

## **Managing Transitions**

“It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions,” says William Bridges in his book, *Managing Transitions*.

Bridges describes *change* as situational and *transition* as the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Unless transition occurs, change will not work. This is what happens when a great idea falls flat on its face.

“There can be any number of changes, but unless there are transitions, nothing will be different when the dust clears” (Bridges). We see this in our personal lives and with the congregations we work with.

### **The three stages in transition**

There are three stages in the transition process. Transition begins with an ending - moves into the neutral zone - and then enters into a new beginning phase.

#### **Transition starts with an ending**

Transition begins with an ending and a letting go. For Israel, they were given the opportunity to let go of Egypt as the first step in their transitional journey to the Promised Land. Their ending involved a radical event and was the intervention strategy God used to launch them on their journey towards a better future.

#### **The middle of transition is the neutral zone**

After the letting go comes the neutral zone or wilderness. This is the no-man's-land between the old reality and the new. It is when the old way is viewed from the rearview mirror but when what's coming is not yet realized. To understand this “neutral zone” can be a powerful gift for those confused by change or in a rush to get through it.

*It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear...It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to (Marilyn Ferguson).*

#### **The third phase of transition is the new beginning.**

After letting go and the neutral zone comes the new beginning. A healthy and robust new beginning occurs when both an ending and a neutral zone have been embraced. The timing of the new beginning is like the timing of a flower coming to full bloom. If the new beginning is forced, transition stalls but at the right time, is a beautiful thing.

#### **Seeing the new beginning before you get there.**

There is a definite advantage to helping people see the new beginning before they get there. Bridges suggests four ways to prepare the ground for a new beginning before it actually arrives:

1. Explain the purpose behind the outcome you seek.
2. Paint a picture of how the outcome will look and feel.
3. Lay out a step-by-step plan for phasing in the outcome.
4. Give each person a part to play in both the plan and the outcome.

Moses, as a transitional leader, not only painted a picture of a land flowing with milk and honey but gave God's people a step-by-step plan to get there. He taught them new ways to worship, believe and behave. He gave them a template that was intended to prepare them for life in the Promised Land.

When people want a quick fix to some change that has come upon them, it's important to patiently travel through the phases of transition. To jump from an ending to a new beginning is too great a leap. As the American proverb so wisely says, "It doesn't work to leap a twenty-foot chasm in two ten-foot jumps."

For more on this particular transitional framework, pick up a copy (or reread one you already have) of William Bridges book *Managing Transitions - Making the Most of Change*.

### **Think about it**

*In your life, what part of the transitional process is most difficult?  
Where do those you work with get stuck in their journey of transition?  
What can you do to help others keep moving when they do get stuck?*