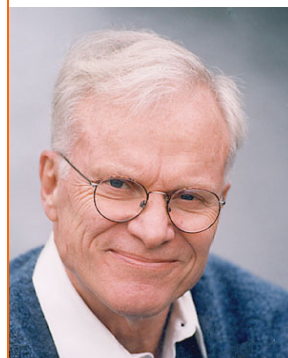


The Three Questions

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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Getting ready to talk to the executive director of a large non-profit organization the other day, I found myself jotting down three questions that I wanted to ask her. I realized that I had been using these questions with clients, in one form or another, for some time now but had never written them out and reflected upon why I was using them. When I did so, I realized how central they are to my practice. Here they are:

- 1. What is changing?**
- 2. What will actually be different because of the change?**
- 3. Who's going to lose what?**

Here is why I think that they are so important:

1. What is changing?

It still surprises me how often organizations undertake changes that no one can describe very clearly. "What's changing?" I ask. "We're changing the whole way we manufacture our product." Or, "We're developing a world-class HR infrastructure." Or, "We've come to believe that it is time to rethink the way that we go to market competitively and differentiate ourselves from the other niche players in our industry. And, also, blah, blah, blah."

The trouble with these answers is that they convey a very unclear picture of the change to those who have to make it work.

Now, in fairness to the speakers, it is often true that at an early stage in the process they themselves have only a vague idea of what, specifically, is going to have to change. The planners know only that there needs to be change in response to some threatening presence or some great opportunity "out there."

But until that vagueness can be cooked out of the undertaking and until the leaders of the change can not only explain it clearly, but do so in a statement lasting no longer than one minute, there is no way that they are going to be able to get other people to buy into the change. Longer explanations and justifications will also have to be made, of course, but it is the one-minute statement that will be the core of people's understanding.

Don't get me wrong. I am not urging you to do a Readers Digest version of all your strategic plans. I'm only saying that the successful leader is a person who can take a complex change and reduce it to statements that are readily comprehensible to the people who are going to have to make the changes work. The Communications Department may offer editorial help, but the statement itself needs to express the understanding and intention of the leader.

So the first thing to check is whether there is, in fact, a short statement describing and justifying the intended change, one that doesn't use jargon. (What is a "world class HR infrastructure," anyway?)

And be sure that the statement ties the change to whatever situation it is that makes the change important. The way we often say that to our clients is, "Sell the problem before you try to sell the solution." In other words, don't try to make a change to meet a challenge, solve a problem,

or seize an opportunity unless you have already established the challenge, the problem, or the opportunity in people's minds.

Remember: one minute!

2. What will actually be different because of the change?

Explaining the what and why of the change is essential, but it is not enough. I go into organizations where a change initiative is well underway, and I ask what will be different when the change is done—and no one can answer the question. One of my students arrived to run a transition management seminar at a large oil company and asked, in all innocence, what was going to be different because of the change. "We thought that you were going to tell us," replied the room full of managers.

Many change projects are designed and launched at such a high level in the organization that all the planning is unrelated to the everyday, operational details that make up the lives of most workers. In such cases, the decision-makers often have no idea how changes will actually make anyone's life or job, or even the function of a whole department, different. Yet that is all that people need to know before they can embrace and support a change.

Leaders find this frustrating. "The workers can't even see the crisis the organization is facing!" they growl. True. But who is responsible for that fact? Leaders are paid to understand the organization's larger problems, but at most companies the people under them are paid to do their jobs. When we tell the leaders that they ought to share the state of the business, in all its financial detail, with their followers, they say, "That'll just worry them. Besides, they don't need to know that stuff to do their jobs."

A change may seem very important and very real to the leader, but to the people who have to make it work it seems quite abstract and vague until actual differences that it will make begin to become clear. Some of those differences will be behavioral (answering customer complaints within 24 hours, for instance), while others will be structural (realigning sales teams by product rather than region or reducing the layers between CEO and line workers from twelve to five).

The drive to get those differences clear should be an important priority on the planners' list of things to do. If the differences simply cannot be spelled out at this time, then tell people how they will be established (by whom, using what criteria?) and when the differences will be explained. If you miss that date, by some mischance, explain why you missed it and give a new date. The thing to remember: Say what you'll do and do what you say.

3. Who's going to lose what?

The previous two questions, as important as they are, concern the change—the shift in the situation. The transition—the psychological reorientation that the people must go through to make the change work—does not start with a new situation. It starts when the affected people let go of their old situation. Endings come first. You can't do something new until you have let go of what you are currently doing. Even the transitions that come from "good" changes begin with losses of some sort, for letting go of the old way is experienced by the people who were used to it as a loss.

For that reason, we often say in training programs that you don't cross the line separating change management from transition management until you have asked "Who will lose [or has lost] what?" Some of our clients resist asking that question. "That's negative," they say. "We want to be positive about this change." Or they argue, "Let's don't talk about what is ending. What we want them to understand is the new things that are beginning." Or they rationalize: "It isn't as though they were going to lose their jobs. It's just a reorganization, for heaven's sake"—as if leaving the team or the boss you've worked with for a year weren't a loss. Sometimes they argue, "If we talk about losses, we'll just trigger off a lot of bitching and moaning," or that "I don't think that loss-stuff has even occurred to them. We don't want to be putting ideas into their heads."

There must be a hundred other versions of this objection to dealing with endings and losses, but they are all variations on a single theme: the mistaken idea that the best way to get people through a transition is to deny that they are even in a transition. In fact many communications projects are based on this central misconception that you can (and should) talk people out of their reactions to the change.

Transition management is based on another idea: that the best way to get people through transition is to affirm their experience and to help them to deal with it. It is not a question of agreeing with people or being nice to them. It is simply a question of understanding how the world looks to them and using that as the starting point in your dealings with them.

When you do that, you bring issues out on the table, build trust and understanding, and give people the tools they need to move forward through a difficult time. When you speak to where people actually are in the transition process rather than telling them that they ought to be somewhere else, you are bringing people along with you.

If, on the other hand, you deny endings and losses and act as though they did not need to let go of anything, you are sowing the seeds of mistrust and talking in a way that simply convinces people that you don't know or care anything about them. That is not your intent, of course. But that is why "Who is going to lose what?" is such an important question.

For it is by asking that question, that you open the door to the transitions that people will have to make if the change is to work. It is that question that helps them to let go of the old way, so that the new way can be established and work.

More than half of "communication" is the result of listening rather than speaking. That is why three questions are so important in a time of change:

- 1. What is changing?**
- 2. What will be different because of the change?**
- 3. Who's going to lose what?**

They not only create a climate of listening which reassures people and defuses opposition. They also generate information that you may not, yourself, know yet. And, hey, you're in transition too.

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Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com