

Motivation

YOUR GUIDE TO MAXIMIZING YOUR MOST VALUABLE ASSET—YOURSELF

[ATTITUDE ENHANCEMENT]

GOING THROUGH CHANGES

Face it: Change is unavoidable. Take control of yourself so that the changes don't control you.

Ceorge Alexander has just realized a dream that many share: He is a published author. He went on tour with his first book, *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk About the Magic of Cinema* (Broadway Harlem Moon; \$15.95), earlier this year, and he admits, with a broad grin, that he's "loving every minute of it."

Perhaps part of the reason he can so appreciate this high point in his career is because he remembers what it was like to feel just the opposite. About seven years ago, the Mobile, Alabama, native was a bank vice president in New York City with an enviable salary and lifestyle. But, he says, "I was in a state of constant complaint. I hated my job."

In search of a positive outlet, he started taking weekend courses in screenplay writing and film production. "The minute I walked into that classroom, my life changed. I knew there was another way to live," says Alexander. Yet, while his mind-set changed, his lifestyle didn't, for reasons anyone can understand: fear of leaving a job without having a job; fear of disappointing friends and family who were proud of his so-called success; fear of failure; fear of the unknown; fear of change.

Whether you need it, choose it, crave it (as Alexander did), or have it thrust upon you, change is never easy. Changes in our health, our jobs, our finances, and our personal lives can send us reeling. Even just changing your diet or exercise habits are more than most of us can stand for more than the first two weeks of a new year. Let's face it: We are creatures of habit. Routine and predictability are comforting. Shaking it all up launches us out of that comfort zone and forces us to adapt, often when we're not certain of the outcome.

The technology boom has us all in a constant state of flux as new products and applications replace old ways of doing things almost daily in our work and in our lives. As if that's not enough, the current economy with its attendant layoffs, the trauma of Sept. 11, and the constant threat of war only exacerbate the problem. As the old saying goes, "Too much of anything is a bad thing." Or, as Mary-Frances Winters, CEO of The Winters Group Inc. in Rochester, New York, and author of *Only Wet Babies Like Change: Workplace Wisdom for Baby Boomers* (Renaissance Publishing Inc.; \$24.95), says, "No one can stay on a roller coaster for too long without feeling queasy."

Of course, there are those who love roller coasters. They sit right up front, throw their hands up high, and go! They may scream, but they still go back for more. Somehow, they accept



the lack of control and feel sure that they'll be fine. Without any fear impeding them, they actually enjoy themselves. Embracing change requires the same ability to let go, as on a roller coaster, and goes against instinct for most (see sidebar, B.E.'s "Successpert Speaks"). "The power to face transformation with courage and resolve comes from within," says Winters, who has been in the organizational development and diversity consulting business for the past 19 years. "[It comes] from knowing and believing in your authentic self."

In fact, it was a long period of soul-searching that finally made Alexander, 40, quit his job. "A lot of my peers from college and business school thought it was crazy. But sometimes you have to throw your ego on the sidewalk, step over it, and keep going. The more demanding my job became, the more I couldn't stand it. It was almost as if God was saying, 'You have no choice but to leave.' So I did."

It's one thing for the man above to say it. It's another thing for your employer to say it. That's what happened to Hugo T. Mullins in 1994. Married, with two daughters, Mullins

had built up a substantial business working for a Virginia-based social services company from his Atlanta home. He contracted with state and county agencies to counsel members of troubled families. "I built the business on my own, with very little support from the company," says Mullins. "All they were giving me was a paycheck. Everything else was on me."

But once the business was a success, the company began imposing more rules, restrictions, and demands on Mullins. At one point, he was asked to apologize to a supervisor who felt he was not giving her enough credit in the development of the Atlanta region. Mullins refused. Several weeks later, he was fired.

Mullins, 46, says it was the first time he felt like a failure. "You immediately start to doubt yourself," he says. "You wonder, 'What's wrong with me? Did I destroy my career? Was I too stubborn?' But after awhile, my [social worker] training came into play and I took an inventory of myself. That's when I said, 'Wait a minute! I built a business for them.' If I did it for them, I can do it for myself."

Although his wife, Lisa, had some reservations, Mullins launched his firm, Family Ties Inc., that same week with one employee, one service, and one agency in one county. Today, the firm boasts 21 full-time employees, 15 contractors, five programs in six counties, and Lena's House, its first group home, which expects to open this year. Meanwhile, the company that fired him is out of business in his area. Three years ago, Lisa, 42, left her executive position at Coca-Cola to become his administrative director.

"When we moved to Atlanta from New York in 1988, Lisa was pregnant and neither one of us had a job," Mullins recalls. "I got confidence from realizing that I'd done unconventional things before and it's always worked out. We've all overcome challenges in life. If you've done it before, you can do it again. It's not easy to do, but it feels great once you've done it."

Or, as Alexander says, "You find happiness by opening yourself up to whatever comes your way. Bitterness and frustration come when you resist change, not when you give in to it."

—*Caroline V. Clarke*