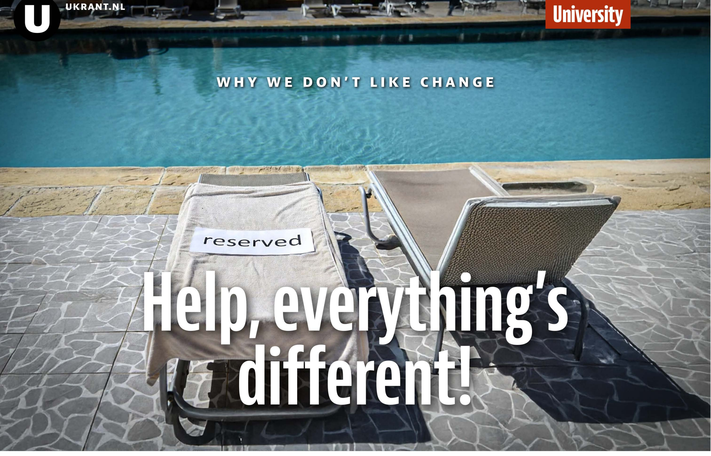
WHY WE DON'T LIKE CHANGE



Help, everything's different!

The UG's merger plans aren't getting a lot of support from the faculties involved. It's not exactly surprising: people tend to not respond well to changes being announced. But why is that? 'People know what they have and appreciate what they already know.'

BY MARIT BONNE
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It's three minutes past eight in the morning, a hotel in a sunny location. The first Dutchman walks outside, a towel under his arm as he marches doggedly to the recliners around the pool. There's one in the back that gets the best sunlight and is the farthest away from the screaming children in the water. It's been his for the past few days.

Behind him are a host of other tourists, all on the same mission. But as the Dutchman approaches the recliner, he finds a nasty surprise: 'his' chair is already occupied by a towel.

Whether they suddenly have to find a new recliner, their colleague stole 'their' desk in the office, or an entire university system is being changed; people don't really like change. That's actually quite interesting, explains neuro-geneticist Jean-Christophe Billeter, because we're constantly faced with it.

Intrinsic

'Life and the environment are always changing', he says. 'Your body is equipped with all sorts of mechanisms necessary to adapt. Adapting to change is a core aspect of living organisms, really.'

For instance, our skin changes colour after a day spent in the sun. When we go for a walk at night, our pupils react to the amount of available light, whether we're walking past a bright lamp post or in complete darkness.

So why do we resist change so much at other times? As Billeter explains, it all depends on the type of change. 'Personally, I love to see new things and I find that the best way to grow is to change my environment. I'm actually surprised that I've been living in the same place for fourteen years now.' But, he emphasises, these beloved changes were all wanted. 'They have not been imposed on me; the changes I am talking about are intrinsically motivated.'

> Adapting to change is a core aspect of living organisms

Unexpected changes enforced from the outside are much less likely to be welcomed. Assistant professor of organisational psychology Claudia Kitz knows this to be true as well. Her field roughly distinguishes between two types of change: evolutionary change and revolutionary change.

Evolutionary change at work happens gradually and is practically unavoidable, such as changes to HR policies. But revolutionary change constitutes major turning points. Like a new type of technology that upends an entire field, for example, necessitating a change in strategy for organisations. 'Most change processes are evolutionary', Kitz explains. 'Revolutionary changes are very rare.'

Uncertainty

The latter usually comes with a lot of uncertainty, says professor of information management Albert Boonstra. The 'fear of the unknown' plays a big part in that. 'People know what they have and appreciate what they already know', he says. 'They haven't yet experienced how attractive certain changes will be.'

Social sciences professor Wander Jager agrees. 'Even when people expect a change to turn out well, they'll keep ruminating on what it will mean for them individually.'

> Around 75 percent of the change initiatives do not yield the intended outcomes

He is seeing this happen at the university. 'My young colleagues are working extremely hard so they can get promoted, pay their mortgages, and take care of their kids', he says. 'They're already dealing with so many uncertainties and fears, and now they have to deal with the reorganisation on top of that. It's probably really hard for them.'

That's why he says that communication is absolutely essential, even when changes do clearly have negative consequences. 'People dislike it less than the uncertainty', says Jaber. 'By being open about the effects of the change, you can at least alleviate some of the fears that people have, and with it, their resistance.'

Spectrum

Boonstra knows all about resistance. He studies how technology is adopted in healthcare. 'Support of and resistance to change are on a spectrum', he says. 'Where someone is on the spectrum depends on three factors: context, content, and process.'

The first factor emphasises what Boonstra and Jager say about uncertainty. Context contains a bias for the status quo: people feel that any change that's implemented should prove itself. Will the new situation definitely be better than the previous one?

When people are resisting the intended goal of change, we're talking about content, Boonstra explains. 'That's when people think the change isn't a solution to the problem at hand.' One example is Arthur Mol's recommendation to merge the smaller UG faculties with bigger ones: it would improve efficiency and interdisciplinarity. While the faculties have no qualms about interdisciplinarity, they don't think the merger works as a solution.

The unequal division of cost and benefit also plays a role. Boonstra: 'The losers lose more than the winners win.' At least, that's how people tend to perceive it: the large faculties gain interdisciplinarity, while the smaller ones lose their identities.

> Winners should win a little less and losers lose less

Finally, when people focus not on the change's end goal, but rather on how these changes are being devised and executed, we're talking about the 'process', says Boonstra.

Sometimes, changes are decided by higher ups, like a board, and sometimes, people simply don't trust why changes are being made. This also leads to resistance. 'For instance when an "outsider" like Arthur Mol becomes involved,' says Boonstra. 'It's important to note that people don't necessarily oppose the goal of the change; rather, they disagree with the process.'

Common goal

Kitz knows that the immense resistance to change means very few plans actually come to fruition. 'Around 75 percent of the change initiatives do not yield the intended outcomes.'

So how should sustainable changes be implemented? 'You have to make sure that there is a common goal and work towards that together.'

In healthcare, Boonstra utilises principles he learned from grief counselling. 'Changes can almost feel like losing a loved one', he says. 'It's almost like grief, which can make people angry and confused.' Implementing change is often only considered from a rational viewpoint, and the emotional side is forgotten.

That's a mistake. People will always be resistant to change in some form or another, says Boonstra, and so it pays to consider the process carefully. 'If you want to engender more support, you have to make sure that the winners win a little bit less and the losers lose less. That requires listening to people, taking your time, and sometimes making concessions in order to get people to cooperate more.'

Staying the course

Jager agrees. He takes inspiration from his experience in sailing. During a sailing trip on the Wadden, he suddenly saw that the weather was changing. The wind was picking up and waves were getting bigger. Visibility declined to near zero, the waves were tossing his boat around, and water was splashing onto the deck.

Jager was startled by the sudden change and had his work cut out for him. 'It was incredibly difficult to stay the course while at the same time ensuring that my family on board trusted me to take them home safely.' But, he says, it's a captain's job to stay calm in front of his crew. 'You have to focus on your course, communicate calmly, and trust that things will be alright.'

He feels it's a good metaphor for how leaders should handle change. When a big organisation like a university has to navigate their 'crew' through changes, it's important to stay the course and stay calm during hectic times.

DUTCH

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