



# Focus

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## Managing Transitions

“It isn’t the changes that do you in, it’s the transitions.”

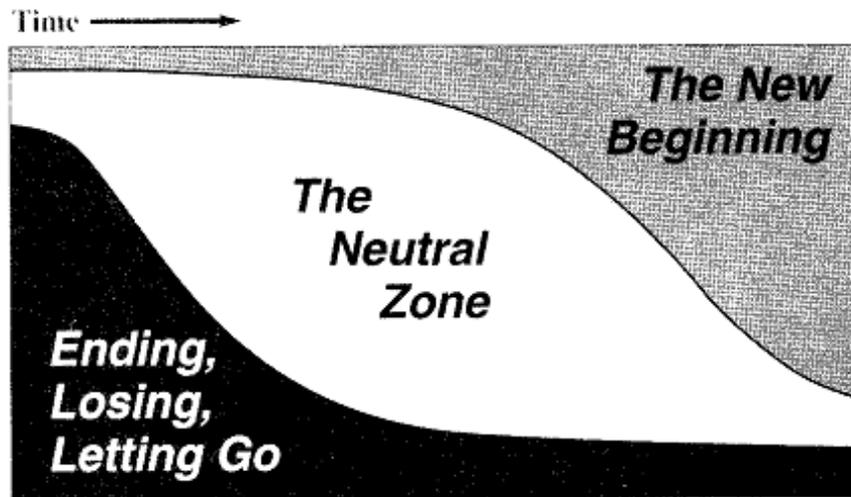
So says William Bridges in his classic book *Managing Transitions*. Originally published in 1991, Bridges’ insights are even more relevant today because the rate of change is increasing. “Life comes at you fast,” says one television commercial.

*Managing Transitions* is now #5 on my list of must-read books for leaders, and I think its most important concept is the fact that *change* is situational, while *transition* is psychological. Transition is what we as people experience; change can happen to a rock or bullfrog.

William Bridges puts it this way: *Transition starts with an ending and finishes with a beginning. Until people have let go of their “old world” they cannot fully plug into a new world.* Between the old and the new is a Neutral Zone where people search for new identities and roles. This period varies in length, and time here should be used creatively as people evaluate new ideas and processes.

- Managed well, the neutral zone may be a time of great, positive transformation for an organization. Besides generating new ideas, behaviors are re-patterned during this time.
- A rushed or poorly-managed transition can lead to future challenges that may themselves cause even more drastic transitions.

The graphic below illustrates the three transition phases.



Graphic from *Managing Transitions* by William Bridges, 2003 edition

Note that all three phases – ending, the neutral zone, and the new beginning – are continuously present in the transition. It's their relative magnitude that defines the primary transition state.

Good leaders understand, expect, and cope with the neutral zone. Some tips for managing transitions follow.

#### Deal directly with losses and endings.

- Identify who's losing what
- Acknowledge losses openly and sympathetically
- Accept the signs of grieving: Anger, Bargaining, Anxiety, Sadness, Disorientation, Depression
- Compensate for the losses, as much as possible
- Define what's over and what isn't
- Mark the Endings – even dramatize them
- Treat the past with respect
- Let people take a piece of "The Old Way" with them
- Show how endings ensure the continuity of what really matters

#### Lead people through the neutral zone

- Use the time creatively
- "Normalize" new behaviors in the neutral zone if you think you'll be in it for a long time
- Create temporary systems to deal with change
- Strengthen communications – a lot!

## Nurture new beginnings

- Accept new understandings, new values, new attitudes, and **new identities**
- Beginnings cannot be scheduled; they follow the timing of the mind and heart

Bridges notes that the most common reason new beginnings abort is that they were not preceded by well-managed endings and neutral zones. To make a new beginning, the leader needs to provide each follower with a **Purpose, Picture, Plan**, and **Part** to play. Explain the logic of the purpose behind the desired outcome. Sell **problems**, not your solution. When you have "sold" the common problem(s), people are on your side and in the market for solutions. Paint a picture of how the outcome will look and feel. Then lay out a step-by-step plan for phasing in the outcome, and give each person a part to play in the plan and the outcome.

A quote from Marquise du Deffand is especially appropriate when considering the three stages of transition. He said, "Shallow men speak of the past; wise men of the present; and fools of the future."

For more on transitions, including William Bridges' book, Google "managing transitions."

*Tom Wagner*

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