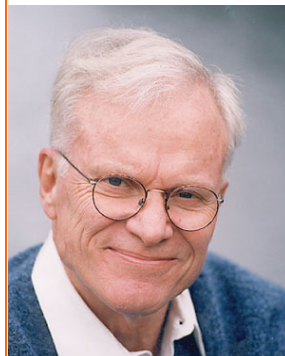


Why Change Management Isn't Enough

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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An executive at a computer products company was explaining to me that the company had planned the forthcoming reorganization very carefully and that the top managers had been through a highly regarded Change Management seminar. “We managed everything—the logistics, the costs, the timetable—successfully. We set objectives and kept people informed—everything they told us to do. But then, in the middle of the change, things started slipping. First we started missing checkpoints. Then production, which was supposed to be increased by the changes, began to decline. Then the defections...” His voice trailed off and he looked out the window. “Somehow the whole change got away from us.”

His experience could be replicated dozens of times in my work. The changes were looked after, but the transitions were forgotten. Transition is more than just gradual change. It is, rather, the psychological process by which people affected by a change reorient themselves from what-has-been to what-is-going-to-be. Its three phases are:

1. Letting go of an old identity, an old reality, an old strategy.
2. Crossing the wilderness between the old way and the new.
3. Making a new beginning and functioning effectively in a new way.

The problem is that if people cannot get through this three-phase process, they may move to new jobs on new teams with new missions—but nothing will be really different. The change won't take.

Some of these people simply won't let go of the old reality. At best, they mess things up by doing things the old way, rallying around the old leaders, trying to live by the old values. At worst, they undermine the changes through everything from passive resistance to outright sabotage.

Other people in transition let go of the old ways, but they get lost in the Neutral Zone, the wilderness, the no-man's land between the old and the new. They form little knots of confused and anxious employees who are demoralized by the losses and are unable to find their place in the new order.

It is critical to the success of changes to manage the transition process—to foresee who is going to have to let go of what and to make it easier for them to do that; to understand the dangers and opportunities posed by the Neutral Zone and to guide people through it successfully; and to provide the resources that people need to make a new beginning. To do these things is to manage the transition. Not to do them is to launch a change that may well prove to be unmanageable.

A generation ago, we could muddle through organizational changes. They didn't come along as often, and we had longer to complete them. Employees were more compliant and employers weren't so constrained by liability regulations. But today the costs of unmanaged transition are too high:

- ◆ you lose good people—often the best ones
- ◆ people's anxiety undermines teamwork, adaptability, and communications
- ◆ old problems resurface, old mistrusts reappear

- ◆ stress levels rise dangerously—and with them, absenteeism and health care costs

So managing a change is simply not enough. Managing the transition is necessary too. Transition Management is today a key executive skill—a survival skill, in fact—and is likely to remain so for years to come.

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