

# The Four Room Apartment Model of Change for Understanding and Choosing Action Strategies

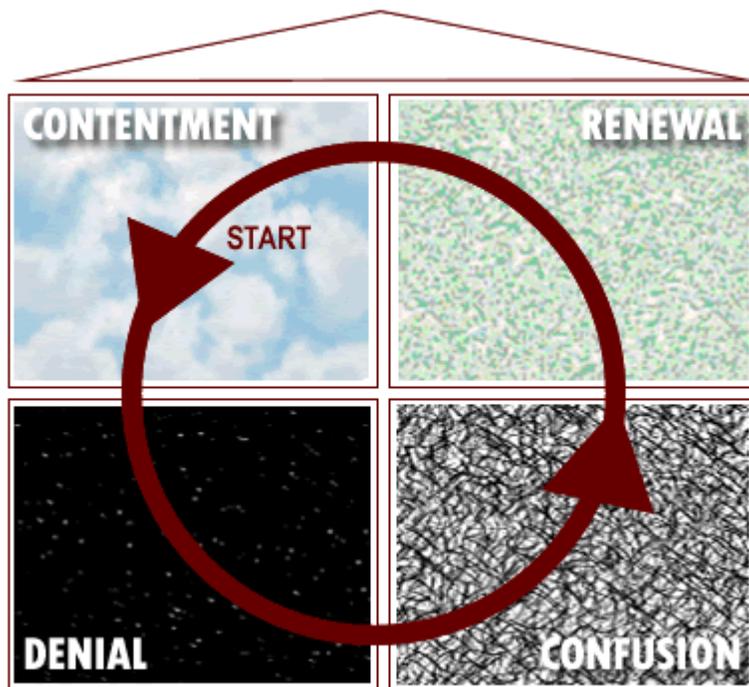
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Understanding how you or those around you engage change can make a big difference in how you face the change process, how productive you are during it, and the quality of the end result. This article describes the stages of change as a "four room apartment" and offers advice for what you might do (or help others do) to move effectively through the stages of change.

## How Do People Engage Change?

In her description of the stages of dying, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross brought to light an understanding of psychological stages of adjustment to change. Many other models of change have built upon this to describe a wide variety of other human changes. In his book [Productive Workplaces](#), Marvin Weisbord describes the Four Room Apartment Model that was created by Claes Janssen. This model is elegant in its simplicity as it describes the stages of change and what to do when you or others are in each of these stages. To this description of Janssen's work we add practical applications from OED's work with our clients.

## Janssen's **Four Room Apartment Model of Change**



The model proposes that in terms of our perceptions, emotions, knowledge, aspirations, and actions in any change situation, we begin in the Contentment Room and move counter-clockwise through the others as we and the change engage. Eventually, once the change is incorporated, we end up back in the Contentment Room.

## Description of Each Room

As you read this article, picture your work life as you engage change in a single significant area. Later we will take on the fact that we never face just one change.

## CONTENTMENT

In contentment you are just that -- content and without a change need or demand. Your energy is focused on sustaining a good working system. Life is good -- you are centered, focused, and in control.

Then! A need for change emerges. It might be internal -- for example, a need for you or your group to take your work to a new level, perhaps automating a system to free up time for other pursuits. Or it could be external, like an imposed budget cut or new organization-wide program that demands a response.

## DENIAL

Because both people and organizations are seldom without plenty to do, your first reaction to change is characterized by the Denial Room. Denial isn't always bad -- it's a vital defense mechanism that helps us keep priorities in mind while keeping less-pressing issues from interfering. In denial, you are focused on other things. In the early stages of denial, people typically submerge the pressures of change. With persistence, the change becomes an annoyance to which you may respond with varying degrees of anger, avoidance, and frustration.

The pressure of a truly important change will continue. If you do not acknowledge the change, you become a passive recipient of the change. To exaggerate, imagine being the only person with a typewriter in a staff room full of computers. That's risky. Whole companies have failed because they denied vital change needs (the departure of key customers, for example). Persistent denial in alcoholics is another classic illustration of this defense mechanism gone awry.

Most of the time, though, sooner or later you acknowledge the information, feelings and advice around you, and you become convinced that the change before you is real, significant and requires an intelligent response. Your reward for seeing the light: movement from the Denial Room into ... confusion.

## CONFUSION

When you're in the Confusion Room, you're neither here nor there. The old way is unraveled, the new way unclear. A new leadership team at the top -- what do we keep doing and what do we change? A new structuring of client or project assignments -- what do I do with the requests from my old clients or projects, and how do I get started with the new? Living in this room means living with uncertainty. Ambiguity. Suspicion. Rumors and flights of imagination fill in gaps of scattered information. You may begin putting together pieces of the puzzle, if only tentatively.

Like a sailboat "in irons," stuck out of the wind, you can languish in the Confusion Room and endure a daily grind of busywork that seems poorly connected to your goals -- both those you once served or those unknown that lie ahead, out there, somewhere.

Usually the information starts to trickle in, however, and the new picture begins to form. At this point you pick up speed out of the Confusion Room to the last of the transitional rooms: Renewal.

## RENEWAL

This is a heady place, once you get here. It's a place full of possibilities to best bring about a great solution or outcome to the change. Happy are you, if you can make space in your life to fully be in this room with this change (as opposed to letting your mind pull away from Renewal to attend to the denial and confusion calling you from the other rooms from other changes). Renewal is a time of great energy, yet poses the challenge of relative lack of structure. Offering the right balance of structure -- goals, timelines, memberships -- and freedom

within these structures is the key to enjoying the rush, and harvesting the rewards of Renewal. Make it through renewal and you're back where you started, in Contentment, at least with that change. Give it time, though -- a new leader, or technology, or some other change is probably just around the bend.

The lesson: Keep your sense of perspective and humor as you make the tour of the Four Room Apartment.

### **Solutions: What to Do in Each Room**

Here are some general guidelines to help you manage yourself and others as you navigate the four rooms of change. Although broad, the OED team has found them remarkably valid and helpful in timing change management activities for healthy individual and organizational development. The solutions below are Weisbord's recommendations with minor embellishments from us. "In the organization" translates some of those into an organizational context.

**In Contentment:** No need to do anything but carry on maintaining and tuning the system.

*In the organization:* This is the status quo, which in our changing society and workplace implies a certain continuous learning and continuous improvement of the status quo. Making time for periodic check-ins to see how the organization inside and out is doing is a good health maintenance practice that will lessen the chances of being blindsided by change.

**In Denial:** Share information calmly. Don't force advice (you'll only deepen the resistance of denial).

*In the organization:* By definition, one is unable find oneself in the depths of denial -- but you'll recognize it as you emerge from it. So the strategy here applies most practically to helping others in denial.

A typical first instinct when dealing with a person or group in denial is either to not bother with them, or knock them over the head to wake them up. The former is too subtle and the latter too harsh -- neither will fit through the barely open cracks of awareness of those in denial. In a real life example, people might withhold information from a leader's likely angry reaction, so the problem grows and the leader and group chime in too little and too late in responding to the change. They may make it through, but far less gracefully and effectively than if they had followed Weisbord's advice not to force things on someone in denial, but to share information and create an environment where input is welcome.

**In Confusion:** Get people together. Share information. Focus on short term goals.

*In the organization:* These strategies are simple and practical. In Confusion, everyone is talking, imagining, wondering. Some are dreading. Eighty-five percent of the information that circulates in the Confusion Room is "smoke" with no substance. Much of it is rumor built upon rumor (think of the game of telephone, where people in a circle whisper a message from person to person and discover by the time it completes the circle that a far different, often amusing, message has emerged). Getting people together helps them stay grounded, test information, and contribute ideas. Focusing on short term goals helps sustain the commitment to current clients and activities that remain at the core of the organization.

**In Renewal:** Give people some structure and let them put the new together.

*In the organization:* The promise and perils of the Renewal Room are often illustrated during retreats. In the prioritizing activities of some retreats, an energizing initiative comes to the fore. Then the meeting ends. If it ends without an action plan, the whole result is at risk -- and the group will probably settle for much less than that envisioned at the height of the meeting. Too structured an action plan is also risky, since people can feel excluded (especially those outside the room), or the invitation to be bold in responding can be squelched. Your target is a promising solution that will challenge and stimulate people to be energized AND create enough structure to channel that energy into results.

Recall one other caveat from the Room of Renewal -- having emerged from the waves of confusion into this more buoyant place, it can be tempting to declare victory and abandon this change effort to go battle other change efforts that are still stuck in late denial or confusion. Do that and you will be pulled back into confusion. Bring it home first by keeping your focus on action and results.

**Summary.** This is a model for understanding and acting upon the notion that you and others meet change in psychological and behavioral *stages*. Understanding this allows you to act with greater power and precision in enabling effective, lasting change. Ultimately the quality of engagement among those involved in a change will help catapult the use of this model to its greatest effect.



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