Transition: The Blindspot of Change Management

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Introduction

Change is the only constant. And it happens at every level of our existence - from our own bodies right through to the whole planet.

When it is initiated by others in companies, departments, hospitals, mine sites and the like, it is labeled organizational change, and a plethora of literature exists on this subject.

The vast majority of change programs initiated in large organizations fail - for many well documented and known reasons.

But too often the results are disappointing because change management is not sufficient in itself; it needs to be supplemented by transition management. Transition is the blind spot of so much well intentioned organizational change.

Transition is **not** just another word for change. The concept of transition was popularized by *William Bridges*[1] and the reader is referred to his website for a large array of *resources* on the topic. It is not the intention of this paper to canvas all of that material, but rather to summarize it and bring it to the attention of those who lead change and those who may be experiencing transition, as change is done to them.

What is transition?

Change involves a shift in the external situation. It is about the events or circumstances of the organization: for example, the new leader, improved products or processes, changed structures, different customers or newly merged organizations.

Directly or indirectly we are all familiar with the newly appointed CEO who arrives and makes wholesale changes to the senior and

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middle level positions, removing carriers of an old culture. Equally, we know of dysfunctional dynamics in an organization that executives believe can be resolved through a change program of some form that, often, involves structural re-arrangements, new processes and new people in new roles.

Put simply, organizational change is typically outcome or results focused, a solution to someone's perception of a problem or an opportunity. Transition, on the other hand, is an internal, three-phase psychological re-orientation that people go through as they come to terms with change, often a change that is visited on them by others.

Transition is a process, an inner experience not necessarily focused on outcomes or results.

Transition is timed differently from the external changes, and has less definition than the change it accompanies.

There are three predictable phases of this transition process or journey –

- Endings
- Neutral Zone, and
- New Beginnings.

These can be further broken down into sub-phases and the reader is encouraged to consult

William Bridges for further insight and resources related to these.

The nature of transition

William Bridges points out that we need to understand that transition is an individual reaction. It can be triggered by others (as a response to an organizational change), by events (death of a spouse, break up of a relationship) or by oneself through a choice (new country, new relationship, new role). It can happen in as apparently simple a situation as a unit or section reshuffle of people into new roles or returning from an extended stay in another country. It can start when the change starts or may even begin before the change starts, in anticipation so speak.

In the case of transition triggered by organizational change, the leader's role is to help individual managers and staff members move through to new beginnings. All this has to happen while key business or service outcomes are achieved: continuing to mine ore, deliver health care to patients, or maintain a transport network.

Three Phases of Transition

These three stages are shown in a Transition Curve and while this curve is over simplified, it is a useful tool for understanding the sorts of issues people might be facing during a change.

" *It is transition not change that people resist* "

(William Bridges)

We often talk about people being resistant to change. But it is actually the transition that people resist.

- They resist giving up their sense of who they are, their identity as it is expressed in their current work.
- They resist the chaos and uncertainty of the neutral zone – the 'in-between the trapezes' state.

- They resist the risky business of a new beginning – doing and being what they have never done and been before.

Unless we help people through the transition, the success of our strategic initiatives and the cultural change that is required will be compromised.

Emotional Responses to Change and Transition

In any transition there are a range of typical emotional responses to the losses that people experience because of the changes.

Bridges suggest this is normal but often these responses are taken by others as signs that the change is being resisted.

2. The list of emotional responses to workplace change is adapted from William Bridges "Leading Organizational Transitions", 1998 and J.S. Jeffreys "Coping with Workplace Change: Dealing with Loss and Grief", 1995.

Leaders need to recognize these emotions in others and themselves and not misinterpret them as resistance. It behoves leaders to develop ways to manage their own emotions and assist others to manage theirs.

Unmanaged, these responses can lead to productivity losses and at worst the desired changes can be undermined, as we have seen with many clients.

Distrust

After the shock wave of a sudden re-organization announcement and the layoffs and other changes that typically follow, employees may feel as though "the rug has been pulled out from under them."

The trust level with the company takes a nosedive, and people who feel betrayed develop a generally suspicious, "save-your-own-skin" attitude.

Resentment

Those who don't benefit from the change or those whose friends/colleagues don't benefit can feel resentment, especially towards the

hierarchy. They can become angry, blame the organization and can look for ways to payback (working slowly, leaving work undone, leaking documents, making mistakes or organizing opposition).

Guilt

Change creates winners (those who benefit from the change) and losers (those who don't). The winners can often feel guilty and the messengers of the change may also feel guilty.

Guilty people usually express their feelings indirectly and may feel uncomfortable around the losers. They may overcompensate ("don't blame me, I didn't plan this change") or they may even blame and/or patronize the losers for not being able to cope well with the change.

Anxiety and Stress

Some people get anxious from first rumor of change and when the changes are complete they then worry about the next changes. Nervousness, working extra time and taking on extra work to please the boss can be examples of how some employees respond to change. "If I get more paperwork out, start the day earlier

The new beginning

Neutral zone

Ending or letting go

Time
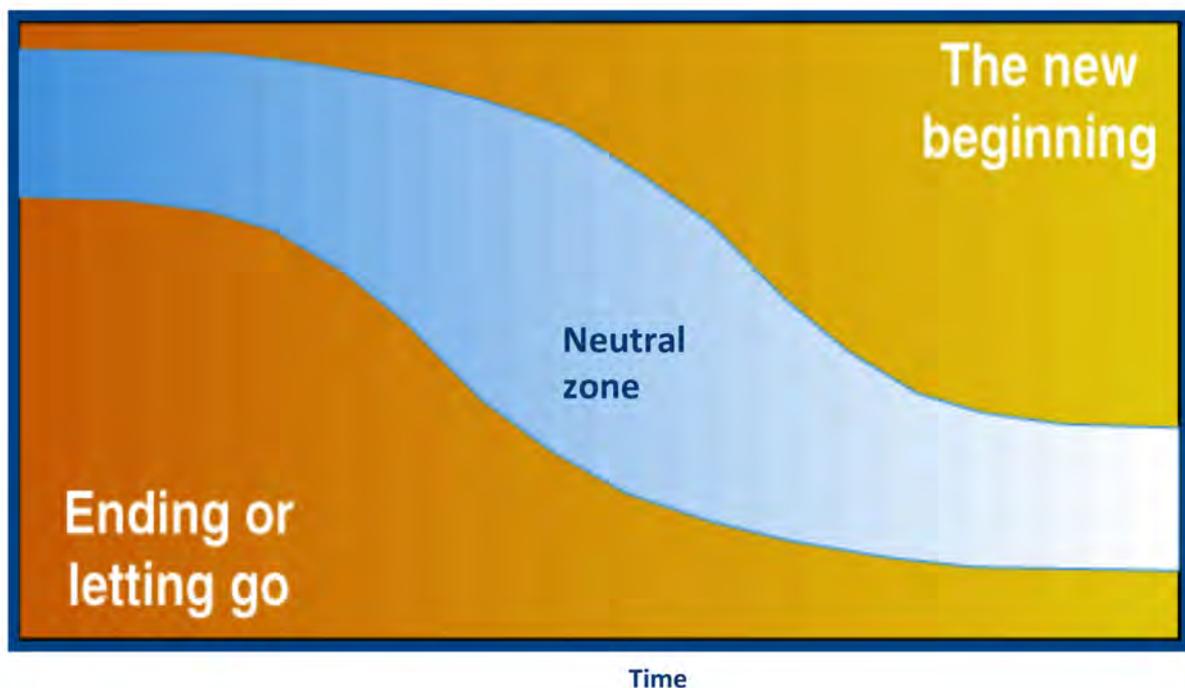
and stay later, come in on weekends, maybe I'll get to stay or keep my staff or this office."

Anxiety can be a stimulus initially and can eventually lead to a decline in focus on tasks and reduces motivation, energy, and adaptability. Stress and its negative effects usually accompany this behavior. It is instructive to note that absenteeism, medical claims, stress related claims all increase at times of significant organizational change although there may be a few months lag time.

Play it safe

Living with the anxiety of the unknown associated with a change can create fears that taking risks and setting work goals too high or being too creative may result in displeasing the boss. Goals are set low, creative approaches to problem solving are scarce, and no one wants to take any chances of looking bad.

Self Absorption

Some people focus on "How does this affect me? What will happen to me?" Transitions focus people back on themselves, which can undermine teamwork and increase competition for positions as well as undermine customer service. It is hard to take care of others when you are preoccupied with your own survival. Self-absorption can also undermine loyalty and commitment to the organization.

Malicious undermining

Sometimes a range of these reactions coalesce among individuals who have group level interests to protect. In the most extreme form, deep defensive covert politics become the norm as a response to the change. It is rare that the various factors come together to produce such destructive effects and there is little to be done in such circumstances, other then remove

the promoters of this way of working.

It then behoves the leaders over time to rebuild normality, openness and eventually trust as the group concerned begins to put the past behind them. In such instances it really is a case of "change the people or change the people".

Understanding Endings

In the "Endings" stage, people may want to deny the existence of the initiative and other related change events. Their denial can move them to fear and uncertainty about the future. This diminishes their productivity and the readiness to deal with the accelerating pace of change as the process starts to impact on the business.

They may acutely feel the loss of the familiarity and security they felt in the organization before this and other changes occurred. They are likely to be trying to reconcile or accept the fact that things will now be different from the way they have been.

Understanding the Neutral Zone

The Neutral Zone or exploration stage is the time between the current and the desired state. People will be attempting to orient themselves to the new requirements and behaviors. During this time, they will be confused about the future and will feel overloaded with competing demands.

This can have a negative impact on productivity or service delivery. In a company with high kinetic energy, e.g. the maintenance function on a mine site where heavy equipment is moving, it is a time to especially vigilant regarding safety. In a hospital, it is a time for vigilance around patient care and the adherence to tried and true protocols.

Because things can be chaotic at this stage, people may question the *status quo*

or the accepted way of doing things. With encouragement this stage can be a time of exploration that is ripe with creative opportunity.

With people in the neutral zone it is not unexpected to see

- Deadlines not met
- Projects started then dropped
- Conflict
- Individuals trying to do too much
- Power plays
- Political maneuvering
- Unexplained behavior

This is a time for leaders to be patient with people and provide individual coaching if needed, to define confusion as normal, to open new ways for people to get and receive information, to encourage networking and to support publicly and strongly those who are on board and supportive of the changes.

Leaders who have subordinates in the neutral zone of transition should be holding frequent briefing meetings, reviewing priorities for teams and individuals, being present and visible as much as possible (then doubling that), sharing the intention or ambition that the change seeks. It is especially a time for leaders to be visible and present to their staff.

Understanding New Beginnings

The New Beginnings stage of transition is that time when people are ready to commit to the new direction and the change.

They may still feel insecure in the new and emerging organization but are ready to function as a significant contributor. This typically occurs as the initiative starts to achieve some of its desired goals or the new

Photo: Salt pans of Maras, Peru by Peter Copley

processes and procedures start to stabilize.

Groups start to form, conversations start to shift to the future more than the past, individuals and teams start to talk and think in terms of possibilities rather than problems, and successes start to be recognized.

This is the time for leaders to celebrate successes, promote personal responsibility and accountability and delegate as much as possible where appropriate. New procedures should be documented, alliances built within teams and across the organization, and new behaviors modeled. If beginnings cannot be forced according to one's personal wishes as William Bridges suggests, they can be encouraged, supported, and reinforced. You cannot turn the key or flip the switch, but you can cultivate the ground and provide the nourishment.

And ...

- You can explain the basic **purpose** behind the outcome you seek. People have to understand the logic of it before they turn their minds to work on it.

- You can put a **picture** of how the outcome will look and feel. People need to experience it imaginatively before they can give their hearts to it.

- You can lay out a step-by-step **plan** for phasing in the outcome. People need a clear idea of how they can get where they need to go.

- You can give each person a **part** to play in both the plan and the outcome itself. People need a tangible way to contribute and participate.

What happens if you find yourself in transition?

There are many resources available to help individuals come to terms with and get the best out of a transition process they may be experiencing.

These include materials on the *William Bridges website*, but also include a workbook to guide you through a helpful thought process. This is *available on request from Dalmau Consulting.*

One key to helping yourself through a transition

What are you going to have to let go of? What's over for you - what are you likely to lose in the transition you face?

These may be hard questions to answer, not only because the effects of change are complex but also because you are likely to react with denial when you first face your losses. You're likely, that is, to find it difficult to see clearly and describe accurately the personal ending you face.

Some possibilities include

- It could be your identity as a member of a group, organization or team

- It could be a dream that has motivated you thus far in your life and career.

- It could be an assumption about the rules by which you were playing.

- It could be a tacit understanding about your value to the organization or the value of the project you care so much about.

- It could be a belief about the worth of yourself and your colleagues to the organization

- It could be the belief you have held about your boss or the head of your company - that he or she was ethical, for example, or concerned about his or her employees.

- It could even be the image you have had of yourself - the faith you had in your competence, honesty, or organizational clout and that of your colleagues

All of these losses, you will note, are internal ones: feelings, views, understandings, assumptions, self-images.

Remember that change deals with the outer situation, whereas transition (and the loss that it triggers) is an internal matter. What you lose is part of yourself.

Loss hurts, so the best clue to loss will be any pain or frustration you are experiencing.

What hurts you most in the current change? Spend some time letting yourself experience the feelings.

You may feel bad for somebody else. Push further and ask if the other person's situation means that you're going to have to let go of something yourself. Will you have to give up the idea that you can help your people when they need you? Or that you have to give up the illusion that the same couldn't happen to you? Or that you have to give up a hope of getting ahead while maintaining your self-image as a nice person?

These are the things you need to mourn.

William Bridges suggests that the depression you've been feeling, punctuated with episodes of anger, may be the mourning process you're already undergoing.

Recognize the signs of mourning in yourself - they can be denial, anger, bargaining, or depression. These are not comfortable emotions to have, and you need to avoid acting them out thoughtlessly. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross would suggest that you get to acceptance only by getting through the four preceding phases. You can't get around them, and suppressing them is simply going to undermine the letting-go process.

Take Time-Out in the Neutral Zone

You probably can't drop out of your life, though the idea sometimes sounds appealing.

But you can set aside special time in your day-to-day life for the state and process in which you find yourself. You may benefit from making agreements with the people who are closest to you to provide you with a time-out from decisions or from particular responsibilities. The idea is to decide what temporary arrangements and agreements you must make to get through this time between an old life and

a new one.

You will also do well to build yourself quiet times and solid places as a retreat from the chaos of the neutral zone. These may be as simple as a half hour alone in a park, or as involved as a two-week trip to a favorite place in the mountains. Look particularly for islands of stability that you can build into your week on a regular basis - times and places you can look forward to when things get crazy.

Another kind of stability you can build in comes in the form of objectives you set yourself and then reach. Most of the time the neutral zone feels endless, and one day tends to run into another in a manner that makes it hard to know if you're getting anywhere.

One way to counter these feelings and build a kind of structure into the emptiness is to deliberately construct short-range projects. Focus on reaching these goals, and note them as you reach them. It reminds you that things are still getting done.

The blind spot

In the hurly burly of organizational life, with the many competing demands and vague futures, those charged with organizational success often initiate major organizational change for good reason: efficiency gains, better performance, productivity improvement, resolution of conflict, re-invigoration of the organization, responding corporately to a burning platform, planning for a different future.

Whatever their goals, those charged with leadership see a program of change as the usual recourse. And they see good change management as a necessity.

No matter how good the change program, it is unfortunately true that those charged with the change are often blind to the internal transitions that will inevitably attend those who are to "be changed". Their blind spot is usually to their own detriment for unmanaged transition dynamics associated with organizational change inevitably lead to wastage, confusion and sub-optimal commitment.

Good change management requires good leadership of transition interventions and unless both are addressed the result will always be disappointing.

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November 2014
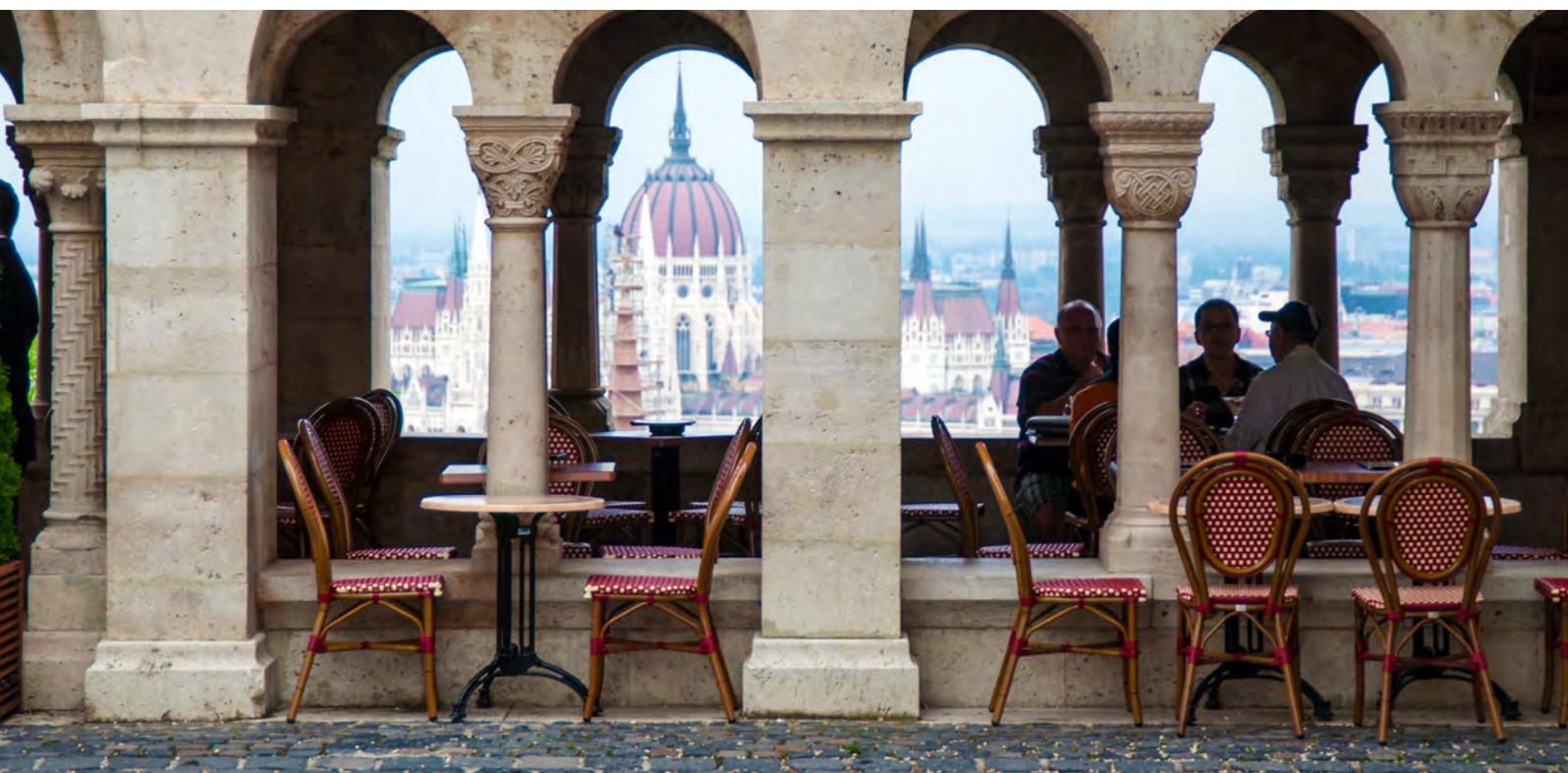
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