



CAREER

DESIGN PREPPERS

If there's one thing in-house managers know will never change, it's that change is constant. Be prepared so you can protect your staff and produce great work in spite of the inevitable.

With companies merging, converging and submerging, no one is safe during these uncertain and unstable economic times. Many of you will experience change at some point in your careers. It may be positive change, pushing you in new directions with exciting challenges and opportunities. Or it may be a change for the worse—catapulting you smack in the middle of uncomfortable and stressful situations that disrupt your life and make things messy. Your department may be downsized. You may have a new boss. (From hell!) Or the unthinkable: You may lose your job.

Like most people with a steady gig, I've become a creature of habit: up at 5:45 a.m., same bowl of Cheerios, same route to work. I'd like to think of myself as someone who embraces change—whether good or bad—and goes with the flow. But in all honesty, my daily routine provides stability and a certain level of comfort. C'mon, who wants to be plagued with anxiety, confusion, uncertainty and loss of control?

The key is to change your attitude and your mindset so you'll be in a better place to recognize the things that you can control. Stay engaged to find the right

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balance—that “sweet spot,” so you can navigate the uncertainty with professionalism, integrity and grace.

PREPPING FOR THE END OF A GOOD THING

When the bad stuff happens—negative change—we usually find ourselves in a state of shock. Paralysis sets in, and we’re consumed with feelings of disbelief. When faced with adversity, I often think of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’ “Five Stages of Grief”—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It helps me identify and take better control of the emotions I’m experiencing. And being in control is good. It will help us make smarter and better-informed decisions.

With businesses being shaken, rattled and rolled, downsized, relocated and dissolved, it’s time to commit yourself to what I like to call the “four Ps.”

1. Protective

To be protective, maintain your professionalism, take care of your team and stand your ground. You don’t want anything jeopardizing your reputation or your department’s credibility. That means you have to continue to be a center of excellence and provide top-shelf creative and production support. Period.

If you’re a good manager, then you should also have your staff’s best interests in mind. Look hard to see if there are places throughout the organization that might provide a home for some of your employees in the event of sudden workplace changes. If this should happen, meet with directors of other business groups that you support to discuss the possibility of integrating some of your designers into their units. Look for opportunity anywhere and everywhere. As in-house corporate creatives, we have access to many resources that can help us advance our careers both internally and externally. Remember to reach out to your neighbors and connect.

2. Productive

Keeping everyone, including yourself, focused on your work should be a priority. And staying away from gossip-fueled rumors and conflicting reports will help to generate a positive vibe in the department. “Business as usual” is a good mantra to live by during uncertain times and will help to restore a sense of normalcy. Idle hands are the devil’s playground, so staying productive will keep everyone on track and your well-oiled machine running smoothly.

If you’re a department head, you must recognize the importance of sending the right message with your words and actions. Be consistent and walk the talk. Communicate more frequently to restore confidence, preserve trust and avoid speculation. Maintain your integrity and professionalism, and direct any negative energy to something more productive—be it a work project or a personal one—and encourage your team to do the same.

I often think of Martha Washington’s observation on the human condition: “I am determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may find myself. For I have learned that the greater part of our misery or unhappiness is determined not by our

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circumstance but by our disposition.” Keep yourself and your team focused on the important stuff.

3. Prepared

Over the years, I’ve had to justify my department’s value on a regular basis and have survived both external and internal audits. Although the fact that I reported to the finance department was something I initially feared, it ultimately gave me more muscle and made my team stronger. I learned how to capture, document and show the positive impact our work had on key objectives in a way that satisfied the bean counters.

I was prepared. And you need to be prepared, too. Have a department overview presentation ready—complete with department history, structure, staff, budget, capabilities, recognition and awards, testimonials and a boatload of project samples. Be prepared to defend your job, staff and department. Like your elevator pitch, keep a comprehensive department overview slide deck in your back pocket and be ready to present it at any moment. Don’t forget to keep portfolios handy with live work samples—and remember to keep them current.

4. Proactive

Let’s face it: As corporate creatives, most of our time is spent in “reactive mode”—putting out fires, handling projects with no lead times and dealing with last-minute requests. Being proactive, both internally and externally, will always put you in a better spot. Internally, reinforce your position within the organization and the value your department brings to the table. Externally, prepare for the worst—losing your department and/or your job.

Do this by keeping a high profile, volunteering for committees and staying connected to everyone up and down the food chain, which ultimately will strengthen not only your professional network but your personal one, too. Now is not the time to hide out in the basement like Milton, the stapler guy from “Office Space.” Let employees know you’re there. Stay connected. Reach out to your advocates who are willing to champion your cause, and gather testimonials.

And don’t forget to share. Use your staff meetings as a forum to discuss business-related articles from magazines, journals and websites. Share book recommendations on everything from résumé writing to how to prepare for interviews to financial planning. Your staff meetings can become a haven where everyone can vent and express their anger, confusion and fears, giving them strength and hope. Once you accept change, be adaptable and look for opportunity everywhere. You can’t predict the future but you can prepare for a better one.

BEGINNING A NEW CHAPTER

If your department is relocated or now supporting entirely new businesses and stakeholders, you'll need to address a variety of questions. Fundamental queries such as: Who are your stakeholders? What are their expectations? What are their short-term and long-term needs? You'll then review your capabilities, strengths and limitations and determine if you have the resources to provide the quality creative support expected. You'll also need to eliminate nonessential services that don't directly support business objectives and, if necessary, find some ways to expand your current capabilities.

Re-examine your value proposition. Are you valued because you're innovative, cost-effective, efficient and possess brand knowledge? Is it your customer service approach, your alliances and partnerships? Defining your value proposition is a key component to building your department profile. Once you know why you're there, you'll need to customize your capabilities to meet the needs of your stakeholders and then staff, accordingly with colleagues who have the talent and skill sets to effectively support the business. I've always led my department with an entrepreneurial spirit and operated independently as a small business within the big corporate machine. So take ownership of the situation and formulate a smart business strategy before making any important decisions.

LOOKING UP, MOVING FORWARD

"The secret of life isn't figuring out how to stop the storm, but learning how to dance in the rain." Sure, you've probably seen this saying on a bumper sticker or inside a fortune cookie, but for me, the sentiment is very profound. It's not the challenge, but how you handle it, that will make or break you.

Remember, you can't stop change. And sometimes it's scary. It can be disruptive and messy and out of your control. Be adaptable and flexible and seek out your inner entrepreneur to help create opportunity anywhere you can. Stay calm. Stay focused. Be genuine. Don't compromise your integrity. Have compassion. Follow your heart but use your head. You can't control everything. Things don't always turn out as planned. But sometimes, they turn out better. **HOW**

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