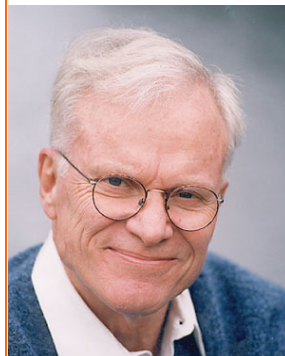


How You Can Handle Change Better

By William Bridges



William Bridges, Ph.D. is an internationally known speaker, author, and consultant who shows individuals and organizations how to deal more productively with change. The most recent of his ten books is a new and expanded second edition of his best-seller, *Managing Transitions* (2003), and the updated second edition of *Transitions* (2004), which together have sold over one million copies. Before that, he published

The Way of Transition (2000), a partly autobiographical study of coming to terms with profound changes in his own life and transforming them into times of self-renewal. And before that, he published *Creating You & Co.* (1997), a handbook for creating a work-life that not only survives, but capitalizes on today's frequent and disruptive changes.

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Dealing successfully with change is a survival skill these days, what with all the new technology, mergers, and reorganizing. And I mean survival literally. Forty-eight years ago, the United States Submarine Service did some research that identified the best predictor of people's likelihood of needing hospitalization in the coming year: It was the amount of change they had been through in the previous 12 months.

Change ► stress ► illness or injury ► hospitalization

People that rated highest on the change-end of that sequence had five times the hospitalization rate of the group that rated lowest!

We'd all like to slow down the pace of change, but that is seldom possible. So we're left with the task of learning how to handle it better. I've been studying how people do that since I began running seminars for people in transition back in 1975, and I'd like to share some of what I have learned. I'll group the most important learnings under five headings.

1. Recognize that everything you want to hold on to was the product of past changes

It is easy to forget where the status quo came from. But no matter how comfortable and even necessary the existing arrangement of things feels today, it was once new, untried, and distinctly uncomfortable. Change is how we got wherever we are, and change is how we'll continue the trip.

Change is, in fact, the only way to protect whatever exists at present, for without continuous readjustment the present cannot endure. No less a conservative than Edmund Burke said that "a state without the means of some change is without the means of its continuation." So turn things around: change is how things continue.

The absence of change only assures the demise of everything we care about. A marriage, a career, a dream for the future, even a picture of the past: each of these things has to change with time, or if it doesn't, it is being set up for destruction.

2. Deal with the loss before you try to move on to the new beginning

When people are faced with a big change, they want to begin by getting started on their new life. They walk about "putting the past behind them," and "not crying over spilt milk." But actually the first task they face deals with that past: letting go of it, saying good-bye to it, breaking its hold.

The commonest problem faced by the people I have worked with is that they try to begin the new without letting go of the old. That is also the commonest problem, faced by organizations too: in their hurry to get started, they forget about endings.

But you cannot launch a successful new identity of purpose or way of doing things without letting go of the old one. And with both individuals and organizations, there is going to be some sense of loss in this process. That isn't a sign that something is wrong. It's a sign that a transition is taking place.

3. Build yourself a temporary “bridge” between the old and the new

Between letting go and successfully launching the new there is a time of confusion and emptiness. People often feel lost during this time, and too often they interpret that lostness as yet another sign that something is wrong. It is simply a sign that they have endured the fertile chaos of the “neutral zone.” Like Moses getting his people from the ending of Egypt to the new beginning of The Promised Land, they must endure a time in the wilderness.

In the wilderness—now as then—many people are tempted to try to opt out of the process or even go back. (“Egypt wasn’t so bad, was it?”) To deal with that tendency, we need to create temporary structures and purposes and support systems for this in-between time. Individually, these may be temporary agreements within a family—like, “We won’t make a final decision about this for a month,” or “Until we get out of this situation, we’re going to review our progress every Friday.” These may be temporary sources of money or counsel or information.

Generally, people who do well during this in-between time are people who have good sources of the elements of the acronym, CUSP.

C They are people who find things to do that help them to be (or at least to feel) more in CONTROL of their situation. Anything that does that helps.

U They are people who UNDERSTAND the transition process and know why they are feeling what they are feeling. They also UNDERSTAND (as much as possible) the reason for the changes they are being affected by.

S They are people who have pretty good SUPPORT systems— friends, family, even professional counseling if that is appropriate. Otherwise, transition is a terribly lonely time, and the loneliness turns the confusion into something like craziness.

P They are people who have a fairly clear sense of PURPOSE to carry them along and help them decided which way to go when they get to a crossroads. It may well be a new sense of purpose, since the change may have rendered the old one obsolete.

4. Forget trying to “cope” with the change; learn instead to “capitalize” on it

When you feel that you’re in danger of falling apart, it seems that the best that you can do is to hold on. But actually, the people who do best with change are the ones that recognize that the “neutral zone” is also a very creative time. The same up-in-the-air quality that makes it so confusing also means that almost anything is possible. Everything is fluid. The other side of confusion is that there is less standing in the way of doing something new.

To capitalize on this fact, recognize that you’re going to have to step back and take stock. The idea of just hurrying along, hitting the ground running, or getting back to business as fast as possible is very appealing—and very dangerous. It makes it unlikely that the old way will really be new. It makes it more likely that it will be the old way with a thin coat of new paint. In an age when change is minimal, that may be all right. But today, when change is systemic and radical, that’s disaster.

There’s no way to make do with yesterdays’ left-overs, whether we are talking about an organization’s technology or strategy, or whether we are talking about an individual’s skills or

career. Even the vision of the change that you had may, itself, have to change as you get further into it and understand better the inherent dangers and possibilities.

5. Build up your transition-worthiness and your resiliency

It would be reassuring if there were a treatment you could undergo or a course you could study to do this, but there isn't. Thinking back on your past experience with change and seeing how often it looked dark in prospect may help. But you need to do what you can to increase your transition assets and minimize your transition debits. Here is a brief list of each:

Assets

- ◆ You think of your work life as though you were a little business (creating your strategies and enhancing your resources) rather than thinking of yourself as an employee with a career.
- ◆ You understand what your most valuable abilities are and see where those might be useful to someone.
- ◆ You like to imagine ways to use those abilities in situations totally unlike any you have ever worked in before.
- ◆ You are developing your entrepreneurial and your negotiating skills.
- ◆ You have a good personal and professional network and keep enhancing and strengthening it.

Debits

- ◆ You secretly think that all of this turmoil will “blow over” in a little while.
- ◆ You want to be told what to do; You find the idea of self-management ridiculous.
- ◆ You believe that change disrupts and destroys the opportunities of “the good old days” and think that change simply relocated opportunity is just double-talk.
- ◆ You think that all this talk about everyone having a customer is ridiculous; you just want an old-fashioned job.
- ◆ You derive much of your sense of who you are from the job that you hold: “I am a machinist . . . a sales person . . . an HR manager.”

OK. There's a self-help plan for you. It'll give you something to do while:

. . . the Re-Engineering Team finishes their work on your department's work processes

. . . or while the Directors mull over how the Reorganization will affect people in your category

. . . or while you wait to see what the Merger or the Privatization or the Workforce Cuts or the Outsourcing Plan or the new Automation Project does to your job.

As I said at the start, handling change well has become a new survival skill. Hasn't it?

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Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com