

# People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

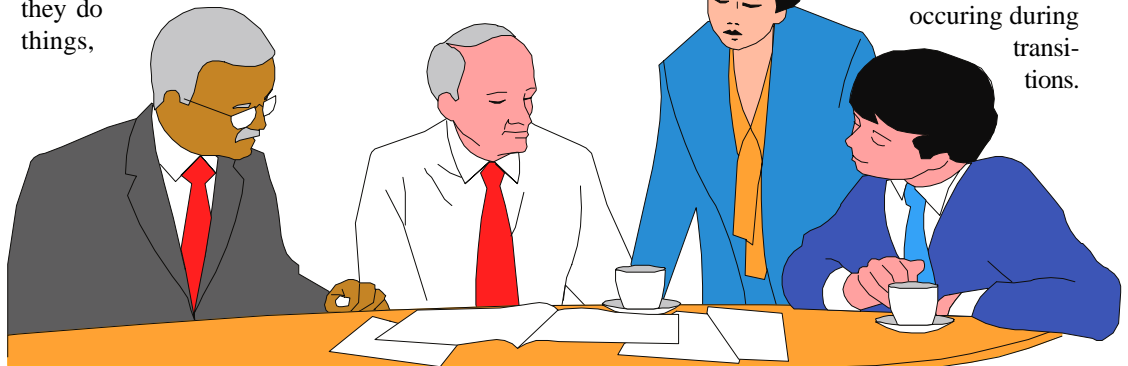
Social Sciences Team

## Managing Change and Transition

### Why should you worry about managing change and transition?

Today's buzzwords, whether you're dealing with government, business, or personal lives, all refer to change. Reinvent, restructure, reengineer, retool, reevaluate--these words and ideas challenge us to change the way we think and do things.

Whenever you try to get people to change the way they do things,



you face some difficulties. A change is situational, like a new supervisor or new roles within a team. A transition is what people go through to deal with the new situation; it can be partly a psychological process. Leaders need to be able to help people make transitions since organizations are constantly changing.

This issue of People Partnerships and Communities discusses techniques for managing transitions in three major categories: "endings", the "neutral zones", and "beginnings".

### Who can use these managing change and transition techniques?

Transition management techniques are most often used by those at the management level. However, in a time of change, any member of an organization may find himself/herself in new leadership or facilitator roles. Many organizations appoint transition teams to facilitate

communication and to help everyone cope with changes occurring during transitions.

These teams can be assembled by people within the organization.

Hence, everyone in The Conservation Partnership could be called upon to apply transition management techniques.

### When should transition management be used?

It has been said that the only constant is

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change. In a fast-paced world such as ours, change occurs regularly and often. Many people are unaware of the transitional stages organizations and individuals go through each time a change is instituted. In this way, the change may occur, but the transition has not, and the organization or individual has trouble moving forward. These techniques can and should be used for any change that takes place to help facilitate the transition that needs to take place.

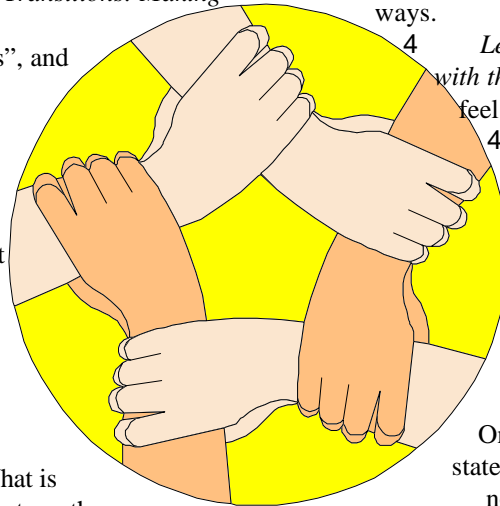
**How is transition management used?**

According to William Bridges, author of *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* and *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, transition has three stages: “endings”, “neutral zones”, and “beginnings”.

**Endings**

When changes occur, people are going to experience loss. They will have to let go of something. These losses need to be directly dealt with in order for the transition to be successfully navigated. Bridges identifies twelve steps to do this:

- 4 *Identify who's losing what.* What is actually going to change? What are the secondary changes? Who is going to have to let go of something? What is over for everyone?
- 4 *Accept the reality and importance of the subjective losses.* Don't discount other people's losses.
- 4 *Don't be surprised at "overreaction".* It is the losses, not the changes that people react to. People are reacting to a piece of their world that is being lost.
- 4 *Acknowledge the losses openly and sympathetically.* Pretending a loss doesn't exist causes a problem. If the losses can be discussed openly, people will recover more quickly.
- 4 *Expect and accept the signs of grieving.* Emotional stages are easily mistaken for bad morale. However, they are simply signs of grieving. Some examples include: denial, anger, bargaining, anxiety, sadness, disorientation and depression. Some ways of dealing with those stages are: addressing the issue, listening, keeping a realistic outlook, keeping people informed, sympathizing, and giving extra support.



- 4 *Compensate for the losses.* Give something back to balance what's been taken away.
- 4 *Give people information, and do it again and again.* Don't assume that information is known or correct. Even if you don't know all of what is going on, let people know what you do know.
- 4 *Define what's over and what isn't.* Be specific to avoid confusion.
- 4 *Mark the endings.* Create activities or actions to dramatize them.
- 4 *Treat the past with respect.* Show that the new ways are building on the foundations of the old ways.
- 4 *Let people take a piece of the old way with them.* This ensures that people won't feel blamed for having been part of the past.
- 4 *Show how endings ensure continuity of what really matters.* Today's success was launched by yesterday's ending and if tomorrow's changes are to take place, today will have to end.

**The “Neutral Zone”**

Once the ending is achieved, you “enter a state of affairs in which neither the old ways nor the new ways work satisfactorily”

(Bridges

1991, pp34). People are caught up in conflicting systems and end up immobilized. In the “neutral zone” there can be many dangers: motivation falls and anxiety rises, absenteeism rises, old weaknesses reemerge, personnel are overloaded, signals are often mixed, systems are unreliable because they are in flux, people become polarized between those who want to rush forward and those who want to hang back, and all of this can make the organization or individual vulnerable to outside attack. However, all is not lost in the “neutral zone”. There is more creativity and innovation during this time precisely because it is so chaotic. Bridges also has steps to help us through the “neutral zone”:

- 4 *“Normalize” the “neutral zone”.* Let people know that it is natural to feel confused or frightened.
- 4 *Redefine it.* Avoid negative metaphors in describing this time.
- 4 *Create temporary systems in the “neutral zone”.* Try to protect people from further changes, set short-term goals and long-range checkpoints, and provide training to leaders in the “neutral zone” to help them function successfully.

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- 4 *Strengthen intragroup connections.* Try to rebuild a sense of connectedness and identification with the group.
- 4 *Use a transition monitoring team.* This is a group of 7-12 people chosen from a wide cross-section. Its purpose is to facilitate communication, to demonstrate that the organization wants to know how people feel, to act as a focus group to review plans or communications before they are announced, and to access the grapevine to counter rumors and misinformation.
- 4 *Use the “neutral zone” creatively.* It is here that restraints on innovation are the weakest. Now is the time for experimentation.

**Beginnings**

Beginnings, while they can’t be forced, can be supported, encouraged and reinforced. In order to do this, you can:

- 4 *Explain the purpose behind the outcome that is sought.* Before they can begin work on it, people need to understand the logic of it.
- 4 *Create a picture of how the outcome will feel and look.* People need to experience it imaginatively.
- 4 *Lay out a plan for phasing in the outcome.* This gives people a clear idea of how to get where they need to go.
- 4 *Give each person a part to play in the outcome and the plan to get there.* People must have a way to participate and contribute.

In order to reinforce this beginning, Bridges proposes a few rules to follow:

- 4 *Be consistent.* Consistency is a key both in message and in action.
- 4 *Ensure quick successes.* These can come from small tasks or sure-win situations.
- 4 *Symbolize the new identity.* The symbolization will reinforce the new identity.
- 4 *Celebrate the success.* Mark the beginning.

The “beginnings” stage can also be termed the “working vision” stage, and can continue throughout other changes. A working vision is a phrase of a few words that enables people to create a picture of the outcome, a picture that will help them on their way to making that outcome a reality. For example, “Natural Resources Conservation Service works hand-in-hand with the American people to conserve natural resources on private lands.” This statement is short, concise and visual-evoking positive mental images. It creates energy, pride, and a sense of accomplishment. In addition, this working vision is constant during times of change. It stays in the mind’s eye.

**Where can I get more information?**

- ◆ Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change.* Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991.
- ◆ Bridges, William. *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes.* Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980.
- ◆ Katzenbach, Jon R. *Real Change Leaders: How You Can Create Growth and High Performance at Your Company.* New York: New York: Random House, Inc. 1995.



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