

August 2005

## Managing Transitions Making the Most of Change By William Bridges

This is the second edition of Bridges' popular 1991 book that has sold 400,000 copies. He says that people do not have problems with change itself, but rather with transitions. The change is the situation, i.e., the new boss, the move, the reorganization, etc. The transition is "psychological. It is the three-phased process people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about." "People have to bring their hearts and minds to work," so when change comes along, "transition management...is a way of dealing with people that makes everyone feel more comfortable."

The first phase is Letting Go—the ending of the old. People need to deal with their losses. Next is the "neutral zone," when the old is gone and the new is not fully operational. Psychological realignments take place. And then there is the new beginning. People develop a new identity, experience new energy and purpose, and make change begin to happen.

### How to Get People to Let Go

You start by identifying who will suffer losses and try to understand them. You sympathize publicly and permit people to grieve. Find ways to compensate (non-financial) for the losses, if possible.

Of course, communication is a top priority, clearly defining details over and over is important. Ceremonies to "mark the ending" are appropriate to honor the past.

### Leading People Through the Neutral Zone

Marilyn Ferguson, an American Futurist, has described the neutral zone as "Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There is nothing to hold on to." Anxiety and self-doubt are up; motivation and efficiency are down. Many people miss work; medical and disability claims are up. Old weaknesses such as confused priorities or miscommunications reemerge. People are polarized. Teamwork is undermined.

It is also a creative time. People are more hospitable to new ideas. Since there are less clear systems, new ones can be built.

Your challenge is to “normalize” this neutral zone. Create temporary systems for special projects, temporary assignments, overloads, and increase training—such as in problem-solving, team-building, and transition management tactics. Look at new roles and relationships. Set short-term goals, interim checkpoints, and realistic output objectives.

You want to strengthen communications as much as possible with newsletters, encouraging letters to the editor, etc. Using a Transition Monitoring Team, a cross-section, single purpose team, is also a good idea.

The most important thing is to use the neutral zone as a time for creativity. By word and example, it is a time to come up with creative solutions to the organization’s difficulties. Use retreats, policy reviews, surveys, and suggestion campaigns. Take ideas seriously. Encourage experimentation. It is important to embrace losses and setbacks. Foster entrepreneurialship. Take risks.

### Launching a New Beginning

Bridges uses four “P”s in launching a new beginning: explain the purpose, paint a picture of the outcome, lay out a step-by-step plan, and give each person a part to play.

People need to understand the purpose and the logic behind any change. It must be real and specific. The picture can be as simple as a floor plan, an organization chart, a video, or a visit to the new site.

The plan will be detailed and include people-oriented events such as a ceremony for the closure of a facility, the scheduling of a visit to another site, the start of a training program, and the date of a brainstorming session. In addition to everyone looking for a part to play in the final play, during the transition, everyone needs to be involved so that they can have some insight into what the real problems are. And by sharing those problems you enhance your relationship with your subordinates. The employees’ knowledge becomes available to decision-makers and since employees play a part, they are more vested in the outcome.

To reinforce the new beginning, there are the following rules:

*Be Consistent.* All policies, procedures, and priorities should send consistent messages. Your actions must match your words, and rewards (both monetary and non-monetary) must match what you preach.

*Ensure Quick Successes.* Look for sure wins to “reassure the believers, convince the doubters, and confound the critics.”

*Symbolize the New Identity.* Understand why small things can be symbolically very important to people, so you can use it to your advantage and not get tripped up by it.

*Celebrate the Successes.* This can be small or large, behind the scenes or in public, with mementoes of transition progress.

### Organizational Development

Bridges defines seven stages of organizational development:

1. Dreaming the Dream
2. Launching the Venture. This is the “making it up as you go” stage.
3. Getting Organized. The organization is now big enough to be organized and have specialized expertise. Financial controls become necessary
4. Making it. This is the “adulthood” stage. It is established in the marketplace. It may expand and grow in this stage for a long time
5. Becoming an Institution. This shift is subtle. It’s more style than substance. Reputation is already established. There is little talk about development. This stage may also last a long time.
6. Closing In. “This phase often grows almost imperceptibly out of the self-satisfaction that so often marks institutional life.” Customers are likely forgotten and focus shifts to internal matters. And this brings us to the final stage
7. Dying. These days, this stage leads to a likely acquisition.

He then offers these laws of organizational development

1. Those at home with one phase are most likely to experience the subsequent phase as a severe personal setback.
2. The successful outcome of any phase triggers its demise by creating changes it is not equipped to handle.
3. In any significant transition, the thing that the organization needs to let go of is the very thing that got it this far.

The reason we need to understand the developmental course of organizational life is so that we can determine when problems just need to be fixed and when “renewal” is necessary, i.e., “taking the organization back to the start of its life cycle”. This means “redreaming the dream” or “getting a new central idea around which to build the organization’s activities,

This book remains a classic. It is a good coaching primer and a good reference book for managers with whom you are working.

Judy Denny  
jadenny@aol.com