Transitions – William Bridges Model

Change Versus Transition
“It isn’t the changes that do you in, it’s the transitions… Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal” (Bridges, 1991).

When we are talking about change, we are talking about some external situation. The change simply happens. However, what causes a need for change management is people’s internal reactions to the change. Our emotional and psychological transition takes time.
The strategies for each stage will focus on how to transition people because unless transition occurs, change will not take root.

Transition Stages
People need to transition through change. They do this through three stages:

- **Endings**—people need to let go of the past first before they can embrace the new.
- **Neutral Zone**—People begin to explore their comfort with the new change.
- **Beginnings**—People begin to embrace the new change.

All of us go through these stages, BUT some of us may move through them quickly while others very slowly. And some people will not make the transition at all.

Endings
A transition begins with letting go of something—with an ending where you decide to leave the old situation behind. People will experience many emotions at the sense of loss. Not only loss of the situation—but loss of their sense of identity in relation to the situation.

Emotions at the Endings Stage:
- Uncertainty
- Denial
- Confusion
- Frustration
- Reservation
Strategies to Help People Through the Endings Stage

- Expect and accept signs of emotion
- Acknowledge emotions openly and sympathetically
- Provide people with information
- Don’t try to talk people out of their feelings
- Treat the past with respect
- Communicate again and again
- Explain what to expect
- Make your leadership visible

Endings and Emotions

Endings may seem the most emotional part of the transition stages. The Endings strategies emphasize responding to and allowing the emotions of people experiencing the change.

Emotions run strong during the Endings stage because people are going through grief. Just as with a great loss, people need to process their grief at the loss of the past, their own sense of identity as it existed under the old system, and what was known.

Grief Cycle

All of us experience emotional responses to loss. These emotional states can be mistaken for bad morale, but they are the natural process people go through when they lose something that matters. Not everyone feels all of these feelings, feels them intensely, or goes through them in sequence.

Here are common grief emotions and what you can do to help people deal with them.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>People deny that the loss will actually happen. It doesn’t demand action on your part unless it goes on too long. If people stay in denial for more than a few days, then address it, such as saying, “A lot of you are acting as though X isn’t for real. Well, it is. I’m concerned because I want all of us to get through this change with as little distress and disruption as possible. We’ll never do that if we pretend it isn’t happening.”</td>
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<td>Anger</td>
<td>Everything from grumbling to rage, often misdirected or undirected. It can lead to foot-dragging, “mistakes,” and even sabotage. Listen and acknowledge that the anger is understandable. Don’t take on the blame if it is being misdirected toward you. Distinguish between the acceptable emotions and the unacceptable acting-out behavior: “I can appreciate how you feel, however I’m not going to allow this project to fail. Nor do I want to see you fail.”</td>
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<td><strong>Bargaining</strong></td>
<td>Bargaining appears as unrealistic attempts to get out of the situation, trying to strike a special deal, or making big promises if you'll only undo the change. Distinguish between bargaining efforts and real problem solving. Keep a realistic outlook and don't be swayed by desperate arguments or impossible promises.</td>
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<td><strong>Anxiety</strong></td>
<td>Silent or expressed, it is a realistic fear of an unknown and probably difficult future. It can include catastrophic fantasies. Help people to not feel stupid for feeling it; anxiety is natural. Just keep feeding them the information as it comes, and commiserate with them when it doesn’t.</td>
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<td><strong>Sadness</strong></td>
<td>You see everything from silence to tears. Encourage people to say what they are feeling, and share your feelings too. Don’t try to reassure people with unrealistic suggestions of hope. Sympathize. You can be sympathetic to the feelings, even as you continue to support the change.</td>
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<td><strong>Disorientation</strong></td>
<td>Confusion, forgetfulness, and feelings of being lost and insecure are common. Give people extra support, such as opportunities to get things off their chests, and reassurances that disorientation is natural and common. Give them extra attention.</td>
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<td><strong>Depression</strong></td>
<td>Feelings of being down, of hopelessness, and being tired all the time. You, and others on your team, will probably find it is hard to be around someone with depression. You can't make it go away. People have to go through it, not around it. Make it clear that you understand and even share the feeling yourself, but that work still needs to be done. Help restore people’s sense of having some control over their situations.</td>
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**Respect the Past**

One of the common problems with choosing something new is that sometimes people criticize the old. In the enthusiasm for what’s coming, people may ridicule or put down the old way of doing things. Unfortunately, since those listening often associate part of their identity to the old, criticizing it is perceived as attacking them. Remember, good or bad, people feel an association with the old that they may not be ready to give up. So, focus on how the old helped lay the foundation for the next step into the new. Focus on the skills and values from the old that will be carried forward into the new. This helps emphasize the continuity and can be followed with emphasizing the new challenges that call for new responses.

Another suggestion is try and determine “what can I give back to balance what’s been taken away?” Is it status, turf, team membership, or recognition? If people feel that the change has robbed them of control over their futures, then look for a way to give back some sense of control.
Reflection Activity
Consider the strategies and suggestions for the Endings stage and the grieving cycle as you reflect on each of the following questions.

- *Can you remember a situation of change, where you were the one grieving? What emotions did you have to work through?*
- *What can you use from that memory to help you work with others going through a sense of loss?*
- *Can you recall a situation of change for a group or your family? What were some of the emotions people felt? Imagine it happening today, what would you do to help deal with the emotions?*

Neutral Zone
The Neutral Zone stage can be a time of confusion and one of creativity. Neither the old ways nor the new ways are working. People are caught between the demands of conflicting expectations. And Leaders are often impatient.

As people pick up the new way, they’ll also bring their innovation to implement and enhance the new ways. And that is great to see as it shows a certain commitment of ownership in making the change happen. They may also challenge how it is being done or express skepticism of the new.

Emotions at the Neutral Zone Stage:
- Innovation
- Anxiety
- Creativity
- Skepticism

Strategies to Help People Through the Neutral Zone Stage
- Provide a sense of direction and guidance
- Encourage employee involvement
- Meet frequently to give feedback and to listen to concerns and expectations
- Collaborate and build bridges between work groups
- Have peers share their success stories or new ideas (encourages others to see themselves also succeeding)

Allow for the withdrawal and return of associates who are temporarily resistant.

Reflection Activity: Consider the strategies recommended for the Neutral Zone. Which of these strategies do you feel would be most useful for you or fellow associates?
Beginnings

In the Beginnings stage, the new situation is fully accepted. People are building up skills and seeing success at the change. They are feeling confident and we want to reinforce that.

Emotions at the Beginnings Stage:
- Commitment
- High Energy
- Learning
- Accomplishment

Strategies to Help People Experiencing the Beginnings Stage:
- Explain the purpose behind the outcomes you seek
- Paint a picture of how the future will look and feel
- Lay out a step-by-step plan
- Involve people in setting goals for their work
- Design opportunities for quick successes
- Provide individual and team training in new values, behaviors, and skills

Celebrate change with public displays that acknowledge groups and individuals

Visualizing the New

Visualizing the new way of doing things is an important part of the Beginnings stage. However, you should introduce a change as soon as it is announced. Doing so will plant the picture of the future in people’s imaginations, where it will grow to reassure them.

Visualizing alone will not make the transition happen, but it helps it throughout each stage. So, introduce it with the change, review it through Neutral Zone, and bring it into focus and support in the Beginnings stage.

Warning: If the picture is so complex and hard for them to identify with, it will become intimidating rather than exciting or reassuring. The goal is enough information to feel 1) they can identify how they fit in to the new, and 2) reassured that they can fit in and do the work.

Reflection Activity: Consider: Which of these strategies do you feel would be most useful for you or fellow associates?

Where else could you use these strategies to help people transition through change from Endings through Beginnings?