

Don't Forget to Manage the Transition Too

By William Bridges



For over two decades, William Bridges & Associates has helped organizations and individuals deal more effectively with change. A pioneer and leader in the field of transition management, William Bridges is widely recognized for his breakthrough thinking on how to help people deal productively with change. Linkage partners with William Bridges on the Leading Organizational Transition: Train-The-Trainer Program, a unique program based on William Bridges' Three-Phase Transition Model and developed by William Bridges & Associates.

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The next time you are having trouble implementing a change that looked easy on paper, consider the possibility that the problem isn't with the *change* but with the *transition*. "What's the difference?" you may wonder. There's a big difference—at least as a growing number of consultants and trainers use the terms. They line up this way:

Change	Transition
External	Internal
Situational	Psychological
Event-based	Experience-based
Defined by outcome	Defined by process
Can occur quickly	Always takes time

The difference between *change* and *transition* can be illustrated with the example of a geographical move. The *change* is the relocation itself; it involves packing dishes, getting a mover, selling your home, and taking an airplane trip. The transition involves all the confusion, distress, and excitement that you and your family go through.

Whereas *changes* are always unique to the situations in which they take place, *transitions* show a remarkable similarity, one to another.

First, *transition* always starts with an ending. Even though *change* can be initiated by something new, the internal, psychological process that accompanies it always starts by separating from, getting closure on, or bidding farewell to the old reality and the identity that went with it. Even in a "good" change, like starting a family, one has to let go of the old life. You cannot make a new beginning without making an ending first.

After the ending has been made, a beginning is possible—but it cannot occur immediately. First you must go through an in-between state that there is no accepted name for—a time when the old reality and the old identity are gone, but the new ones have not yet taken root in your mind and heart. In my writing I have called this the "neutral zone," to capture the in-betweenness and the neither-this-nor-that quality. (Having found, belatedly, that *Star Trek* beat me to the term, I have wished that I had chosen a term that did not carry overtones of Klingons and Romulans, but after several books on the subject I feel too invested to change—and deal with the transition that the change would involve.)

The ending disengages us and the neutral zone is a kind of fallow time when old habits are extinguished and new possibilities are born. It is out of the neutral zone that the third and final phase of the transition (the beginning) emerges. This beginning is not to be confused with the "start" of the new situation, which may have happened on Day One. The beginning is when people really buy in, get on board, and feel at home with the new.

Whenever a change occurs, those affected by it go through all three of these psychological phases as they come to terms with the new situation. If for any reason they do not go through

with them, the change simply fails to “take.” It is a paper-change: the new strategy is in the books, the new organization chart is on the wall, the new policy is announced. But inside people, nothing is any different.

Now, think back to some organizational change that did not work as it was supposed to. Ask yourself these questions:

- ◆ Whatever the details, wasn't the reason that the change failed that people didn't work through the three stages of transition?
- ◆ And however well the *change* was managed, isn't it true that there was no explicit attention given to the transition? Wasn't it assumed that if the *change* was well planned and executed, the *transition* would take care of itself?

What you needed was a transition management plan: a way to manage the endings, the neutral zone, and the new beginnings.

Check Yourself Out!

To check yourself out, ask the following questions about that change situation:

A	B	
		1. a) Was it clear to people what old things they could stop doing, or b) was all the emphasis on the new things that they were supposed to start doing?
		2. a) Was there any symbolic recognition (ranging from a memorable incident to a full-scale ceremony) to mark the endings being made and losses being experienced, or b) were people expected to just get on with the show as if nothing had happened?
		3. a) Did the organization's leadership analyze and acknowledge who was actually losing what, or b) was such talk dismissed as “negative,” “unconstructive,” or “opening Pandora's box”?
		4. a) In the confusing time when the old way was gone and the new had not yet taken full shape, was communication continued regularly, or b) did they say, “we'll get back to you as soon as we have something to tell you”?
		5. a) When temporary problems emerged during this in-between time, were new, temporary solutions found, or b) did people try to bend old ways to fit the new problems?
		6. a) Was there a conscious effort made to provide people with temporary sources of control and support, or b) were people simply told that they'd have to manage the best they could?
		7. a) Have you assured that further, unrelated changes are not disrupting the attention that needs to be paid on this one, or b) is this just one more change on which people can expect others to be piled?
		8. a) Was there a constant feedback on how the transition was going from a transition monitoring team (created just for that purpose), or

		b) were people told not to raise problems unless they also had a solution to them?
		9. a) Have you focused your efforts on a few areas that are most likely to work and achieved quick successes there first to build credibility, or b) are you trying to bring the whole change off in one piece?
		10. a) Was the reward system in the organization redesigned to reinforce the behavior and attitudes appropriate to the change, or b) are you calling for people to act in new ways and rewarding them for acting in old ways?

Ok, you get 10 points for each question you answered "A" to. _____

What's your transition-management quotient? _____

Imagine that it's a grade. Does your organization pass the test or flunk? _____

Linkage

Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

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