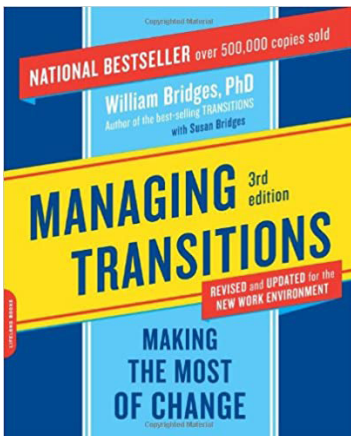


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Managing Transitions THE NUTSHELL

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It isn't the changes that do you in. It's the transitions. Change is situational: the move to a new site, the retirement of the founder, the reorganization roles on the team, or the revisions to the pension plan. Transition is psychological. It is a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about.

Managing transition involves helping people through three phases:

- 1. Letting go of the old ways and the old identity people had.** This first phase of transition is an ending, and the time when you need to help people to deal with their losses.
- 2. Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational.** We call this time the "neutral zone." It's when the critical psychological realignments and re-patterning takes place.
- 3. Coming out of the transition and making a new beginning.** This is when people develop the new identity, experience the new energy, and discover the new sense of purpose that makes the change begin to work.

Several important differences between change and transition are overlooked when people think of transition as simply gradual or unfinished change or when they use change and transition interchangeably. With a change, you naturally

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focus on the outcome that change produces. If you move from California to New York City, the change involves crossing the country and then learning your way around the Big Apple.

Transition is different. The starting point for dealing with transition is not the outcome but the ending that you'll have to make to leave the old situation behind. Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place. Organizations tend to overlook that letting-go process completely, and do nothing about the feelings of loss that it generates. In overlooking those effects, they nearly guarantee that the transition will be mismanaged and that, as a result, the change will go badly. Unmanaged transition makes change unmanageable.

Once you understand that transition begins with a letting go of something, you have taken the first step in the task of transition management. The second step is understanding the neutral zone. This is the psychological no-man's-land between the old reality and the new one. It is the time when the old way of doing things is gone but the new way doesn't feel comfortable yet.

It is important for people to understand and not be surprised by this neutral zone. If you don't understand and expect it, you're more likely to try to rush through or even bypass it only to be discouraged when you find that doesn't work. You may mistakenly conclude that the confusion you feel there is a sign that something is wrong with you.

The neutral zone is both a dangerous and an opportune place, and it is the very core of the transition process. It is the time when re-patterning takes place as old and maladaptive habits are replaced with new ones that are better adapted to the world in which the organization now finds itself. It is the winter in which the roots begin to prepare themselves for spring's renewal. It is the chaos into which the old form dissolves and from which the new form emerges. It is the seedbed of the new beginnings that you seek.

Ending—neutral zone—new beginning. You need all three phases in that order for a transition to work. The phases don't happen separately. They often go on at the same time. Endings are going on in one place while in another everything is in neutral zone chaos, and in yet another, the new beginning is already palpable. Calling them "phases" makes it sound as though they are lined up like rooms in a house. Perhaps it would be more accurate to think of them as three processes and to say that the transition cannot be completed until all three have taken place.

It has become a truism that the only constant today is change. (Ironically, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said the very same thing 2,500 years ago!) Yet we all feel that change is different today: it's continuous, wall-to-wall, and nonstop. A department is reorganized, and that's hardly finished when a new director arrives and decides to reorganize it again. We talk not of a single change but of change as an ongoing phenomenon. It is a collage, not a simple image. One change overlaps with another, and it's all change as far as the eye can see.

Nonstop change is simply a lot of different changes that overlap each other as well as an increase in the rate of overlapping change. Every new level of change is termed "nonstop" by people who are having trouble with transition.

At the same time, every previous level of change comes to be called "stability." Seen in this light, what people today call "nonstop change" is simply a new level of what has always existed. It isn't pure chaos as much as a new experience. When people adjust to it, they will look back upon it as "the stability that we used to enjoy."

We are still caught in the mid-twentieth-century mindset, which conceived of the main organizational problem as the

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lack of change. That outlook led to the idea of the “change agent,” a person who knew how to enter an organization, often from outside, and change things. But as we enter the twenty-first century, we’re increasingly faced with the fact that the current problem is change itself. It’s the problem of “survivors” of yesterday’s change projects, and everyone is a survivor.

This is why transition management is such a critical skill for you to develop. You’re going to find yourself dealing with the aftermath of mismanaged or unmanaged transition every time you turn around. That aftermath is a manager’s nightmare.

If we know anything about the future, it is that it will be different from the present. Whatever currently exists is going to change. What it will look like is something that the futurists can debate. The only certainty is that between here and there will be a lot of change. Where there’s change, there’s transition. That’s the utterly predictable equation: change + human beings = transition. There’s no way to avoid it, but you can manage it. If you want to come through in one piece, you must manage it.