



Managing Transitions in Complex Change Efforts

**A summary article of William Bridges' book
*Surviving Corporate Transition***

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Managing Transitions in Complex Change Efforts

by Beth Hart

William Bridges, Ph.D. in his book, *Surviving Corporate Transition* (1990), lays out a three-stage model for managing transition in a complex change endeavor. Although written for the business community, his theories and ideas are applicable to the transitions we are all experiencing with Healthy Start. Bridges establishes a three-stage model for the transitions that people and groups experience in complex change situations and suggestions for helping people to transition through these stages. Bridges calls the first of these stages "The Ending", the second stage, "The Neutral Zone", and the third stage, "The Beginning."

When something new starts or something old stops, that is change. Transition is more complex. Healthy Start is not just about adding new services or relocation of services. You are changing the interactions between people and organizations, the institutional and neighborhood climate, and the methods by which you see and address "problems" in your communities. As you are all discovering, the work involved in deciding which services to integrate, how to integrate them, and who can provide what is monumental. On top of the content work, the underlying human processes need managing so that all your good work on the content will be realized.

According to Bridges, transition is a "gradual psychological process through which individuals and groups reorient themselves so they can function and find meaning in a changed situation." The change for relocated agency staff, from working at the downtown office to working at a school site, is not the difficulty. Adjusting to working away from the home office and therefore changing status with a peer group and supervisor, working in a collaborative manner with new people with different goals and training, that is difficult. The adjustment requires transitioning.

Stage One: The Ending

As stated above, change starts with a new beginning but transition starts with the ending. The first stage is noticeable by a sense of loss and subsequent resistance. Losses can be categorized as loss of attachments, turf, structure, a future, meaning, or loss of control. As a school begins building in parents' voices to the school's planning and functioning, teachers can feel a loss of control. In the old paradigm teachers were more autonomous, deciding what was best for their students based on their own individual ideas and knowledge. In the new paradigm, a teacher must reconsider his teaching methods and content based on the perspectives of parents and others. This sense of loss is especially confusing when it is attached to a change that everyone, including the teacher,

has been working toward and views as beneficial. As Bridges states, "it makes no sense to treat resistance to transition as unnatural. It is the completely natural act of self-preservation."

Loss of Attachments—Transition always threatens our attachments—not only specific relationships and group memberships but also our feeling "connected" in a larger sense. This loss can be especially heartfelt for people whose identity is largely based on their relationships.

One way to help people deal with the loss of attachments is by using ritual. A ritual can be a simple way of publicly and tangibly recognizing the kinds of losses that are too often left unarticulated. Having a send off party for a nurses aide that is relocating from the local clinic to the school site is one example of a ritual.

Loss of Turf—Bridges uses this term broadly to include everything from people's physical territories to fields of responsibility. Turf issues are very likely to surface when you begin to work collaboratively. Decisions, which previously were made individually, are now made by a group.

The secret to working through turf issues is to discover how the change looks from the other person's point of view. Empathetic listening is needed to understand clearly what the other person feels they are losing.

After you understand their point of view, the basic turf-management technique is negotiation. The heart of negotiation is discovering and discussing interests, rather than presenting and trying to balance fixed positions. When a school administrator says that you can't have outside agency staff providing services on the school campus because of liability issues, you may be dealing with turf issues. It may be that the administrator is truly concerned with liability or she may be trying to protect her own turf or the turf of school staff. The key is to negotiate solutions that recognize and serve everyone's legitimate but very different interests. It may require that someone give up a little bit more of his or her turf to accomplish this.

Loss of Structure—The issue is not that organizations have a "structure" that can be pictured in a wall chart. This loss of structure is more about psychological effects than the actual physical structure. Whatever their other and more practical justifications, all patterns of authority, policies, schedules, deadlines, and physical arrangements of an organizational situation are ways of protecting people from the chaos of life without structure. Later in this article, in stage two, we will discuss in more detail the problems of dealing with structurelessness. In the meantime, it is important to establish a new and temporary structure to support people during this transition time.

For instance, an out stationed worker, who is used to receiving close direction from her/his home agency supervisor, will have more autonomy for making decisions in a new position at the Healthy Start site. To help the person transition into a more autonomous role, the collaborative team can partner with the worker's home agency supervisor to provide more direct supervision while new roles are being worked out and while the worker adjusts to her/his new responsibilities.

Loss of a Future—Although we are unlikely to be aware of it until it isn't there anymore, all of us carry around an expected future in our heads and hearts. In a project like Healthy Start where the goal is to dramatically shift the way people perform and account for their work, loss of a future is sure to appear. Particularly, as we move toward funding programs based on outcomes or the achievement of program results, people may feel more unsure of their future employment if it hangs on whether they can get results. It is important to help people understand what will be expected of them and how they will fit in to the new system.

Loss of Meaning—Meaning is always at risk in an ending. It is apparent when people attempt to counter loss of meaning by wrestling persistently with the question "Why?" When the meaningfulness of an organizational situation breaks down, a reality vacuum develops and all kinds of "meanings" rush in to fill it. Rumors abound.

Because meaning is personal, it is fruitless to insist that people view events impersonally. The key is to honor the individual's picture of what is happening while asserting the "real" reasons why. If you only assert your opinion about the "real" reasons you can win the argument about why something is happening, but lose the war of getting people to go along with it.

Loss of Control— Many changes result from situations that we have no control over. Even when we have choices, it is often difficult to know which decision is right. While involvement in the planning process is not a panacea, anything that gives people a feeling of regaining some control is a gain. The control must be real or else disillusionment is likely to set in. Offering stakeholders some voice in the planning and an opportunity to participate in the implementation will increase their sense of control.

These are some of the basic losses that people experience at the beginning of a complex change process. The primary fear is of the unknown. Much of what is happening or will happen is unknown at the beginning of a transition. It is, therefore, very important to clearly communicate all that you do know, to admit when you are unsure, and to include people in as much planning about their future as possible. It is also important to remind people that the ending stage is the signal for the beginning of a transition.

Stage Two: The Neutral Zone

Stage one, the ending, in which the old way of doing business comes to a close, is often the most painful phase because we mistake it as finality and not as the beginning of a transition. But the next phase, the neutral zone, is the least understood and the most perplexing. If you have ever been through the break-up of a serious relationship or a career change, you know the feelings. You may fluctuate between excitement about new opportunities and a desire to return to the old familiar situation. But the most overwhelming feelings are of disorientation and confusion. These feelings characterize the neutral zone. In addition, the feeling of confusion is often magnified because for many folks Community School Partnerships is only a partial transition. Their job and other commitments remain the same as before.

If we fail to recognize and work through this phase, we face two risks. The first is that we will be taken unaware by the perils of change that we are facing. The second is that we will miss the opportunity to maximize the positive aspects of this stage.

Bridges suggests numerous ways to help people through the perils of the neutral zone. These are strategies for supporting people during the interim and for continually monitoring the transition:

- Do whatever is necessary to encourage cohesion. For instance, Healthy Start center staff, including out stationed agency staff, might meet weekly for lunches. The lunch would be a time to discuss personal reactions to changes and to get to know each other better.
- Expect old issues to surface and try not to suppress them. The neutral zone brings everything out of the closet. Parents might bring up a time from the past when they were promised they would be included in decision-making but felt it didn't materialize. Use this as an opportunity to explore what shared decision-making means to them and put unresolved issues to rest.
- Keep the vision for school-linked services uppermost in people's minds. Some will be tempted to escape to a "simpler" past. Remind them of what was wrong about the past without dishonoring it. Identifying strength from the old systems and incorporating them into the new system will help.
- Create new communication channels and use them. There can be a temptation to hold back information, especially bad news, until you are sure. The result can be decreased trust, since people usually can tell when something is going on. Often the information void will be filled with

anxiety-producing rumors. As an example, if you thought you had a firm commitment for services from one agency and now it's unsure, consider sharing that with people. Let them know that you will continue to work on it and ask for their assistance. A simple one-page update every other week from principal to school staff, director to service providers, or parent representative to the community can go a long way to keep people up-to-date and feeling involved.

- Frame all your change efforts in terms of your vision and outcomes. This will help people to better understand how the different efforts fit together and maybe think of new ways they can contribute.
- Monitor the changes carefully and keep track of people. Regularly ask the folks who are affected by the change how it is going for them and what adjustments they think are necessary. For parents, school staff, agency staff, or others who are not involved on a daily basis, quarterly update meetings may be enough to keep these people feeling up-to-date and a part of the process.
- Educate people about this strange interim state. People should understand not only what is going to happen but also why it is happening.

The second consequence of rushing through the neutral zone is losing access to its positive aspects. The neutral zone brings the most opportunity for creativity. It is the empty space created by letting go of the past and it is necessary for maximizing creativity. Rules tend to suppress creativity and in the neutral zone there are few or no rules. Kierkegaard called it "the dizziness of possibility."

Bridges suggests three strategies to encourage creativity:

- Provide opportunities for people to step back and take stock of where things really stand and what changes they feel are needed. Involve people in creating the new vision for the new system.
- Resist the temptation to silence dissident voices for the sake of unanimity. Innovation and creativity begin with people who are seeing through their own eyes and thinking for themselves. What seems like an impossible or "crazy" idea may be just what it takes to enact positive change. Or a crazy idea may lead you to think of a more realistic, creative solution.
- Finally, provide people with opportunities to view the problem from other perspectives. Circumstances, such as professional background, organizational culture, and personal experience, guide people to view problems in one particular way. Viewing a problem from alternative angles can help to identify the core issues that are the true cause of the problem.

This new information allows the development of realistic and effective solutions. The goal is to encourage creative exploration of the problem or what Edward de Bono calls "lateral thinking." A few of these techniques include:

Use unstructured time for people to explore and record their thoughts, utilizing alternative techniques like drawing, metaphorical thinking, and visualizing. For instance, have collaborative members draw pictures of their vision for Healthy Start and where they fit in to that vision.

Use activities or role-plays that put people into unfamiliar roles and situations. Have service providers shadow each other for half a day. A teacher might be able to see how her work supports the work of the health care provider (or vice versa) if she understands that person's role and the issues she or he faces.

Stage Three: The Beginning

The final stage of Bridges' model is called "The Beginning." This stage—after initial feelings of loss and confusion that occur in stages one and two have been resolved—is a time when people's energy and interest turn more fully to exploring and implementing new ways of working. It is important to keep in mind that the three stages are not always sharply delineated, however, and not everyone will be fully ready to move forward at the same time. Individuals who are more involved in the change process—participants in your planning or collaborative decision-making group, for example - are usually ready to move ahead sooner. An individual's personality also influences the speed at which she or he moves through the first two phases and is ready for change. Some people may move ahead quickly, then revert back to a previous stage, or seemingly get stuck in one of the earlier stages. Some people are "early adopters" who embrace every interesting new idea or project, ready to participate in the change process. "Late adopters" are much slower, needing a lot of information and encouragement before they are comfortable making a large transition. Both types of people, as well as those in between, bring strength and important perspectives to the process; early adopters bring energy and creativity to your efforts, while late adopters and skeptics ask important questions that help the group stay on track. The key for change leaders is to be aware of the differences and to help each person find his or her own way to participate in the change process when she or he is ready. The components of a plan for helping to engage people are discussed below.

Ready, Set, Go

Because many new beginnings can seem overwhelmingly large and may take a long time to implement, it is necessary to have a multi-dimensional implementation plan throughout the transition process that covers communication, training, incentives, and ritual. It will be especially important to

have this implementation plan when a critical mass of people are ready to begin implementing a particular portion of the change effort. An example would be getting line staff from various agencies to implement a multi-disciplinary, multiagency team effort for case management. This plan should be developed by your collaborative group with participation from all interested stakeholders. Once you've begun, it is also important to make sure that you demonstrate and recognize small successes along the way.

1. Communication

In the first, or "Ending", stage, communication was primarily informational, explaining the vision for the new efforts and how they differ from the old way of working. For people in the "Neutral Zone" (the second stage) your communication needs to be more supportive and reassuring. During the final or "Beginning" stage, communications are evocative, with the purpose of raising energy and promoting action. They depict in detail the new organizational world that is going to exist. These communications should come from the various diverse people involved, in their own words, so that people can hear from their peers and from others; the demonstrated commitment at all levels and from all groups. You will also want to use appropriate media (e.g., video works well to communicate ideas, charts and bulletin boards can communicate details of the implementation plan). Information needs to be expressed repetitively, because you are trying to communicate a whole new picture and that will be difficult for some people to see.

Different types of people will have different questions and communication needs in relation to the change process:

- For conceptual folks, you will want to communicate the seed of the idea. What is the new idea that lies at the heart of the new beginning?
- For visionary people, you need to explain: What is the new organization that will put the idea into practice? What is your picture of how services will be created and delivered? How will clients be treated? Who will make the decisions?
- For concrete thinkers: What is going to happen? When? In what order? How will present activities be coordinated with old activities? What training will be needed to staff in new roles and how will you deliver it?
- And finally, for folks who are relationship-oriented: Where is everyone going to fit? What will the new roles look like? Where will I fit in, where will you fit in? How are you going to find the "right" place for everyone so that they have a sense of "belonging" in the new system?

2. Training

When thinking about training, ask yourselves the following question: "What new skills and knowledge do people need to make the new beginning work?" Folks will first need to understand the new context for their work. For instance, case managers' work might shift from working independently on one area of focus (e.g., health, mental health, etc.) to working interdependently with a multi-disciplinary team of case managers and addressing the family holistically. Once they understand this new context, the new skills they need to work within the new focus should emerge. Skills training for case managers might include cross training between team members and how to conduct a complete, multi-faceted assessment.

3. Incentives

All of our efforts will fail if we ask people to operate in a new way but undermine our efforts by rewarding people for functioning in the old way. There are complex issues here about how agencies are funded to do their work (e.g., Children's Services paid according to the number of children who are removed from their homes) that needs to be addressed in order for the system as a whole to become more family-focused. However, at the same time as we are working to change how large systems function, there is much that can be done at a local level to reward people for the positive changes they make. Some examples are:

- Involve people in special projects in lieu of, not in addition to, their regular tasks.
- Use public recognition for people who make positive change in the way they do their work. Reward teachers who create a welcoming environment in the classroom for parents and other family members.
- Reward commitments of time and energy by sending people to workshops or on site visits. Send involved parents to workshops on topics of interest to them or to visit neighboring Healthy Start sites to meet with other parents.

4. Ritual

In the final stage, ritual and symbolism can be used to dramatize new expectations and the values that underlie them. Following are examples of symbols and rituals used by some Healthy Start sites:

- Logos. These are a picture of what you are trying to accomplish. They visually capture the imagination.

- T-shirts, hats, pins, etc. worn by collaborative group members, other staff, and involved kids and families symbolize a team spirit that you are all working toward the same goals.
- Regular retreats are not only beneficial to give team members time to reflect on successes and future challenges, but also ritualize the value of reflection and acceptance that change is constant, and that the process of change needs special attention.
- Sharing meals is a ritual that connects people in a personal way.

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In addition to the three-stage model for managing transition, Bridges includes in his book the following chapters:

- Turning Points in the Organizational Life Cycle
- Leadership and Transition
- Planning and Carrying Out a Transition-Management Project
- Making Change Work for You
- Creating the Transition-Worthy Organization.

If you want to learn more about managing transition in your Healthy Start efforts, I would recommend that you get a copy of this useful and enlightening book. The book “Surviving Corporate Transition” costs \$12.95 (plus shipping and tax) and can be ordered by phone at (415) 381-9663 or you can write to: William Bridges & Associates, 38 Miller Street, Suite 12, Mill Valley, CA 94941.