

GETTING

Navigating
transitions
is a tricky
business, but
opportunity
is inherent
in the
process



THERE



There's an old joke about jumping off a tall building: "It's not the fall that will kill you; it's the landing." The same principle applies to the differences between change and transition and their impact on people's lives. In fact, William Bridges, an acknowledged guru on transitional management, uses a variation on that theme to open *Managing Transitions* (Da Capo Press), his perennial best-seller about making the most of change: "It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions."

BY MICHAEL J. McDERMOTT

First published in 1979, Bridges's book—and his wisdom—remains as fresh and relevant as ever. His view is that change is situational, usually related to a specific event such as the loss of a job or the end of a relationship. Transition, however, has to do with the psychological process we go through as we struggle to adapt to the new situation. Whether it's in the workplace or in our personal lives, managing transition is the key to dealing with change successfully.

Navigating through transition involves three distinct phases, Bridges says. The first is an ending, where you have to let go of the past and come to terms with any loss that entails. Next comes an in-between time, when the old situation is gone but a replacement hasn't fully materialized yet. Bridges calls this the "neutral zone" and highlights it as the critical period when psychological adjustments take place. The final phase involves a new beginning, and that's where a door opens on the new opportunities change can bring.

While change can happen quickly, transition can take weeks, months, or even years, Bridges points out. "Change can, and usually should, be speeded up, but transition, like any organic process, has its own natural pace," he said in a 2003 interview. "Change is all about the outcome we are trying to achieve; transition is about how we'll get there and how we'll manage things while we are en route."

Endings

The starting point for any new beginning is some sort of ending. But learning a new way of doing things requires unlearning the old way; adopting a new type of personality requires letting go of the old one. "The problem is," Bridges writes, "people don't like endings."

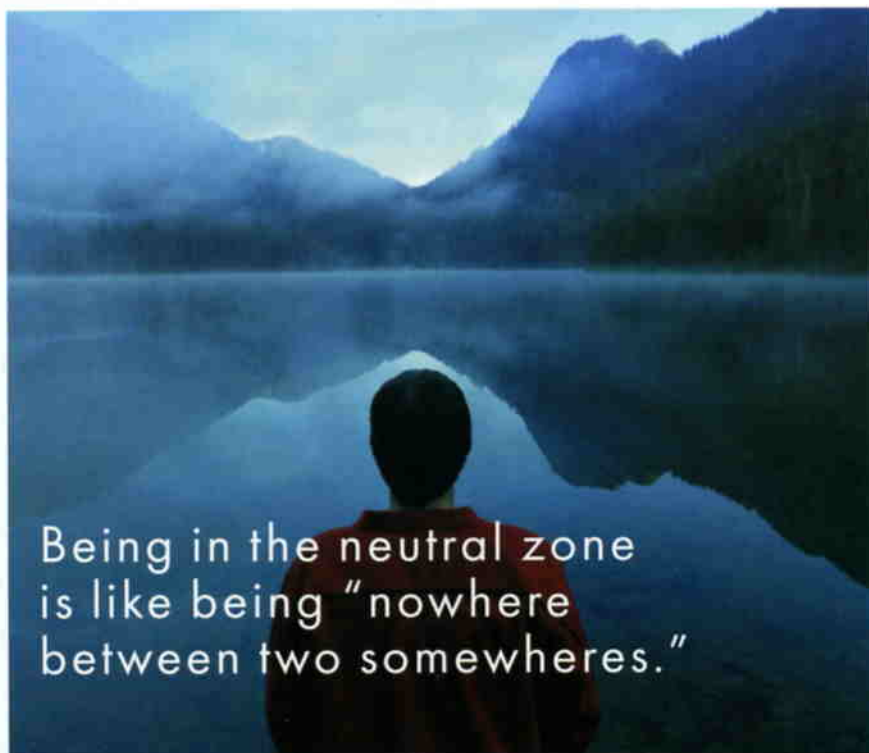
When faced with an ending, we can expect to feel a variety of emotions, including denial, anger, sadness, fear, confusion, and depression. All are signs of grieving, and it's natural for us to experience them when we lose something that matters to us. The sequence of emotions is similar whether the change-related loss occurs in our personal or professional lives.

Bridges advises embracing the emotions and working through them to reach acceptance of the change, a

prerequisite before we are able to move forward. It can help to do something symbolic, such as tossing out the physical reminders of an ended relationship or changing the physical configuration of the office floor plan at a business going through a reorganization.

Mike Ballard, executive director of Turning Points Research Institute, an organization founded by his parents, Phoebe and Jack Ballard, in the early 1980s to help people manage transitions in their careers and personal lives, says attitude can play an important role in how well we deal with the endings that accompany change.

"View change in a positive light, as an opportunity for growth and learning," says Ballard, who is an advocate of Bridges's approach to managing transition. "If change is inevitable, it must mean you are alive. If you view change as an opportunity, the chances of making a successful transition increase exponentially."



Being in the neutral zone
is like being "nowhere
between two somewheres."

The neutral zone

As difficult as dealing with endings can be, it is the next phase, Bridges's neutral zone, that the majority of people find most daunting. Marilyn Ferguson, author of *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Tarcher, 1980), described the sensations we feel as "like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to."

Being in the neutral zone is like being "nowhere between two somewheres," Bridges writes. Forward motion seems to stop, and we hang suspended between what was and what is to come. "It is a time when all the

old clarities break down and everything is in flux,” in Bridges’s words. “Things are up in the air. Nothing is a given anymore, and anything could happen.”

Not surprisingly, many people experience fear, anxiety, sometimes even physical ailments in the morass of the neutral zone. Weaknesses and shortcomings we might have successfully masked in the past are suddenly laid bare. Confusion and uncertainty may lead to feelings of frustration and impotence. In an organizational setting, polarization may flourish and teamwork break down.

But the neutral zone is also the spawning bed of creativity. According to Bridges, it is a time when reorientation and redefinition must take place. “This is where curiosity, inquiry, and research emerge, gradually replacing the fear, anxiety, and angst we had been feeling,” Ballard says. “This process has to take place to allow us to make decisions about the future.”

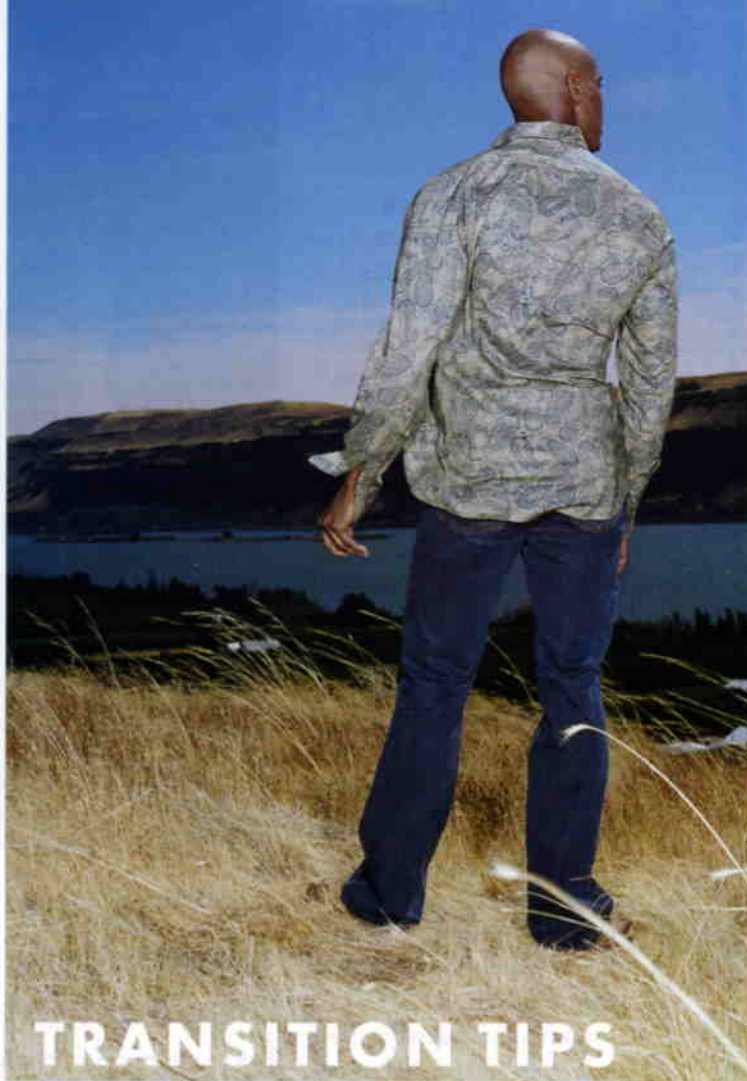
New beginnings

Rosabeth Moss Kanter is a Harvard Business School professor who has been studying change at large organizations such as IBM and Procter & Gamble for 30 years. She believes their success at managing transition has been crucial in transforming those companies and positioning them as forward-looking leaders in their industries. They have survived passage through the neutral zone and found promising new beginnings.

“The key, I’ve concluded, is that a decisive shift is occurring in what might be called the guidance systems of these global giants,” she writes in “Transforming Giants,” an article in the January 2008 issue of *Harvard Business Review*. As those companies have passed through the neutral zone, they have successfully inculcated their employees and their corporate culture with the building blocks of a new beginning.

“Employees once acted mainly according to rules and decisions handed down to them, but they now draw heavily on their shared understanding of a mission and on a set of tools available everywhere at once,” she writes. “Authority is still exercised and activities are still coordinated—but thanks to common platforms, standardized processes and, above all, widely shared values and standards, coherence now arises more spontaneously.”

New beginnings, whether in a large organization or an individual life, are marked by a release of new energy in a new direction. They are the expression of a new identity, Bridges writes, “much more than the practical and situational ‘new circumstances’ that we might call starts.” And although we might express some fear-driven ambivalence about new beginnings, ultimately we welcome their arrival as an escape hatch from the neutral zone.



TRANSITION TIPS

Mike Ballard, executive director of Turning Points Research Institute (www.turningpointsresearch.org), has helped guide hundreds of people through changes in their personal and professional lives, often using the principles laid out by William Bridges. He suggests these six steps:

- 1. Assess.** Take stock of where you are right now and where you want to be.
- 2. Be patient.** Trust the process and accept that it takes time to unfold.
- 3. Learn how to “market” yourself,** whether it’s as the best candidate for a new job or as the love interest in a new relationship.
- 4. Network.** Personally and professionally, it’s the best way to expand your sphere of influence.
- 5. Implement.** All the above is prep work for whatever it is you are going to do, so be creative, seek guidance, and do it.
- 6. Don’t give up.** Most successes don’t occur on the first try.

A world of stress

So, ending, neutral zone, new beginning—sounds simple, right? But to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare, “if to do were as easy as to know,” then there wouldn’t be much to it. Truth be told, many of the changes we experience in life involve extremely stressful events, and transition is often fraught with emotion.

Among the top 10 stress-inducing life events on the Social Readjustment Rating Scale developed by mental health experts Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, five have to do with marriage, the most intense personal relationship for many people. Death of a spouse, divorce, and marital separation are Nos. 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Marriage itself is seventh and marital reconciliation ninth.

Being fired from a job and entering retirement are the only work-related events in the top 10, but many events related to work and finances make the top 20, including a business readjustment, a change in financial state, taking out a mortgage, going through foreclosure, and a change in responsibilities at work.

Stress and emotion are not the only complicating factors in navigating transition. Two others are the seemingly nonstop pace of change we face in modern life and the fact that the three phases of transition Bridges describes are rarely so clearly delineated as they appear on paper.

Behind the onslaught of change that characterizes life in the early 21st century is a confluence of factors, including technology, demographics, globalization (the so-called “flat world” phenomenon), economics, and evolving social mores. “Who could have visualized a time when we would all be carrying BlackBerries around with us?” Ballard muses. “Things like that are instantaneous enablers of change.”

In managing the transitions that come with all that change, we face another challenge, which Bridges describes as overlap. “The three phases of transition are more like curving, slanting, overlapping strata than like sequential stages,” he acknowledges in his book. Each of those

processes starts before the previous one is completed. As a result, we are likely to be in more than one of those phases at the same time when we are going through transition. Rather than an absolute shift between phases, we experience a change in the dominance of one phase over the others.

While there is no way to forestall the rising tide of change or the overlap of phases in the transition process, Bridges suggests that postponing some changes, foreseeing as much as we can, preparing ourselves for worst-case scenarios, clarifying our goals, and accepting the reality of nonstop change as the new norm can help.

And change is indeed a constant. It’s likely that members of every generation in modern times have perceived the pace of change to be accelerating in their lifetimes, but what’s happened over the past two or three decades is truly remarkable. “Change really has become faster and more common in present-day life,” says Ballard. “My folks wrote their first book in the 1980s, and in it they talked about what they dubbed ‘the new impermanence.’ They were right on the money.”

Michael J. McDermott writes “Creative Business,” Creative Living’s regular column about building and growing small businesses.



Among the top 10 stress-inducing life events, five have to do with marriage, the most intense personal relationship for many people.