for Changing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proactive learning will . . .</th>
<th>Collaborative teamwork will . . .</th>
<th>Stress management will . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) mean sharing information about therapy that I prefer to keep to myself,</td>
<td>(a) make me more dependent on my coworkers,</td>
<td>(a) take up too much time,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) require more reading about brief therapy on my own time,</td>
<td>(b) reduce my autonomy as a therapist,</td>
<td>(b) disrupt my daily routines,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) take time away from more comfortable ways of practicing.</td>
<td>(c) make it harder for others to recognize my unique achievements.</td>
<td>(c) take away the &quot;performance&quot; &quot;edge&quot; that stress provides.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 3. Small Steps in Moving to Brief Therapy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proactive learning</th>
<th>Collaborative teamwork</th>
<th>Stress management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Write down information on brief therapy and share it with a coworker.</td>
<td>• Identify a goal you share with others in your organization around brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Take a walk when you feel anxious about doing brief therapy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talk with an expert about how to improve on the practice of brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Ask a coworker to brainstorm with you as you solve a problem with doing brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Plan one enjoyable social activity this week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Find data to back up a decision you make around doing brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Make a conscious effort to remain open to others’ ideas about brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Take 15 minutes out of your lunch break to practice relaxation exercises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learn more about the successes and failures of one of your organization’s competitors in providing brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Pay attention to how you handle differences of opinion regarding brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Prioritize your work assignments so you have time to learn brief therapy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4. Action Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proactive learning</th>
<th>Collaborative teamwork</th>
<th>Stress management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Seek out new information this week about brief therapy. —read one article on advances in brief therapy. —ask an expert a question to become better informed about brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Practice working collaboratively with coworkers. —identify at least one project around brief therapy that could benefit from a collaborative approach. —talk with coworkers about a brief therapy project you could work on together. —organize a collaborative team on brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Identify a colleague who is willing to listen about the challenges of doing brief therapy. —begin sharing your difficulties and concerns regarding brief therapy with a close colleague. —set aside time to talk about brief therapy without distractions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Share what you have learned. —tell a coworker about a book or article you’ve read on brief therapy. —ask a coworker for his or her thoughts on one of your ideas about brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Begin to improve conflict resolution skills around brief therapy. —read a book on collaborative teamwork. —talk with a coworker about how you might resolve conflict in teams about brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Gradually increase moderate exercise to 20 minutes, 3–5 times/week. —take a brisk walk around the block and let go of your tension about brief therapy. —use the stairs instead of the elevator when possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gradually increase proactive learning around brief therapy. —identify courses and seminars on the practice of brief therapy.</td>
<td>• Encourage others to participate in collaborative teams on brief therapy. —tell a coworker about the Pros of collaboration on brief therapy</td>
<td>• Schedule time each week to relax and socialize with friends. —make socialization a part of your regular routine.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Mastering change can transform employees from passive staff members who react and resist change to proactive staff members who participate in producing progress through continuous learning, collaborating and managing stress. Wherever employees are in the stages of readiness to master change to brief therapy, they can participate in the process and begin progressing toward a mastery that can enhance personal well-being and the long-term well-being of the agency. Organizations can facilitate such participation and progress by respecting employees in each stage of change and welcoming them to become part of the process rather than trying to coerce them into immediate action.

References


TABLE 5. Signs of Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proactive learning</th>
<th>Collaborative teamwork</th>
<th>Stress management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Continually trying to anticipate and prepare for the future of brief therapy</td>
<td>• Regularly searching for new sources of information on brief therapy</td>
<td>• Regularly talking with coworkers about innovative ways to do brief therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regularly searching for new sources of information on brief therapy</td>
<td>• Engaging in active listening when others are talking about brief therapy</td>
<td>• Accepting occasional conflict about brief therapy as a normal part of collaboration and teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regularly talking with coworkers about innovative ways to do brief therapy</td>
<td>• Regularly encouraging others to work with you on brief therapy skills</td>
<td>• Regularly monitoring your daily level of stress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 6. Comebacks for Tempting Thoughts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tempting thought</th>
<th>Proactive learning</th>
<th>Collaborative teamwork</th>
<th>Stress management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The more I learn about brief therapy the more they will expect of me.</td>
<td>The more I learn the better I do.</td>
<td>This isn’t worth the trouble.</td>
<td>Stress management takes too much time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not getting paid to learn.</td>
<td>Working to improve myself increases my self-esteem and value to employers and clients.</td>
<td>Anytime I try to collaborate, conflict arises.</td>
<td>Just 10–15 minutes of relaxation will make me feel better the rest of the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict is a normal part of working together.</td>
<td>I can manage stress, even though it can be difficult at times.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

come stronger than the old patterns of long-term treatment.