**William Bridges Transition Theory**

Bridges distinguishes between *change* and *transition*. He defines change as the 'external' elements of what is changing – the new boss, the new job, new team, new policy etc. – situational factors. He describes transition as the 'internal', psychological process of adjustment that people go through to adapt to the new situation.

Change is external. Transition is internal – it is the adjustment that each individual must make in order that change is able to truly be made. Bridges suggests that unless transition occurs, change won't be effective or sustained.

Change focuses on outcomes – the new computer operating system, the revised organisational structure. All of these can be implemented in a relatively clear, manageable timescale. For example, on Friday we pack up our things and on Monday we report to work in a new building, to be given a new desk. Or, on 1 April we come to work to find a new computer on our desk, using new software and a different database to record our information in. In each case we have to understand the new arrangements; to make the *change.* However, before the change can imbed and become our new 'normal', we must make the *transition.* Transition is an internal process, which often involves working through loss, letting go, and leaving things behind. As mentioned in the section on Kubler-Ross' theory, these things that we must leave behind can be valuable things like our sense of competence, relationships, and identify.

Bridges describes three stages in his transition model.

### Endings

The first stage is Endings, during which people have to accommodate or come to terms with their losses. During this stage they must detach from the old reality and the old identity they had before change occurred. In simple terms you have to end before you begin.

So the start of this transition process is an ending. If you think of a personal change you have gone through, even a good one, for example being promoted or moving home, there are usually losses associated with even these changes.

In moving house we leave behind our neighbours, perhaps a great view, or even one's pet DIY project. Promotion often brings a new set of relationships, perhaps even a loss of competence associated with familiar and successful task achievement.

Forced change is often more challenging, and in some circumstances extreme in terms of the losses felt, e.g. through loss of a loved one, or a job. Coming to terms with the losses associated with these endings is the first step in managing transition. The thing to bear in mind is that while external change might happen quite quickly, the psychological transition can be extended in timescale and for each one of us it is navigated at a different pace.

## Neutral Zone

This stage has been described by Bridges as an 'emotional wilderness' – a period when you are no longer who you were, nor yet who you will become. It is the time between the ending and the new beginning.
One's gut reaction to this state of ambiguity is often to rush through it, and many are disheartened when it is prolonged. People often feel significant self-doubt at this time and sometimes respond by withdrawing (often taking sick leave), or leaving the organisation.

A key feature of the Neutral Zone is the opportunity it presents for change – Bridges describes it as the individual and the organisation's best chance for creativity, renewal and development. This 'blank canvas' space between old and new is a time of creative opportunity; to think and do things differently.

The Neutral Zone is both a potentially rich, and potentially frightening, place to be – an opportunity for new things, while uncertainty is at a high level. It is the core of the Transition process.

## Beginnings

The transition process paradoxically ends with Beginnings. People, and the organisations in which they work, don't reach Beginnings without having first experienced the challenge of Endings and spent a period in the Neutral Zone.

Beginnings arrive at different times for different people, and faster may not necessarily be better. They cannot be forced, but they can be encouraged and supported. Bridges suggests that people are helped by application of the four P's - Clarity of Purpose, a Picture, a Plan and an understanding of the Part they play.

## Key things that help the Transition

### Purpose
Explain the purpose behind the change – not just what it is, but *why* it is happening. Help people understand the logic behind the change, so that they can begin thinking about how it can happen, rather than imagining why it is happening.

**Picture**

Paint them a picture of how the future will look and feel. The more clarity there is to this vision, the more able people are to move toward it. If it is vague or unclear, people are likely to get stuck in the 'ending' – and the difficult feelings that are part of this phase.

**Plan**

Create and communicate a plan for phasing in change. Provide a clear sense of direction.

**A Part to Play**

Show people the part that they are able to play in the future, how their role will contribute to making the vision a reality. People find it easiest to create a future that they see themselves in.

Each of us will find one or two of these factors more important than the others. Some of us need to understand the Purpose, others need the Picture. For some a detailed Plan is necessary, while others need reassurance that everyone has a Part to Play.

### Why Change Fails (Or Why People Don't Change When We Want Them To)

Senior leaders and managers (planners of change) go through transition too, but are often 3-6 months ahead of others, as they have been thinking things through for some time prior to them being announced. This often means that the planners are near to the 'beginning' before others even know the ending is planned. It is important to be aware of this as communication begins. Those announcing the change may, indeed, be clear of the benefits – but be wary of selling them too strongly…others may be caught in the headlights of facing the ending. Yes, it is right to talk about the future vision with confidence, but it will be useful to also acknowledge that it will be difficult to let the past go.

"So while managers do need to get to Beginnings to plan and scope the change process, they must also provide support for their people through each phase and remember that their teams will usually be at a different place in the Transition process."
**Bridges, W (2004) Managing Transitions, Published by Da Caro Press**

### How can leaders support an effective Transition?

**Tips for Managing Endings**
- Have I given space and time for people to express their strong emotions?
- Am I aware enough to understand that people might not hear what I am saying at this stage?

- Have I thought about each aspect of the change carefully and identified what specially needs to change (attitudes and behaviour) what needs to stay the same?
- Have I defined clearly what is over, and what isn't? If this is not done staff will decide for themselves what to keep and what to discard. Are there opportunities for staff to get involved in deciding what to take into the future?
- Who is likely to lose what? – What am I likely to lose?
- Have I permitted staff and myself to grieve and publically express our own sense of loss?
- Do I understand the realities of losses to other people who experience them, even when they seem like over reactions to me?
- Have I acknowledged these losses – how?
- What ideas do I have for compensating for these losses? (what is the potential gain?)
- Am I giving people quality information and doing it appropriately, while recognising that they might not be able to hear it?
- Even where there is no news am I making sure to tell them "there is no further news at the moment?"
- Have I found ways of marking the ending?
- Do I demonstrate that I, too, value the past?
- Have I made it clear how the ending we are making is necessary to protect the continuity of the organisation, or conditions on which the organisation depends?
- Mark endings – don't just talk about endings, create actions or activities which demonstrate or symbolise them. Separate the old from the new.

**Tips for Managing the Neutral Zone**

- Communicate a lot during this stage
- Have I made it clear to everyone that it is perfectly natural and normal to find the neutral zone a difficult time, and that we can use such difficult times to change things for the better?
- Am I doing all I can to maintain everyone's morale and commitment – for example, by continuing to make them feel valued, and acknowledging their progress?
- Are there things I can do to try to buffer people from the effects of further changes?
- Have I done practical things to ease us all through this unsettling time, such as providing immediate goals, and realistic expectations?
- Have I thought about how this time of transition can be put to good use – for example, can old problems be solved, or ways of doing things be changed for the better, while the organisation is temporarily "unfrozen" in its procedures?
- Are we encouraging innovation and creativity: are we rewarding constructive and creative effort, whether it is successful or not?
- Involve staff, at every opportunity, in designing the future

- Establish an environment where there is time to take stock and to reflect – this is a good opportunity to reconsider custom and practice.
- Promote team work and cohesion in the face of uncertainty and anxiety.
- Ensure that there is effective and 'healthy' communication.
- Encourage the generation of ideas and creative problem solving
- Set short term goals to give staff a sense of achievement rather than ambitious goals which may set them up to fail.
- Help staff identify for themselves what they need to help them through this phase (knowledge, skills, tools, techniques, support).
- Remind people that they are able to change – they have been doing it all of their lives.
- Don't underestimate the power of 'thank you'.

**Tips for Managing Beginnings**
- Celebrate people's resilience and commitment
- Celebrate again!
- Paint a picture of how things will look and feel.
- Be sure that each person understands their new role and how it contributes to the future vision
- Communicate regularly and consistently at this stage.
- Plan and reward early success.

Ask yourself:
- Am I sure that I'm not trying to make a new beginning come about before the endings and the neutral zone have been adequately dealt with?
- Have I communicated my own vision of the change to everyone else?
- Have I identified some quick successes that will encourage people to get a sense of how the future may be better?
- Have I done all I can to help people to settle into their new roles and to help them to understand the shape of the new organisation?
- Am I consistently being a good model for others?
- Am I consistently rewarding people for their positive behaviour?
- Do I acknowledge the efforts made by everyone to successfully come through a long and, at times, difficult process?