

Worry About Transition, Not Change

Three Reasons Why Leaders Ignore Transitions at Their Peril

By Tom Stevens (c) 2008

One of the most widely accepted beliefs is that is that people find change difficult. Not necessarily so. Or at least, it's not what leaders and managers should worry about.

What trips up most people, and organizational change effort, is not change but transition.

Change and transition go hand in hand but they are not the same. What's the difference? Think of change is a discreet event, while transition is protracted process or state of mind.

For example, selling your car and buying a new one is a change. Getting used to the new car, how it handles and knowing where all the controls and switches are located, requires a period of transition. The change to a new vehicle is quick, perhaps driving to a dealer with your old car and driving out with the new. The transition, however, could last for days, weeks, or months.

This same distinction applies to acquiring a new residence, a different job, or adopting a new company policy. The specific change is typically quick, whereas the transition takes some time...and effort.

Below are three reasons why *transition* is often the difficult aspect of change initiatives.

Transition requires new learning and new patterns of behavior.

Most of what we do – 95% according to some researchers – is done automatically, unconsciously, what I call being on autopilot. Driving is a good example, as anyone knows who has arrived at a destination not quite remembering how they got there. Once we learn something and it goes on autopilot, we free up attention to focus on what is immediately urgent or to learn something new.

When there is a major change in our environment, we must re-learn patterns that used to be on autopilot. Inherently, we are less competent in the new behaviors than the old. It's no wonder that without motivation and effort, people slip back into older patterns of behavior. It's easier and more comfortable.

Transition requires emotional regrouping.

Major changes involving anything we care about generally bring a multitude of mixed feelings. These emotional responses help us adjust to change, however, they may also make us very uncomfortable.

Transitions typically take us away from a sense of *routine* into three other states: *ending*, *abeyance*, *starting*.

Routine is a baseline state that carries an emotional sense that things are as they should be. Sometimes we experience changes but perceive them as routine. Change that has personal impact and implications, however, typically pushes us into other transition states.

Ending are a time of good-byes, and a time of disengaging ourselves from what we had previously known. Following a change, our inner selves may need acknowledgment that something has closed before we can move on. Since endings involve loss, it is a stage marked by grief and all the feelings that accompany it.

Abeyance is often experienced as a time of simply waiting, characterized by low energy, lack of interest in anything, or simply confusion. People in this state may feel they are simply going through the motions of daily living or 'not getting anything done'. This state can be greatly distressing - especially for professionals who see themselves as energetic and decisive.

Starting are a time of energy resurgence, of vision, of trepidation, and of hope. Old things are given a new approach, and new things are tried. This can be a state of excited anticipation and exuberant activity.

This four state model helps us understand transition states of mind, but be aware not every transition experience follows this process in a neat order.

Transition requires large energy and attention expenditures.

Both new learning and emotional responses take energy and attention – lots of it. Loss of productivity in a time of transition is practically inevitable. If managed well, however, this loss is only temporary. Managed poorly, transitions can seed a toxic culture that can burden a company for years.

Leaders and managers do well to give as much emphasis to planning *how to manage transitions* as they do to *what change to make*. Doing so goes a long way to ensuring a change effort is successful.



Tom Stevens is a consultant, speaker, facilitator, and President of Esquare Leadership LLC. Contact Tom at (919) 245-1026, (800) 727-9788, or tis@esquareleadership.com.

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