Bridges' Transition Model

Bridges' Transition Model was created by the American author and consultant William Bridges and is described in two books, Transitions in 1980 and Managing Transitions in 1991. It separates change from transition: change is a new situation, such as a new boss or system, while transition is the inner process through which people come to terms with it. Bridges observed that this process has three phases that often overlap: an ending, a neutral zone and a new beginning. Many change efforts struggle because leaders announce the new beginning before people have dealt with the ending. We look at the phases and at what leaders can do in each of them.

1. Change Versus Transition

Change is external and often happens quickly, for example a new system, a new structure or a new manager. Transition is internal and takes longer, because people need time to let go of how things were and accept how things will be. A change can be planned on a timeline, but a transition cannot be forced to follow it. Leaders therefore manage the change with plans and the transition with attention to people.

Example: A family moves to a new city. Asking what is the change and what is the transition, the family sees that the move took one Saturday, while feeling at home will take months.

At work: Youssef, a department head, announces that two teams will merge on the first of next month. Asking what is the change and what is the transition, he sees that the merger is only a date, while trust between the teams will take longer.

2. Endings

Every transition begins with an ending, even when the change is welcome. People may lose a role, a routine, a familiar team or a feeling of competence, and they can react with denial, anger or sadness. Leaders help by explaining clearly what is ending and what will stay the same. Acknowledging the loss, instead of ignoring it, lets people let go.

Example: A student finishing school feels excited and sad at the same time. Asking what is ending and what stays, the student names the daily time with friends as an ending and the friendships as staying, and feels ready to move on.

At work: Youssef asks what is ending and what stays. He tells the two teams that they will leave the separate offices and old routines behind, while the clients and expertise stay. He listens to all concerns without hurrying anyone.

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3. The Neutral Zone

The neutral zone is the in-between time when the old way has ended but the new way does not yet feel normal. It can feel confusing and unproductive, yet it is also a time when people can be creative and new ideas can appear. Leaders help by setting short-term goals, giving clear temporary roles and communicating often, even when there is little news. Rushing people through this phase usually causes trouble later.

Example: A person who has left one job and not yet started the next feels uncertain. Asking how to use the in-between time, the person sets small weekly goals and tries a new course.

At work: Youssef asks how to use the in-between time. During the merger he sets two-week goals, gives each person a temporary role and sends a short update every Friday, even when there is little news. People feel less lost.

4. New Beginnings

A new beginning is when people accept the new way and start to act in it with energy. It cannot be ordered by a date on the calendar, because it grows as people feel ready. Bridges' guidance for leaders is often summarised as four Ps: purpose, picture, plan and part to play. Early small successes, celebrated openly, strengthen the new way.

Example: After a school moves to a new building, a teacher asks about purpose, picture, plan and part. Knowing why the move happens, how the new classrooms will look, when each step comes and what the teacher's role is, the teacher starts planning lessons with energy.

At work: Youssef explains the purpose of the merger, shows a picture of the joint team, shares the plan and gives each person a part to play. The first joint project is delivered on time, and he celebrates it with the whole group.

Conclusion

In summary, Bridges' Transition Model shows that change is external, while transition is an inner process. It begins with an ending, passes through a neutral zone and arrives at a new beginning. Leaders support people in each phase by acknowledging loss, giving structure in the in-between time and offering purpose, picture, plan and part. Rushing the phases tends to create resistance. When people are guided through all three, change is more likely to last.

Sources

- Bridges, W. (1980). Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes. Addison-Wesley.
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