BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The following key concepts can be used when preparing a discussion, conversation, or workshop using *Mastering the Change Curve*. One important way to help people master change is to help them understand the broader context in which change is occurring. The following tips and notes offer you some ideas to help people understand change. The information also can be used to help you to interpret your participants’ reactions to change. It is helpful to relate the information below to the change your participants are now experiencing. You may choose to use all or some of the information provided before examining the individual phases of change with participants.

The Pace of Change

The pace of change is rapidly increasing. In the past, change occurred much like a series of stairs — you would reach a certain level and then have a chance to relax, re-group, and start again. Change now looks more like a continuous upward curve, with very little time to rest in between. Sometimes people even experience sliding backwards and having to move forward again. In addition, many changes take place at once. Most of us experience simultaneous personal and organizational changes, both major and minor. They all intersect and interact, making it even more difficult to keep one’s feet on the ground.

How Change Affects the Individual

An organizational change has many effects. Like a rock thrown in a pond, change ripples throughout the company, causing disruption, excitement, distress, and sometimes crisis. The usual ways of doing things, including people’s expectations about their jobs, are now in question. In place of clarity there is uncertainty. At first no one can say for sure how things will turn out or know the final outcome.

Change often breeds a climate of mistrust and suspicion. People don’t know where they stand. They get worried. Rumors fly, and clear information is scarce. People don’t know who they can trust with the information they have nor whose information to trust. They worry about being blamed and feel like it is every man and woman for him- or herself. Work often comes to a standstill as people aren’t sure what to do or whether their work will mean anything.
Understanding Individual Reactions to Change

Everyone looks at change in a different way. Views of change can be skewed particularly by whether or not the change is one that was planned by the individual. The images of change that people develop often predispose them in their behavior. If change seems like a threat, then people will tend to respond as if it is a real threat. On the other hand, if change looks like a natural process of growth and development, people approach change accordingly.

Responsiveness to change is also dependent on past experiences with change. If a person’s past has been filled with turbulent changes that were not chosen by him or her, then that person’s approach to change will probably focus more on the concerns of security and stability. Such an individual may have difficulty moving past Denial and Resistance. But if a person’s past has been filled with positive experiences of risk taking and reaching beyond his or her limits, it will be easier to embrace change. Such a person would probably move quickly into Exploration. Change also appears different depending on where one is in the life cycle. What appeared to be a big deal for a person in his or her 20s may not be such a big deal in his or her 40s.

Change Is Upsetting and Disruptive

Even though our individual reactions to change may vary, we are all personally affected by it. We all have feelings in response to the change, including disorientation, confusion, and uncertainty.

It is natural to dislike change. It is disruptive and brings up self-doubt. Organizational changes are often in response to external shifts and changes in the economy, often ones of which people are only dimly aware. Despite the negative issues frequently surrounding change, individual reactions vary widely. Some people feel victimized by change while others manage to overcome their difficulty and frustration, finding opportunities in the open space that change brings with it. Individuals can see themselves as victims of change, passively responding as little as possible to what happens, or they can become change masters, anticipating changes and making the best of the ones that are offered.

The difficulty in mastering change lies in the fact that we can’t “program” ourselves to adjust. Human beings are complex and emotional, and some of the stress of change comes from a gap between what we want to feel and do, and what we actually feel. The gap will not go away by ignoring it, but it can be easier to take by recognizing and facing up to one’s real difficulty with change.

The stress of change can lead to:

- **Physical Signals** such as minor pain, headaches, increased energy and vitality, rashes, and colds.
- **Emotional Signals** such as anxiety, anger, fear, frustration, and excitement.
- **Mental Signals** such as worry, confusion, distraction, difficulty concentrating, and increased questioning or personal planning.
These forms of personal distress, in turn, influence job performance. They may lead to the need for unscheduled time off and/or emotional withdrawal while on the job. Individuals may feel drained, unmotivated, or burned out, and consequently, make poor, impulsive, or ill-considered career choices. When individuals experience the distress of change, they may not work up to their capacity.

Many systems are put in place to manage change transitions from the organizational perspective. But there are also things that individuals need to do to ensure that they land on both feet. They must learn how to take care of themselves and gain mastery over the personal side of change as well as the technical requirements. Personal change management skills can help individuals avoid the more severe effects of distress, and can make them more effective throughout this period of transition.

Understanding the natural phases of change is a good way for individuals to recognize their own reactions and work to overcome their fears and resistance to change. As individuals consciously move through the phases of change, they can gain a sense of control and fulfillment from the change process.
Change does not occur in a straight line. It is a journey that flows through a series of phases as people come to terms with the change. The phases signal a process of renewal, a passage-way from the old to the new.

We can think of change as moving through the Change Curve, which is shown in figure 4. It starts with business as usual at the top left. When the change begins, there is a turn downward into a zone that consists of heightened stress, uncertainty, upheaval, and diminished productivity. As acceptance of the change takes place there is a climb up the other side of the curve as we regain our sense of direction, learn new skills and roles, and begin to work in a new way.

The Change Curve consists of four phases. While people may move more slowly or more quickly through change, complete mastery of the change involves transition through each of the four phases, especially if the individual did not initiate the change. This does not mean that every individual will move through each phase in order. Sometimes people move back to a previous phase or get stuck in one phase. Despite these different patterns, however, one must eventually reach Commitment in order to perform effectively within the changed organization.

Figure 4. The Change Curve Model
The Change Curve Model is based on the following principles of change:

- Change is an ongoing process rather than an event.
- There is a progressive sequence of change behaviors that needs to be experienced and mastered to be effective in handling change.
- Seemingly negative behaviors such as denial, apprehension, anger, and resistance are normal and adaptive elements in the change process.
- There are specific strategies available to increase change mastery.
- The progression through the phases of change represents an opportunity for growth and responsible risk taking.

The Model is helpful in understanding and normalizing current change reactions and predicting and monitoring the course of the change process. Individuals may get stuck in a phase or backtrack to a previous phase, but eventually, to thrive in a changed environment, they must reach a state of commitment to the change.

Change represents both a challenge and an opportunity for growth. This assessment acknowledges the loss and uncertainty that often accompany change and includes the phases of Denial and Resistance, during which such behaviors are dominant. However, the positive side of change is emphasized in the Exploration and Commitment phases, in which dynamic adjustment and growth create a positive orientation to change. Consequently, the potential for both danger and opportunity exist in most change situations. Increased skill areas are required not only to adjust and survive change, but to master it.

During any change there will be a period of adjustment in which anxiety and uncertainty increase. This period is accompanied by a corresponding decrease in efficiency and performance. Employees who are prepared to deal with the manifestations of change will be able to anticipate, plan, and accelerate the change mastery process. Those who are under-prepared to move through change are more likely to have unrealistic expectations, push for premature adjustment, and blame themselves when problems arise.
THE FOUR PHASES OF CHANGE

The following explanations of each phase of change are meant to help you interpret the assessment with change workshop participants. These descriptions will allow you to help the individuals involved look at their own responses to change and offer you some tips to help leaders or managers work with their own groups to move through transition. Remember that not everyone will proceed lockstep through the four phases. Individuals may get stuck in one phase or another. They may proceed quickly through Denial, Resistance, and Exploration only to find themselves disillusioned and back in Resistance. Nonetheless, making it to the Commitment phase is crucial to managing change.

Denial

The first phase of change begins when people hear about the change. This may take the form of rumor or rumblings before the actual announcement, or it may be a sudden and unexpected announcement of a change initiative. Denial begins with the awareness that change is on the horizon but usually entails acting as if it isn’t. Denial is a defense against change that takes the form of ignoring or not responding to information that demands a change. It attempts to preserve the success and comfort of the past by ignoring signs that the past is about to end.

It is hard for people to spot Denial in themselves because it is an inner attempt to protect themselves from the disruption of change. On the surface, people in Denial appear calm and rational. Denial masks their inner turmoil even from themselves. They think the change will pass and that they can continue doing business as usual. People in Denial are not upset because they aren’t really examining their internal reaction to the change. If you ask people in Denial how they feel, they say, “Things are fine, I am ready.” Yet if you look at their behavior, they seem anything but ready for change.

An individual, a group, or even an entire organization can exhibit Denial. People usually go along with team or organizational Denial because it is easier than challenging the past. Denial, however, merely postpones a problem until it becomes worse.

People in Denial:

- Avoid the topic of the change as much as possible
- Are waiting, not taking any initiative, and appear unconcerned
- Act as if nothing is happening
- Only do routine work
- Fail to be very curious or look outside their narrow area of responsibility
- Focus on little details and ask picky questions
- Blame outside forces/others for difficulties
- Question the data or method used to make a decision.
Consequences of Denial:

- Delay of the inevitable
- Lost opportunities
- Poor planning
- Undermining of needed changes.

The items in the assessment that measure Denial are:

1. This change doesn’t really affect me.
5. The reality of the change hasn’t set in yet.
9. I’m not wasting my time worrying about the change.
13. I’m sure this whole thing will blow over soon.
17. I don’t have any feelings about the change.
21. I just try to do what I have to do to get through the day.

Tips for managers and leaders: Denial merely postpones the inevitable; therefore, managers will want to get people out of Denial as quickly as possible. The act of becoming aware of the details of the change may slow down work or prevent people from getting started making changes. People need time to get used to a change. But Denial is also normal and predictable and sometimes even helpful. Managing change is made easier when managers and leaders accept the inevitable phase of Denial.

Tips for senior leadership: Leaders want their people to travel instantly over the chasm of change without feeling anything and with minimal disruption. It is difficult for them to accept the Denial phase in their employees because it makes the leader appear out of control.

If we draw a straight line across the top of the Change Curve, you get an idea of how managers and leaders often wish people and groups would go through change. They wish that people would do it without feeling bad, without losing productivity, or without missing a step. This is called the “Tarzan Swing.” In the swing, Denial takes the form of feeling that there is nothing difficult to deal with in the change. Top managers who are under pressure to change are most prone to the Tarzan Swing. They often don’t see why people are having trouble because there is little choice but to change. They seem to believe that people are being paid to put aside their feelings. However, wishing doesn’t overcome the transition process; it just pushes it underground. Leaders who try to take the Tarzan Swing need to be reminded that they should expect difficulty. It is the leader’s responsibility to help guide people through change.
Resistance

Resistance begins when people wake up from Denial and experience how upset they really are. The change now becomes deeply disruptive and personally upsetting, overtaking the defenses of Denial. Resistance is the experience of being between the comfortable and the unfamiliar while anticipating the future. Resistance can also occur after what seemed like acceptance of the change, at a point when individuals feel discouraged or disillusioned. It is helpful to discuss with participants why they feel resistant to the change.

One of the things that contributes to feelings of resistance is the experience of loss. During a change, people may feel a loss of status, power, security, influence, comfort, relationships, credibility, seniority, value, expertise, and meaningful work. Individuals cannot talk themselves out of their feelings nor can others (as much as they will try). Feelings of resistance are reasonable and realistic. People are being asked to make significant changes and cannot be assured that the outcome will be positive or that the path will be easy.

In contrast to Denial, it usually is easy to recognize Resistance because the behaviors associated with it are more obvious. People in Resistance often display a whole host of feelings, including doubt regarding their ability to handle the change, concerns over the new responsibility and added work, and concerns over meeting the challenge. But they find it hard to admit these feelings publicly. The manager often becomes the focus of these feelings as they have the most direct relationship with the employee.

A potentially dangerous form of Resistance occurs when individuals hide their Resistance and work in the background against the change. This type of passive-aggressive behavior needs to be addressed openly.

People in Resistance:
- Ask, “Why me?” and, “What about me?”
- Show anger at the organization
- Doubt the wisdom of decisions
- Complain
- Believe the task is impossible
- Feel overwhelmed and depressed
- Refuse to go along
- Become quiet and passive
- Feel that there is nothing they can do
- Say, “This will never work — they don’t know what they are doing”
- Say, “It’s unfair.”
Resistance is not always out in the open. This is especially true when the company does not like what it hears from its people. It may be expressed indirectly in the form of responses like:

- We already tried that and it didn’t work
- We’re too busy
- We’ll need to move on this very carefully
- We need more data
- We’re waiting for their input
- Sure, we’ll get right on it.

A group or team in Resistance will exhibit the following behaviors:

- Not starting a project
- Waiting for further direction
- Not taking any initiative
- Arguing loudly with new ideas or initiatives
- Criticizing anyone who tries to do something positive
- Voicing gallows humor about the company
- Bringing up past failures
- Questioning the ability of higher levels of management
- Displaying low morale and energy for the task
- Not wanting to do any work.

Benefits of dealing with Resistance:

- Provides time to ventilate and express negative feelings about the dislocation and disruptions
- Provides time to psychologically regain balance and sense of control
- Creates opportunity for management to engage employees
- System is challenged to “think” about direction
- Change process is slowed down
- Provides time to look for opportunities in the new situation.

The items in the assessment that relate to Resistance are:

2. I prefer the way things were before.
6. I don’t know if I can do what is expected of me in this change.
10. I think this change is bad for the organization.
14. I feel angry about the change.
18. I can’t concentrate on my work.
22. I’m upset about the way this whole thing has been carried out.
Tips for managers and leaders: Team members need to allow themselves to experience their Resistance. If they acknowledge Resistance in themselves, and expect and accept it in their team, they will avoid getting stuck in it. Talking as a team and to other people about feelings of Resistance is the best strategy for the team. Teams should try to focus on what lies ahead, not on what has gone before.

Tips for senior leadership: Change leaders may doubt their ability to deal with the changing conditions. They may feel unwilling or unmotivated to apply their ability to the new situation. If they lack the ability or willingness to deal with the change, they are unlikely to adapt easily.

The challenge for the leader or manager in helping an individual or team through Resistance is twofold. First, leaders have to keep telling themselves that they are not to blame for the change or for people’s feelings. Leaders often argue with Resistance, try to talk people out of their feelings by using reason, or get defensive or angry with people for feeling this way. This just sets up a negative cycle that does not move things along. An effective change leader does not try to resolve people’s feelings but just listens to them. When leaders listen, acknowledge, and support people in experiencing their difficult feelings, they will themselves begin to move through them.

At the bottom of the Change Curve, between Resistance and Exploration, we can imagine a zigzag line. At this time of transition from the negative to the positive, people may feel both hopeless and hopeful, not really sure they will make it through, both open to new ideas and afraid of them. They are moving back and forth between Resistance and Exploration, which is a common reaction to change.

Exploration

People move into Exploration when they acknowledge their feelings and accept that change is necessary and important, even if they don’t personally welcome it. At this point people are more than halfway through the transition. They are ready to think about what they can do, what is possible. They decide to make the best of it, learn new skills, and seek new ideas. They may experience chaos, be stimulated by discovery, and be overwhelmed by what needs to be learned all at the same time. Exploration signals a shift from seeing change as a threat to seeing it as an opportunity.

Exploration is a phase full of energy that needs direction and focus. People in Exploration begin to focus away from themselves and back out on the external environment. They become aware of opportunities to master the change.

People in Exploration:
- Are energetic
- Seek new ways of doing and thinking
- Seek to learn and discover possibilities
- Want to solve problems
- Create a vision of what the future can be
• Take risks and try new things
• Generate lots of ideas
• Work together and seek help from each other
• Have trouble staying focused.

*People in Exploration will say things like:*
• “Let me see what I can do about this …”
• “I have some ideas about the whole thing …”
• “Maybe there is a way to do this …”
• “We can make it work if we pull together …”

*Benefits of Exploration:*
• People are finally ready to learn and plan seriously for the future
• Groups and individuals begin to consider what they can do
• People believe they can make it
• Energy is released.

*The items in the assessment that relate to Exploration are:*
3. I’m excited about all the new possibilities the change allows.
7. Everything is up in the air, but we’re dealing with the real issues.
11. I keep thinking of new ways to do things.
15. Recently I’ve had a lot more energy to deal with the change.
19. I’m amazed at how many new things I’m learning because of this change.
23. I feel like the worst part of the change is over.

*Tips for team members:* Not every member of a team will enter Exploration at the same time. Some will take longer and others will zigzag between Resistance and Exploration for a while. People who are more firmly anchored in Exploration should help those who are stuck in Resistance.

*Tips for managers and leaders:* The leader or manager has to adopt a different role in helping people manage Exploration. In Resistance, little more than listening sympathetically was needed to help people move through their feelings. In Exploration, leaders need to become facilitators, helping people to focus their energy, deal with the many options and choices, and avoid doing the first thing that comes to mind. Leaders need to help people work together to learn, plan, and develop their response to change.

No matter how extensively the organization has planned the change, every individual and group will have a great deal of their own planning to do. Exploration is the stage in which people have accepted the change and are actively trying to find ways to make it successful. Exploration is the leader’s reward for successfully helping people overcome Resistance.
Commitment

The Commitment phase is reached when people make a choice to accept the change. They adopt the new way after a process of learning and testing and have become capable of working effectively within the new situation. Ideally, people who reach Commitment are both motivated and capable of achieving success after a change. They have regained productivity and feel a sense of mastery, relief, accomplishment, and growth through the change. People who have moved through all four phases of change are stronger and better able to face the next change.

Commitment comes when people have learned new ways to go forward. They understand why they have gone through the change. They have accepted that the changed environment is now status quo and it will not return to the way it was. This acceptance is not always characterized by high energy or even by enthusiasm. It can range from unemotional acceptance to an experience of pride and accomplishment in one’s success. But in all cases, Commitment involves an acknowledgement of the change as the norm and an ability to function well within the changed environment.

During Commitment, people once more focus attention on the external world, on what the organization and team needs, rather than on their own personal fortunes. People in Commitment can do this because they have mastered the new ways and feel comfortable with them. They have new skills and have learned to succeed, even if they once thought it would be impossible. Many times they are pleasantly surprised.

*People in Commitment:*
- Feel confident and in control
- Feel comfortable with the change
- Are up to speed on the technical side of the change
- Have worked to achieve success
- Work effectively
- Feel accountable for results
- Know what they are doing.

*Benefits of Commitment:*
- High performance
- Achievement of desired organizational results
- Focus on continual improvement.
The items in the assessment that relate to Commitment are:

4. I’ve really come a long way with this change.
8. I would not go back to the way things were before.
12. I have mastered what needs to be done to be effective with this change.
16. I am comfortable in the new work environment.
20. I feel good about myself and what I have accomplished to meet the demands of the change.
24. I’ve learned things in this change that will help me deal with the next change.

Tips for managers and leaders: Commitment is something to celebrate with others. Now is a good time to go over what has been learned and see if there are further lessons to be drawn. It is also a good time to take a break and do something fun. When people reach the Commitment phase, managers and leaders should reward them, then help prepare them for the next change.

Commitment offers a brief respite from change but it never lasts long. People need to understand that change will not end here. They should be prepared to remain open to what they have learned in this change so that they can limit their time spent in Denial and Resistance during the next change. How well they have managed the current transition will determine how ready they are for the next one.
TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT

Origin of the Model and Assessment Scale

We are both clinical psychologists and organizational consultants. The Change Curve Model and the assessment came out of our work beginning in the early 1980s with organizations that were finding their change efforts stalled because people were not committed to the change or were not carrying out what was expected of them.

We were struck particularly by the fact that change was much more traumatic and difficult for individuals than their leaders were aware it was. In fact, leaders’ behaviors tended to turn off people from talking about difficulties with the change. Employees felt that it was wrong to feel upset, that negative reactions meant that they were not good organizational citizens. Leaders, on the other hand, tended to want their people to “tough out” change rather than focus on their feelings about it.

The result of this denial of the experience of change was that the difficulties people were actually having were pushed underground. This led to unrealistic expectations and projections about how individuals, teams, and organizations would manage the change. We saw several disasters as organizations just did not do what they needed to do to move through a change. People acted as if they were fine, but internally they were paralyzed, disoriented, unrealistic, and upset.

Our experience with personal difficulty led us to recognize that dealing with major organizational change needs to focus on the human factors. People are predictably upset and perhaps even angry during a change. This is especially true if a person has not had much prior experience in managing change or does not expect a change. Organizations, managers, and individuals need to recognize how difficult change is for people. They cannot simply wish people to move quickly through change — they must provide the tools and the time for them to work through the change.

We first derived our model of change transition from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’ work on the pattern people go through as they die (Kubler-Ross, 1971). We considered a major change a “death” of what was comfortable and familiar. This connection was made from our personal observations of many of the feelings that Kubler-Ross saw in dying patients: People asking, “Why me?”; feeling denial, then anger, depression, fear, and finally bargaining with an unseen presence before moving into the stage of acceptance. Kubler-Ross’ model formed the basis for our first two change phases: Denial and Resistance.

But change is not death. It leads to new life. After time, there is acceptance, in which individuals make the transition to rebirth and new beginnings. To complete our model, we created the phases of Exploration and Commitment in which we prepare ourselves for a new future.
Data Analysis

HRDQ has collected data on the Mastering the Change Curve assessment since it was published in 1997. Data analysis results, which follow, are based on a sample of 649 individuals who have responded to the first edition of Mastering the Change Curve.

Sample Size

To determine sample size, HRDQ uses a simple random sampling method. This method allows us to determine the appropriate size of sample needed to accurately report our results. For Mastering the Change Curve, we determined that a sample size of 649 was suitable. Based on the simple random sampling method, this gives us a 98% confidence level with only a 4% chance of error that the data presented are representative of the population who will use this instrument.

Reliability

A measure of reliability expresses the degree to which an instrument is consistent in its measurement. The numerical value for reliability (a reliability coefficient) provides the measure for which the correlation of reliability is determined. Reliability coefficients range from –1 to +1, as the coefficient approaches zero the strength of the relationship (i.e., the correlation) decreases until there is no correlation between the variables. However, as the reliability coefficient approaches either –1 or +1, the higher the correlation and thus the higher the reliability. While there are no commonly accepted standards for reliability in training and development instruments, reliability coefficients near .60 are considered acceptable.

HRDQ uses Cronbach’s Alpha as a measure of reliability. As seen from the table below, two of the instrument’s phases, Denial and Exploration, lie above the acceptable range and can be relied upon to provide consistent results for participants in a training context. The phases of Resistance and Commitment demonstrate a smaller degree of reliability. We will be looking at the items associated with these two phases to determine how they might be improved.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>RELIABILITY—ALPHA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ranges, Means, and Standard Deviations

Ranges show the highest and lowest scores attained by the sample. Mean scores are the statistical average of all the scores. Standard deviation scores indicate how closely the score data cluster around the mean. For example, if the standard deviation is large, the scores will be more spread out.

As can be seen from the table below, all scores are in the acceptable range for this instrument.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>RANGE</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>STANDARD DEVIATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>6–34</td>
<td>19.76</td>
<td>4.14</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Norms

HRDQ assumes a normal, bell-curve distribution of scores when determining norms. These norms (which are divided into three categories—Low, Average, and High) are deliberately broad and intended to offer the respondent only the most general information about where he or she stands relative to others who have taken the instrument. The normative data for the four Change Curve categories are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>AVERAGE</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>18–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>5–7</td>
<td>8–18</td>
<td>19–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>5–14</td>
<td>15–23</td>
<td>24–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>5–15</td>
<td>16–24</td>
<td>25–30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Facilitators should caution respondents to interpret their results as approximations. With training and development instruments, individual scores are simply benchmarks to help the respondent consider what needs to be changed or improved in his or her work behavior. It should be noted that the normal curve is a convenience and does not suggest any normal behavior in nature or in the behavior being measured.