Getting Them Through The Wilderness

A Leader's Guide to Transition, by William Bridges, Ph.D.

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THE PROBLEM AT NEWTECH

The problem at NewTech is one that is becoming increasingly familiar today: the marketing department in that organization is being pressured to "create a stronger brand and a clearer direction." The company's old, technology-driven strategy was starting to give way to a more customer-oriented approach, and a new vice president had been brought in to "straighten out" the sales and marketing functions.

He had studied the mess and decided to reorganize the department. He had taken his managers off on a retreat to "develop a common vision" and had hired consultants to help them "learn how to work together as a cohesive team." Everyone was willing to do the new things. Returning relationships were stated to be the rule of the procedure, old sinners were sanctioned or fear, new priorities were proclaimed, and a no-nonsense management style became the order of the day. The new vice president was sure that the reorganization revived office morale the kind of thing that a "turnaround" requires.

My organization conducted an assessment of the results two months later and found that what had taken place was not a renewal but something approaching a disaster. The changes that were meant to integrate the organization had weakened it. Several of the best upper level managers had left the company, and absenteism was up. The remaining managers were in a state of confusion about what was expected of them. The strategy in the department had broken. Projects were all abandoned, serious, and crucial to the new direction that the department had always prided itself on was breaking down as a "mutiny of chaos" mentally began to turn into actual mutiny. Everyone in the office was in a place for them where the organization was supposed to be.

The executive who had begun with such great hopes was confused and discouraged. Most of the changes that he had undertaken were sensible, sure, and he had communicated his intentions clearly. He had set up a special transition team to solve problems that arose during the change. Jane, he had held "listening" sessions for his managers to discover what was "in the way." He had even set up a special "transition management" consultant to offer "productivity sessions, "telling on the left, his follows up his hands and asked, "What more could I have done?"

TRANSITIONS: THE SHADOW SIDE OF CHANGE

The executive's problem was that he had mistaken Great Ideas Jane, but he had made a basic mistake that has become increasingly costly in today's consumer-driving environment. He had planned the organizational changes, but he had not planned for the transitions that people would have to make in order to make the new orientation work." Like many his, confused "transition" with "change", assuming that the latter meant just gradual, orderly, or orchestrated. (Page 1)

But transition is very different from change. Change is situational: the relocation to the work force, the shift in the strategy, and the switch in reporting relationships are all "changes." Transition, on the other hand, is a three-phase psychological process that people go through as they come to terms with the new situation. Transition is begun with an ending and includes a long stage of limbo (of reality and that did not go smooth, can make or bad ending, they will be unable to make a successful beginning.

When the ending, people are the most prone to resist and minimize, the neutral zone. This is so most it and where, people are in Wordless Anxiety's grasp "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born." The neutral zone is a time and a source of energy, and it can be the most creative time in the life of a group, people are driven by a while a this prospect is more but a sense. A

people did not have to be told that they weren't in Egypt anymore, nor that the Promised Land still lay ahead. But in the metaphorical, psychological wilderness that is created by organizational change, people lack an understanding of, and even a name for, the state that they are in. To make sense out of what otherwise would seem to be only a thousand different private and personal distresses throughout an organization that is changing in some significant way, people need to be told about transition and the neutral zone wilderness. They need to understand what it does to people, and how to get through it. Otherwise they will blame others for their pain, lose confidence in their ability to reach the goal, and sink into unproductive rationalizations and dangerous subterfuges to hide their bewildered state.

Since today's wilderness is not a literal one, but a landscape of the heart and mind, our society has not paid much attention to it. Because of our heritage, we have historically viewed wilderness areas as territory waiting conquest and settlement. Whenever we want to get somewhere, we take the shortest route and the fastest conveyance. We see change as something akin to crossing the street—something that is dangerous to do slowly. In that context transition seems to be nothing more than the time it takes to get across. We imagine that we can create new behaviors and attitudes as quickly as we can rearrange the organization chart or revise the budget. But the story of Moses tells us otherwise. In the years since World War II, so many things have needed fixing that we have celebrated the role of "change agent." Only recently, with the round of mergers, downsizings, and restructurings, have we begun to discover that change itself can be a problem and that we need leaders who not only create change but manage transition. That is why Moses is such a valuable example. He could not only break the bondage of the past and convey the vision of a future, but also get the people through the wilderness that always comes between where we are and where we want to be.

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1 This Fortune 500 company has been disguised by name, and a few details have been changed to protect the company's anonymity. But the reorganization effort and the resulting demoralization are accurately described.

2 When I gave a talk on transition management in Israel, I learned that a Jewish writer named Ahad Ha-am had made a similar point about Moses in an essay he wrote in 1904. (So much for the idea of "new ideas"!) I am indebted to Sydney Engelberg for sending me the essay. It can be found in Ahad Ha-am, Selected Essays (Cleveland: World Publishing Co.)

3 Arnold Toynbee, The Study of History [abridged], (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).