Managing Transitions:
Making the Most of Change by William Bridges

Book Review

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by William Bridges

This book review consists of two parts; part one is a book review and part two presents some ideas which express the writer’s own views on change.

Part One

The world is changing rapidly and making great demands on organizations to adopt changes to global competition. Organizations are not able to survive without change. Examples of change include downsizing, restructuring and merging. Effective management is considered to be the main focus required to assist any organization through the storms of change to achieve its goals. Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change by William Bridges is a book that uses a step by step approach to describe how to move into the transition procedure to help employees get through the transition process. The book could also help managers to handle organizational change so as to leave organizations stronger instead of weaker (Bridges, 1991: vii).

Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change is organized in four parts. Part one provides a new and useful perspective on the difficulties ahead and provides a test case to which readers can apply their new knowledge. Part two translates that understanding into practical action. Part three provides readers with ways of dealing with nonstop change, both organizationally and personally. Finally, the fourth part provides another case to which readers can apply the new strategies.

Bridges has identified change as situational (eg. the new site, the new boss, the new team roles or the new policy). Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, whereas transition is internal. The transition consists of three phases:

Phase 1 is the “letting go” stage where employees leave behind their old realities and their old identities. Transition begins with letting go of something.

Phase 2, the “neutral zone” stage is a time when the old way has gone and the new
does not yet feel comfortable. It is an emotional wilderness, a stage of limbo between the old identity and the new one. It can be both a dangerous and an opportune time, and it is the very core of the transition process.

*Phase 3*, the "new beginning" stage, occurs when employees make a psychological commitment to doing things in the new ways and adopting the new approaches to work according to the requirements of change. People need the 4 Ps to handle change. These are defined as a shared purpose, a clear picture of the future, a sensible plan to get there and a part to play in the plan.

*Part One (The Problem)* comprises the first two chapters. These summaries the three phases and present a short case study concerning the restructuring of teams in a software company's customer service department. Transition to change has not yet occurred. The readers are asked to imagine being brought in to help employees straighten out the tangle by using the five categories of transition management proposed by Bridges.

*Part Two (The Solutions) consists of three chapters (Chapter 3 – Chapter 5). In Chapter 3, Bridges points out that people do not resist change but that it is the losses and endings that they experience and the transition that they are resisting. Twelve action plans are proposed to assist employees in letting go. These plans also emphasize that managers accept and respect the reality and importance of the subjective losses. Managers must identify “who’s losing what” and also acknowledge the losses openly and sympathetically. The change managers must expect and accept the stages of grieving such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance that employee’s experience.

In Chapter 4, Bridges discusses how change managers can support employees through a very difficult time when they are in the state of limbo. This will be a period of low productivity and high employee turnover, but can also be a creative time. In this chapter, Bridges suggests that managers should take this time to create solutions to problems. He provides six points to assist them.

In Chapter 5, Bridges is concerned with how to launch a new beginning involving new understandings, new values, new attitudes and new identities. This chapter provides ideas for the way in which employees can accept transition to change. Employees need to understand the purpose behind a change, have an image of how the outcome will look, and be able to imagine how it will feel to be a participant in the change and have an understanding of their new roles.

*Part Three* consists of two chapters (Chapter 6 and 7). This section of the book deals with nonstop change in the organization and life. Bridges states that change is an ongoing phenomenon which is a collage, not a single image but which is always overlapping. Therefore, in order to deal effectively with multiple, overlapping changes which an organization continually experiences, it is necessary to identify
and communicate to employees the large vision or mission that underlines the change, and give the change purpose and continuity.

Part Four (The Conclusion) these two chapters offer a case study in which readers can apply their skills in transition management. An interpretation is also supplied. Chapter 8 provides a summary and conclusion. Bridges states that there are five real and measurable costs if transition is not managed effectively. These are guilt, resentment, anxiety, self-absorption and stress (GRASS). Bridges concludes that the only certainty is that change will occur. Where there is change, there is transition.

Relationship to Change Theories

This book advocates a psychological approach to the change within the individual. A psychological approach to change proposes a non-linear movement from one situation through a ‘vacuum’ to a new situation. The journey through the ‘vacuum’ involves necessarily an experience of loss. This loss becomes apparent as people involved in the change display aspects of loss. Bridges asserts that at the letting go stage people experience grief manifested in denial, anger, bargaining, and depression (pp. 24-25). Bridges also views change through cultural change theories. With this framework, change is manageable and successful if the group is involved in a transformational process. Within such a framework, the beliefs, stories and heroes of an organization are addressed in order to align them with the change goals of the organization. Such theories are concerned with the leader’s role, democratic decision making, small group change and team building (Senge, 1994).

Part Two

This section presents the writer’s own ideas and his beliefs on change.

Change occurs in every environment both in our lives or our organizations. “Change is increasing in response to corporate downsizing, the economic climate, a fluctuation marketplace and the work force” (Gambrell and Stevens, 1992). In my own case, having worked in a school for 16 years before transferring to Suratthani Rajabhat University, I had experienced many changes in an organization. These changes mostly occurred at the top level particularly when we had the new principal. Whenever we had changes, we had to face a lot of questions. Everyone in the organization felt uncertain and insecure about the direction of the change. In my belief, change is an unavoidable phenomenon if we want to survive in a rapidly changing world. We have to be well prepared. To change must mean to be better or to be more effective, otherwise it is a waste of time and a failure.

Change is like setting out on a journey. We should bear the following questions in mind:

Where are we? This can identify our present situation. We should know where we stand in order to estimate our distance from the destination. In our organization, we should know
what our present circumstances are. This means we have to identify our strengths and weaknesses so that we know why we want to change.

**Where are we going?** This question points to our destination. In our organization, we must have a clear vision so that we know what our organization should be in the future. This means we acknowledge organizational opportunities and threats.

**How do we get there?** In posing this question, we know what to prepare in order to set off on the journey. The change processes are the methods used to move an organization from one state to another (Burne, 1996: p.183). This includes the transportation and packing the luggage. Our organization must have strategies to achieve its goals. It is a transition process when we move from one point to another. It is a crucial process of change in which many obstacles and barriers must be overcome.

In the school setting, I once experienced a profound change when the principal introduced the information technology system in our school. It was a successful change achieved after struggling through three stages of transition (letting go, neutral zone and new beginning). I would like to point out its ingredients:

**Leadership style**

Although Thai society relies very much on leaders and their power, people are resistant if leaders use their power to force them to change. Coercion will cause resistance and chaos. Leaders in the transition process of change should not use their power in autocratic ways but they should be democratic, collaborative and charismatic so that they can talk and walk together with their people. Appropriate leadership, during all stages of the change, is expected by the employees. The reasoning of the employees is, “if you want something you want done, show me your vision and lead me there” (Gambrell and Stevens, 1992). The principal had built a good relationship with the teachers in his school so that they felt comfortable. This created a friendly and supportive atmosphere in the school. I suggest leadership should have the characteristics of SMILE, which stands for sympathy, maturity, integrity, loyalty and equity.

**Planning strategies**

No single task achieves its goals without a plan. Therefore, in the change process we have to study an organization deeply and thoroughly in order to introduce a plan. This includes the study of the organization’s history, its culture, and the internal and external environment that impact on the organization as a whole. Kaufman, Herman and Watters, (1996) stress that planning should ask and answer important questions abut purpose and payoff. First define the results to be delivered, and then select the best ways to get them accomplished. Before introducing the plan, the Principal called for level meetings to make sure that everybody understood and had clear information about the goals. This was a difficult
and crucial stage to brief the teachers in the school about how to leave their old realities (Bridges, 1991). Many of them resisted at first as they were happy and content to remain where they were. They felt frustrated. Therefore, at this stage the Principal gave them more information, time and encouragement. It was the stage of conformity to change. After implementing the strategy plan, the school became one of the leading schools in the province in the adoption of technology systems.

In conclusion, Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change is an essential book to guide both employees and managers on how to manage transition and to get through the change productively and effectively. The book presents very clear and concise points that readers can easily understand. Moreover, a checklist at the end of each chapter helps readers decide what they should or should not do according to the priority of the stages. Change is to reach the goals but not for gold medals, as all athletes in the Olympics try for. In change, nobody loses or wins, but everybody in the organization must be rewarded.

References
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