

# Reorientation + Renewal = Revitalization

*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.

Copyright © 2001-2009 William Bridges & Associates. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

**Linkage**  
Unleash your full potential.

My own organizational practice goes in waves. For a while, it is all about mergers. And then there is a concern with outsourcing and other aspects of “de-jobbing.”<sup>2</sup> And then there will be several clients who want help with reorganizations. Currently, one of the things that keeps surfacing is the search for a way to *revitalize* a team, a department, or even a whole organization after it goes through a difficult time of change.

Even if the change does not affect the group’s structure or its processes in a direct way, people feel drained and confused by the repeated change that they’ve gone through. Needless to say, if transition is managed effectively from the start, these impacts can be minimized. But I live in a world where people usually don’t do the right thing the first time around, so that by the time I get there, things aren’t going very well. The people are *already* demoralized. Talent is *already* heading for the exits. Productivity has *already* started failing. So the time for avoiding trouble is past. This is where people start talking about how to revitalize people.

The irony is that the very source of the trouble—transition, badly managed—is also the source of the solution, if it is well managed. Through a kind of organizational homeopathy, the same process that wears people out and disorganizes their efforts can bring them back together and give them a fresh start. Let’s see how that can happen in four different organizational situations.

The teams and organizations that I see, seem to fall naturally into these three groups:

- ◆ The first is the group that is holding on to the past; they can’t get with the changes because they can’t let go of “the way we’ve always done it.”
- ◆ The second is the group that has bogged down and is stuck somewhere in between the old way and the new.
- ◆ The third is a group that is having trouble getting the new ways launched.

Each of these groups needs to be *revitalized*, although that term means something a little different in relation to each of the three groups.

What the first group needs is help with four things:

1. It needs to say goodbye to the past, after honoring it for its contributions. “Saying goodbye” is a metaphorical process, so this may involve some kind of ritual or symbolic event. There’s no list of rituals anywhere. What you need to do is get people talking about what it’s time to let go of and how that letting-go could be expressed visually or dramatically.
2. The “gates need to be closed” behind the people. Some people hold on in the belief that “all this new stuff” is going to pass, so it helps to send a strong message that there is no going back. When Moses headed for the Promised Land, he closed the Red Sea behind the people. This not only protected his people from pursuit. It also cut off their retreat.
3. Unpack the old baggage. Sometimes what holds people back is attitudes and beliefs from some previous change that went badly. Sometimes it is unresolved resentments from the past. And sometimes it is just outlived arrangements that are still being carried along like the furniture that no one had the heart to discard. Well, now is the time. And it is also the time to go back and finish any unfinished business from the past. Then you’re free to move forward.

4. Maybe the hangers on are just swamped by the confusions of the situation. Let go? Of what? This may be a good time to re-prioritize actions to be taken; it may be time to weed out inessential things that somehow got onto the agenda. Whatever you do, it is time to simplify and clarify what the group is doing—and what it is no longer going to do. When you do that, you may find that people are readier to move forward.

When a group is bogged down or stuck in the middle of a transition, it is likely that they got into the neutral zone but aren't able to get out. This isn't a situation that will resolve itself. These things will help, however:

1. Review with the group its purpose—its reason for being. Getting a clear sighting on purpose is particularly important when a group is stalled and drifting. The group may simply need to be reminded of its charter, or it may need the chance to update or modify its purpose a bit to realign itself with the real needs of the situation.
2. Paint a convincing picture of the group's optimal future state—or the future of the whole organization, if the group's efforts are aimed at bringing that into existence. In the neutral zone, people need to refocus their energy on their own internal transformation, but that turning can become an immobilizing force. Rushing people through the neutral zone is counter-productive, but they do need to have their destination re-established again (and again and again).
3. Involve the group itself in creating and implementing a plan for getting there. To present them with the plan does only half the job, for it is in working through the issues and in designing the best solution to them that a group really comes to understand what is needed. Just as important, is how a group comes to understand why other ways simply aren't going to work. When the plan is theirs, they are invested in it.
4. Finally, with a group that is bogged down, everyone needs to be given a significant part to play—both in reaching the goal, and in operating successfully once it is reached. From a *change* point of view, handing out parts-to-play gets the work done; from a *transition* point of view, it insures that getting through the transition serves everyone's self-interest.

If a group has got itself through the neutral zone, it may still have trouble getting focused in on the new beginning that it needs to make. Here is what you can do to help them:

1. Most of what leaders say about changes is strategic and general in nature, and that is fine. That is how you share the vision. But for people to overcome their fear that they'll do badly in some new effort that they have never tried before, they need a clearer grasp on what the general vision means for them. So, translate the general goals into an actual plan for the group...and into the behaviors and attitudes that each individual will need to contribute to the joint effort.
2. Go beyond explaining. Find ways to dramatize those new behaviors and attitudes. To find and publicize an example of someone who is practicing them is one thing to do. Another is to embody them in your own behavior. Then, look for little symbolic events and initiatives that capture the new style that the change requires of everyone.
3. Be aware that people's first efforts in a new style are like the first shoots sent out by a plant: they are delicate, fragile, easily injured. Don't think that "this is the real world!" and that people had better get used to working in it. Think, instead, of how you can protect their first

tentative efforts at doing and begin in a new and unfamiliar way. Go for small-scale victories that will encourage further efforts and sway people who aren't yet making such ventures.

4. Finally, reward the new behaviors—and make sure that you are not unwittingly rewarding the old ways of being and doing. Even leaders who are personally committed to a change in the large-scale, strategic sense often find that they are thoughtlessly doing and saying things that reward people for acting the old way on an individual or small-group level. Check this out. Ask for feedback. And if you need some help, find someone who can act as your coach.

The thing to remember is getting the group through transition successfully, will automatically create the two components of a revitalization effort: it will *reorient* the group, by pointing it in a new direction and engaging it in the behaviors necessary to make the new way work; and it will *renew* the group by dissociating it from its old patterns, immersing it in the energy-rich neutral zone, and rebuilding its sense of purpose in a new beginning. A well-managed transition not only insures that the change will work as planned. In this day of burnout and overload, it will do something even more important: it will *revitalize* the group.

<sup>2</sup> “De-jobbing” is the term used in *JobShift* (Perseus, 1994) to refer to getting the organization's work done without so much reliance on full-time, long-term workers—people with “jobs” in the traditional sense.

# 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.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

**Linkage**  
**Burlington, MA**  
781.402.5555  
info@linkageinc.com