# Bridges Transition Model

William Bridges distinguishes between change and transition. He defines change as the external things that happen around us – the new boss, new site, new team, new policy etc – situational factors. He describes ‘transition’ as the psychological process of adjustment that people go through to adapt to the new situation.

Change is external. Transition is internal. Unless transition occurs, change won’t be effective or sustained, Bridges argues.

Change focuses on outcomes – the new email system, the revised organisational structure. All of these can be implemented in a relatively short time scale. In each case we have to understand the new arrangements. Transition however involves loss, leaving things behind.

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 losses of varying sorts. 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 up the housing ladder, there are usually losses associated with even these changes.

In moving house we often leave behind 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.

Negative change is often more challenging, and in some circumstances extreme in terms of the losses felt, e.g. through loss of a partner, 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 takes a different length of time. Fast is not necessarily good.

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# Neutral Zone (Wilderness)

This stage has been described by Bridges as an ‘emotional wilderness’ – a period when you are unclear about who you are and where you are going. It is the time between the ending and the new beginning.

One’s gut reaction to this state of ambiguity is to rush through it and be disheartened when it is prolonged. People often feel major self-doubt at this time and sometimes respond by running away, or leaving the organisation.

There is no way back however without abandoning the transition and risking the effectiveness or sustainability of the change. A key feature of the Neutral Zone is the opportunity it presents for change – Bridges describes it as the individual’s and the organisation’s best chance for creativity, renewal and development. This empty space between old and new is a time of creative opportunity to think and do things differently. In social work this time is seen as often the only opportunity you have to help people make real changes to their lives.

The Neutral Zone has a positive and a scary side to it – opportunity for new things, uncertainty at a high level. It is the core of the Transition process.

# Beginnings

The transition process paradoxically ends with Beginnings – the shoots of growth we experience in spring. People don’t reach Beginnings without having first gone through Endings and spent a period in the Neutral Zone.

The minute the new organisation chart is posted, individuals may know what their new roles are, who their new bosses will be and who is in the new team. The reorganisation has begun but until people have made a beginning, effectiveness and productivity will be low.

Beginnings occur at different paces, and faster is not necessarily better. They cannot be forced but they can be encouraged and supported. 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.

# 4 P’s

# Key things that help the Transition

**Purpose**

Explain the basic purpose behind the change. Help them understand the logic behind the change before they apply their minds to it.

**Picture**

Paint them a picture of how the future will look and feel. Let them imagine it first before committing to it.

**Plan**

Lay out the plan for phasing in change. Provide a clear sense of direction.

**A Part to Play**

Show people the part each of them plays in the future and how they contribute.

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*)

Organisations (planners of change) go through transition too, often at a different pace and ahead in terms of timescale. The result often is that the change planners are at Beginnings when change is announced – they are at the roadshow, rah rah stage – "Look how wonderful the future will be."

Well great for them, but you and I are coping with losses and are just entering the Endings phase with no thought for the wonderful future ahead.

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, William, (2004) Managing Transitions, Making the Most of Change**](https://wordery.com/managing-transitions-william-bridges-9781473664500?currency=GBP&gtrck=RkNhazMzZFpjM0ZhYi84Vzg5ajNrTTJ5cm1sdGthWkQ5MGp6MS9KY2J0TEJqSnBXR2RHNzRXQU0rYW5RWHBlNTJrRmFRaEdVd3RsK0VJa0tsL1FQemc9PQ&gclid=Cj0KCQiAzKnjBRDPARIsAKxfTRAvnMtUB4UTKl27AEcN3AlmKMO8eee4SbfDX2hHf4ffYifo1tuMvAYaAs_MEALw_wcB)**. First Published by Da Caro Press, Revised with Susan Bridges 2017**

# How can you 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?
* 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?
* Have I found ways of compensating for these losses?
* Am I giving people quality information and doing it appropriately but 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 show that I 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?
* Define what is over and what is not. If this is not done staff will decide for themselves what to keep and what to discard. Be specific about what attitudes and behaviours will need to change but do not throw the baby out with the bath water!
* 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 keep up everyone’s morale and commitment – for example, by continuing to make them feel valued?
* 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 levels of output?
* 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?
* How can I sell problems that have brought about the change, more effectively and get staff to own the problem?
* Try to find compensations for the loss – what can you give back to balance what has been taken away e.g. if a change has made someone feel less competent timely training could help.
* Sell the problems that are creating the need for change and get staff to take responsibility for these.
* 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).

**Tips for Managing Beginnings**

* Celebrate people’s resilience and commitment
* Celebrate again!
* Paint a picture of how things will look and feel.
* Give each person a part to play, both in the plan and in reaching future outcomes - people need to know how they contribute, what their role is.
* 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 view the change as successful overall?
* 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?