

Organizational Change: How to Survive and Thrive

by Renée Hanson

Change occurs when something new starts or something old stops, and it takes place at a particular point in time. Transition is the gradual psychological process through which individuals and groups re-orient themselves so they can function and find meaning in a changed situation. Change often starts with a new beginning, but transition must start with an ending—with people letting go of old attitudes and behaviors.

Many organizational changes fail to accomplish what they are meant to: they cost so much that their value is compromised; they take so long that opportunities are missed; or degenerate into chaos, leaving everyone discouraged and confused. More often than not in such cases, the difficulty is not with the economic or technical aspects of the change. The difficulty is with the people who must make the change work. What organizational change ultimately requires is that people develop not just new skills and knowledge but a whole new way of looking at things. It puts them through a whole internal re-orientation. William Bridges of the respected Leading Organizational/Individual Transition Program focuses on the crucial transition aspect and contends that, unless this re-orientation process is handled successfully, things will essentially remain the same. If people don't go through the inner process of transition, they won't develop new behavior and attitudes the change requires.

Leaders, managers, and supervisors can learn basic transition management strategies. With such strategies, they can bring employees through even far-reaching and wrenching changes with renewed energy and purpose. When they do that, the organization is strengthened not only by the improvements resulting from the change, but also by the renewal and realignment that comes from the transition.

Transition is a difficult experience for anyone, but some people deal with it better than others. Bridges' research found that a person's success in transition is directly related to how they feel about four factors, represented by the acronym C.U.S.P.:

Control – Do they feel they have some control over the situation?

Understanding – Do they understand, in terms that make sense to them, what is happening and why?

Support – Do they have support, emotional and practical, for what they must go through?

Purpose – Do they have a sense of personal purpose to give meaning to their experience and actions?

Each of these things is undermined by organizational change, but each can also be restored in some degree by managerial actions. In its simplest form, that is what Transition Management is: a way to help people recover a sense of C.U.S.P.

Bridges has found that managers often believe that “this may not be the right time” for transition management. That can mean that people are in chaos, morale has plummeted, everyone is juggling four balls, and that stress level is off the charts. “Maybe later, when things calm down a little,” say managers. This is usually the sign that the transition will never be managed and that the distress and disruptions will continue to mount until one of three things happens: things fall apart completely; some authoritarian control is introduced; or the change is abandoned or so compromised as to be pointless.

Most often organizations and managers are so preoccupied with the content of the change that they plan and manage the technical, economic, and staffing aspects of organizational changes with great care, but do not foresee or know what to do with the psychological effects of change on people. This makes them unprepared when the changes disorient people and leave them demoralized, self-absorbed, and full of mistrust. Managers are surprised when they set out to improve productivity with a new technique, only to find that productivity falls because of the disruptions caused by its introduction. The goals of the changes on which the organization's future depends are often threatened by the effects of the changes on the people who must carry them out.

It is hard to be the one who grapples with the problem that everyone is hoping will take care of itself. However, later on your colleagues will thank you for dealing with the human side of organizational change.

Some questions Bridges suggests asking about changes that are causing people to be in transition:

- What is really driving the change? What is the problem causing the change?
- What would happen if didn't change?
- What will we become through the change?
- How does the change fit with or grow out of the past?
- What kinds of secondary change and side effects are likely to occur?
- How could individuals and groups be affected negatively by the change?
- What kind of assistance will we provide affected individuals and groups?

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