

The Important Difference between Change and Transition

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Change and Transition are Different

According to research by Peter Senge, over 70% of all organizational change efforts fail to meet expectations and deliver planned results. Organizational change is complex, and there are many issues underlying what helps or hinders success. A lot of attention is focused on **what** to manage, such as goals, strategies, action plans or project plans. What is often ignored or downplayed is **how** to lead people through transition.

There is an important difference between change and transition. It's helpful to think of change as the **external** situation. It's what you are trying to achieve, such as a merger, acquisition, reorganization, consolidation, lean enterprise system, process improvement, or other important strategic initiative. Transition on the other hand, is the **internal** process that people must go through to adapt to the change, and the new situation it presents. Until people successfully transition from the old way to the new way, the change won't happen.

The Transition Process

Transition is the psychological process through which people come to terms with a new situation, and adjust and adapt. While transition is a normal, natural and necessary human process, some people deny and avoid it. Their solution is to simply think positive and not waste time expressing negative emotions. However, when people don't have a safe and productive way to express and process their feelings, they tend to internalize them. Their emotions re-appear in the form of denial, anger, fear, frustration, cynicism, and skepticism. The net result is overt and/or covert resistance that is counter-productive. The resistance slows down or stops the needed change.

A transition model that I have utilized in my work is that developed by William Bridges, who was a pioneer in the field. The model has **three distinct stages**. Following is a summary of each stage, including the typical emotions encountered, and the important work that must take place.

The first stage is called **endings**. It happens when people first get news of the change, and initially react to it. Typical emotions experienced during this stage include shock, denial, anger, and frustration. The purpose of this stage involves dealing with the pain and loss that accompany the change. Depending on the individual situation, this can be extremely painful and gut-wrenching. Organizational change may involve loss of a job, organizational status, personal identity, interpersonal relationships, or the comfort and certainty of an established process or work routine. Some people hang on to the past because it gives them a false sense of comfort and control. However, it is important to identify what is being lost, grieve those losses, and let them go. Successful transition begins with grieving losses and letting go of the old situation.

Once people have grieved their losses and let them go, they are ready to enter the second phase – **exploration**. Bridges technically calls this the neutral zone. I prefer the term exploration because it explains the movement that must take place. Exploration is chaotic. People experience a combination of fear, confusion, uncertainty, stress, indecisiveness, discouragement, skepticism, cynicism, creativity, and ultimately acceptance. Metaphorically, this is that in-between stage when you have let go of one trapeze, and you have not yet grasped the other trapeze that you hope is coming your way! We encounter a challenging combination of danger and opportunity during this phase. The purpose of exploration is to face this reality, and creatively explore and discover new ways of doing things. In the chaos of uncertainty, organizations have the opportunity to achieve breakthrough ideas. However, creativity requires time, reflection, experimentation, and even dissent. Leaders must be realistic in planning the time needed, tolerate temporary setbacks, and be patient when immediate results are not achieved. Otherwise, people can become demoralized and lose hope, and your organization can miss your best opportunity to make improvements.

The third stage is **new beginnings**. In this phase, the new way is formally announced and started. The reorganization takes place, the new system goes live, or the new process is implemented. Energy is starting to move in a new direction. People experience a mixture of anxiety, hope, enthusiasm and impatience. They may physically start to do things the new way, but until they understand what they're doing, have a positive attitude about it, and are confidently doing it, the new beginning really hasn't taken place. The purpose of new beginnings is to fully engage people in making the new way work. Leaders must consistently role model the new way, recognize and reinforce new behaviors, and celebrate small successes to gain momentum and traction.

Keys to Your Effectiveness

There are **three things** you can do to enhance your effectiveness in leading people through a transition process to achieve your organization's planned changes.

First, **be aware of where you and others are in the transition process**. People experience transition differently because of their personal experience with past changes, and how they are affected by the current change. In addition, the top, middle and front line levels of an organization typically go through the three stages at different times. Senior leaders often find themselves in new beginnings, while middle managers are in exploration, and people on the front lines are in endings. You must be keenly aware of where people are in the transition process. How are you reacting to the change, and how are others reacting to it? What emotions and behaviors do you observe in yourself and others? What stage of transition are you and others in? Focus on the purpose of each stage, and what needs

to be done to help everyone get through it together.

Second, **provide support**. People need emotional support during transition. For example, during endings, are you being empathetic and respectful of what others are experiencing? During exploration, are you encouraging creativity, and creating the environment that is needed to find a better way to operate? During new beginnings, are you celebrating success, and reinforcing the attitudes and behaviors needed to make the change? Are you a role model for the new way?

Third, **provide information and structure**. Bridges points out the **four P's** that people need to make a new beginning. What is the **purpose** of the change? People need to understand the reasons, and the logic for making the change so that they can put their minds to it. What is a **picture** of what the outcome will be like? People need to experience the change in their imagination before they can give their hearts to it. What is the **plan** to make the change happen? People need a clear step-by-step plan so they understand how they can get where they need to go. What **part** will each person play? People need to know the part they play in the plan so they can personally participate, and make a positive contribution.