

# H4 Consulting Brief

## Anxiety Curve

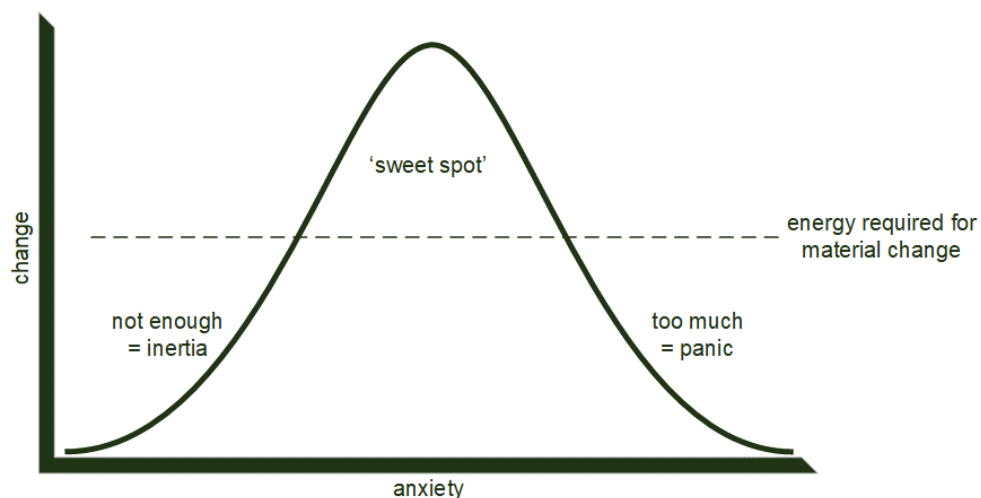
It takes a lot of energy for new thinking to change old habits. We often think of anxiety as a negative consequence of change, especially when too much anxiety brings on a paralysis that makes change impossible. But just the right amount of anxiety can give us the energy to drive change. Publicly funded organisations can harness that energy, inducing just enough anxiety to bring the organisation into the 'sweet spot' of the anxiety curve.

It can be difficult for publicly funded organisations to overcome inertia and achieve change. Most people prefer to avoid situations that make them anxious. People who work in publicly funded organisations may be more than usually averse to risk and change, attracted by, often mistaken, assumptions that their roles and work will be comfortable and predictable.

It is also challenging for publicly funded organisations to adopt any approach to change management other than explicitly seeking to minimise anxiety. Factors such as the number of stakeholders and established custom and practice tend to exaggerate potential negative effects of change. This can force publicly funded organisations to seek short-term consensus and comfort over optimising medium-term outcomes.

An approach to change management with the primary goal of minimising anxiety explicitly loses focus on the desired future state and incidentally seeks to maintain a state of too little anxiety to drive meaningful change. Overestimating the risk that too much anxiety might prevent any change, publicly funded organisations sometimes settle for unambitious reforms.

Avoiding anxiety at all costs prevents publicly funded organisations from adapting to the needs of a changing world, and from learning how to harness anxiety to drive further adaptation in the future. This avoidance of anxiety can crystallise into a culture where every individual feels entitled to veto proposed changes that make them anxious, regardless of the potential to create more public value.



Publicly funded organisations seeking to make change should recognise that both too little anxiety and too much anxiety are barriers to change. Both inertia and panic are incompatible with ambitious reform. But there is a 'sweet spot', where a moderate level of stress provides the fuel to challenge and replace old habits with new ideas.

Publicly funded organisations should not assume that all anxiety is bad. They should communicate openly about both the anxiety that can accompany a proposed change, and the benefits of adopting the change. Talking about ambitious change may increase anxiety among some stakeholders, but it will excite and inspire others to be role models for healthy ways of harnessing anxiety to effect change.

The relationship between anxiety and energy for change is a curve which demonstrates that anxiety should be managed rather than minimised. Some level of stress, without creating panic, is healthy and necessary to overcome inertia. Putting this into practice incrementally will help people working in publicly funded organisations to learn how to harness and manage their anxiety to achieve more significant changes.

Anxiety is not just a pain, or a price for the benefits of planning and change, that we should strive to minimise. It is also a source of energy to fuel change and the benefits that follow. Building the skills to harness just the right amount of anxiety to maximise constructive change takes practice, but the potential benefits of finding that spot on the curve are sweet.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: [info@h4consulting.com.au](mailto:info@h4consulting.com.au)  
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