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Successful Transitions: Where Endings Come BEFORE Beginnings

- Joe received the promotion he'd worked so hard to achieve.
- Julia's firm has merged with another.
- Mark's firm just embarked on a new paperless office initiative.

The statements above represent real life client examples of three different, yet significant changes. And each change requires the individual to transition to a new way of being. Personal and organizational changes happen all the time and often they are significant. Typically we focus on the *outcome* that the change produces. Changes like: our new roles and responsibilities after our promotion, the new firm identity and structure resulting from the merger or the new procedures required from a change in work process or policy.

While change focuses on outcomes, transitions are different. Transition is the *process* that people **must** go through if the change is to be successful. Transition is the more difficult piece but necessary to implement the change. Whether at the corporate or personal level, we often lose sight of the critical importance of the transition process, focusing on the change itself.

Regardless of the type or magnitude of the change, successful transitions require people to undergo three separate phases. William Bridges, in his book, ***Managing Transitions***, describes each of the three required phases of transition as he helps us chart an effective course for the change. They are:

- 1. The Ending**
- 2. The Neutral Zone**
- 3. The New Beginning**

Whether you're a leader responsible for a major corporate change effort or an individual on the receiving end, it's important to understand these three critical phases and their impact on the outcome of successful change. The following pages describe the three critical phases and some solutions for addressing them.



Phase 1: The Ending

Change causes transition, and ironically transition starts with an ending. This phase represents the need to recognize the losses and endings associated with the new change. It's not typically the change that we object to. It's the giving up of the current, having to let go of something that is familiar and comfortable.

As a leader of a corporate change, we know that employees often feel anger, anxiety, sadness or distraction and may want to negotiate to keep things the same.

For example, when Joe received his well deserved promotion, he was faced with leading a team who had formerly been his peers. That anxiety was compounded by the fact he was leaving his comfort zone by adding additional departmental responsibilities. He needed to address the endings associated with his promotion. What are some recommendations for Joe or you as a leader in this phase? Bridges shares a few solutions:

1. Identify who's losing what. Identify the losses you're feeling as a result of the change. Be specific.
2. Acknowledge the losses openly and sympathetically. Often, it's not talking about the loss that causes trouble.
3. Define what is over and what is not. One of the most important leadership roles during times of change is that of putting into words what it is time to leave behind. Be specific about what goes and what stays.
4. If you're the leader of a change, increase communications. Give people information and do it again and again. Establish special communication mechanisms.
5. Mark the endings and show how endings ensure the continuity of what really matters.

Phase 2: The Neutral Zone

The neutral zone is a time where neither the old way nor the new way is fully in place and working satisfactorily. Imagine you're on a trapeze. Think of the neutral zone as that uncomfortable moment in between letting go of the old trapeze and grasping onto the new trapeze! Very unsettling.

During the neutral zone, anxiety rises, motivation falls, productivity suffers, weaknesses reemerge, priorities are unclear and employees lose focus on the "team." But it's also a time for innovation and



creativity. The neutral zone can be a time for new ideas to blossom. It is necessary to understand that this time between the endings and beginnings is required for reorientation and redefinition.

When Julia's firm merged with their local competitor, their neutral zone represented the period where neither firm's culture seemed to emerge. The losses were identified in the ending phase but the new firm had yet to gel.

What are some solutions for organizations and individuals in the neutral zone? Bridges' tips and tools for the Neutral Zone:

1. Normalize the neutral zone by acknowledging it as an uncomfortable time that can be turned to everyone's advantage.
2. Set short range goals and checkpoints. What new roles or reporting relationships or configurations of the org chart do you need to develop to get through this time?
3. Don't push too hard for certainty and closure. Instead allow time for newness and creativity. Work to transform the losses into opportunities to try doing things a new way.
4. Shift attention from the problem to the opportunity. Shift attention from the present to the future. Shift attention from what is done to you to what you can do. Shift attention from what you can't do to what you can do. In short move to thinking about what's possible with the change vs. what can't be accomplished.

Phase 3: New Beginnings

During this phase you're ready to make a commitment to do things the new way, embrace the new values and take on the new identity. Beginnings are the final phase of transitions and their timing is not measured in the dates written on an implementation schedule. The change management plan will spell out the details of the change, but beginnings will evolve when people have worked through their own transitions.

When Mark's firm initiated a paperless office initiative, the transition plan took the company through Phases 1 and 2. Phase 3 was required to implement the successful change to incorporate the new behaviors that the initiative required.



Below are a few of Bridge's suggestions for Phase 3:

1. Be open to shifts and corrections in your plan as events and experiences occur that require modification.
2. Focus your early efforts in achieving a few quick successes, and use them to build your confidence in further steps.
3. Convert the possibilities that you discovered in the neutral zone into objectives and then lay out a plan to get to wherever they lie.
4. Be certain you know how you have to be different now, both internally and behaviorally.
5. Articulate your new identity and communicate it to others. Find ways to symbolize and celebrate it.

It should be noted that the process of transition does not occur in a neat linear fashion and that different individuals can be in different phases at the same time. Regardless of the phase you or your organization is in, the following are some suggestions for your role as a leader:

→ **Lead by example**

Model behaviors that you are asking others to assume. Be positive, open, flexible, engaging of your team, and focused on your mission and objectives.

→ **Communicate**

Recognize that during times of change people need a lot of information on a regular and ongoing basis. You can't over communicate at this time.

Listen. Be visible to your employees. Remember that it is okay to say "I don't know."

→ **Anticipate that people will approach change differently**

Be prepared with rationale and possible suggestions to involve people.

Help develop ideas and suggestions that will help them feel more in control of their work world. In the end, we all want to feel a sense of control, have others understand our feelings and feel support and empathy.



→ **Understand that some people will need additional assistance**

Be patient. Transitions take time and are critical to your successful change effort.

From a leadership perspective, most leaders imagine that transition is automatic. It's not. Transition happens much slower than change and leaders must consider the implications of not managing a successful transition at the time of the change.

New jobs, merged firms, new work processes, downsizing, a sale of a division. These are significant changes that we may have faced in the past or we may be facing at some point in the future. Change is focused on outcomes. Yet transitions are integral to the change. Transitions are focused on the individual's process of moving *through* the change in order to help us ensure that the positive results of the change will be achieved.

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