

## **“Profiles in Coaching: Transitions Coaching” by William Bridges**

*The following excerpt was taken from [Profiles in Coaching: The 2004 Handbook of Best Practices in Leadership Coaching](#), edited by Howard Morgan, Phil Harkins, and Marshall Goldsmith.*

When large-scale organizational change occurs, the human side of that change rarely gets factored into the equation. Nevertheless, during mergers, reorganizations, downsizes or shifts in strategy or leadership, it almost always becomes clear that leaders at multiple levels of the organization need help to be successful in their new circumstances. Typically, those leaders do not run into trouble over tactical issues such as implementing the new strategy or reconfiguring roles and responsibilities. Either they're skillful at managing those complicated challenges themselves or they have consultants with the right expertise to back them up. Instead, the guidance they truly do need is in letting go of the old ways of doing things while undergoing a psychological reorientation to focus on the new way.

Transitions coaching focuses on seeing a leader through their own transition and providing them with the capability to help others do the same. The event that caused the transition is the change, whether that be the promotion, the merger, the layoff of a few hundred people or the appointment of a new CEO. The transition is the psychological realignment of people to make the change work. A look at the phases of that journey will help describe the role of a transitions coach in making change successful.

### **Phase 1 – Relinquishing the Old**

Very few leaders know how to relinquish old ways of doing business; fewer still are good at helping others do the same. The first part of coaching a leader through a transition or coaching that leader to help others through a transition is to help the leader discover the behaviors and approaches useful in the relinquishment process, either personally or organizationally.

Much of the coaching at this stage involves the giving up of old realities. The leader's own former role is one such reality. A person transitioning from leadership of an independent organization to leadership of a joint venture, for example, has to relinquish a lot of assumptions about independence and autonomy. In that sense, although the leader may be doing inner work to manage that transition, there are definite organizational implications as well.

Ideally, the transitions coach should be brought in before the change has occurred to plan for the transition that will be needed. Typically, however, the coach is called in when a change has been implemented but isn't going well. As the wheels fall off, morale plummets and deadlines are missed, leaders who thought they could manage change as they manage any other challenge begin to realize that the human side of change is far more complicated.

### **Phase 2 – The Neutral Zone**

It would be much easier if a transition, like a change, could occur within an hour or two. To replace one leader with another, reorganize divisions and departments or realign reporting relationships are all changes that can happen overnight. But the inner shift—the transition – does not happen as quickly as the outer shift – the change. We call that transitional phase, the neutral zone. It is a term that the traditional language of change doesn't recognize.

In the neutral zone, the old reality is gone but the new reality isn't functional yet. Even so, this may be a time full of activity. In a merger, for example, implementation teams are probably

meeting around the clock, making decisions on everything from HR policies to reporting relationships. Conversely, this may also be an empty time in which not much is happening. A new CEO has taken over, but the CEO's imprint has yet to be felt, even though everyone is waiting to see what will transpire. In either case, the neutral zone is a phase during which the future is not clear but the past is gone. The past may not be gone in a literal sense – the same people may still be around, the same letterhead may be in use – but it no longer offers the answers.

Leaders have a special role to play in the neutral zone. They need to help people understand exactly what has ended with the relinquishment of old ways. Especially at operational levels, this is not always clear. Once people do understand what is over, there's still a job to be done determining how everyone is going to function while creating the new ways. What policies will be adopted in the interim? How will reassignments be managed before they are functional? Leaders need to work with their organizations to determine how everything will play out during a time in which the way things will ultimately play out remains unclear.

To understand the neutral zone, consider what it's like to move from one city to another. The move can happen so quickly that you may think there was virtually no neutral zone period. Yet, it is likely that you felt weird even before you left your old city, meaning before the change occurred. During that time your productivity was down, you were starting to grieve, and you were confused about the future. Long after you have arrived in your new city – after the change has happened – you are still not fully up to speed. In that sense, the neutral zone exists before the old situation ends and even after the new situation is in place.

While that's an easy process to explain, it's a very uncomfortable one for leaders to manage, especially those who like crisp policies and clear strategies. In reaction, many try to put the new in place as quickly as possible, even though people aren't emotionally ready. But structure isn't the answer. Coaching in the neutral zone helps leaders understand what can be done, what should be done, why people feel the way they feel and what people need as well as what events signal that the transition is going poorly or well.

### **Phase 3 – The New Beginning**

The neutral zone is the area where the real transformations take place. At some point, imperceptibly, the neutral zone starts to do its work. During the neutral zone, the two merging companies, for example, start to act as one. It may be that the structural details of the company were clear on the first day, but it took time for the people to act accordingly. Individual roles changed, but people are only now responding. Working under a new leader, people are beginning to learn a new style of habits, what the new leader wants, values or likes. While all of that comes into focus during the neutral zone, the new beginning doesn't start until people can identify with those new demands. The new beginning is a new identity and a new reality.

Transitions coaching helps people recognize the phases of transition and act in the best ways to make the changeover successful. Other forms of coaching do not touch on these issues. Developmental coaching, for example, looks at a leader in a situation and determines what new behaviors need to be adopted to be more successful. While that is very valuable, it doesn't address (except accidentally) the critical issues necessary for navigating transition successfully. Given the amount of change that is occurring in the marketplace, transitions coaching is something that should be worked into projects more often.

Change is misunderstood because transitions are overlooked. When change occurs, what began in hope too often ends in frustration. New leaders may be unable to produce the results they were brought on to accomplish. Mergers may fail to realize the expected value. Start-ups may falter when evolving to a more established structure. Reorganizations may be unable to produce desired benefits. The problems that emerge in leadership, strategy, operations and so forth, are likely to be symptoms rather than root causes. A client should not engage a change coach if transition is the challenge. The failure of leaders to know how to handle transitions is a constant but often hidden factor in the underperformance of organizations just as it is an underlying source of derailment in careers.

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**Dr. William Bridges** is an internationally known author, consultant, and speaker who helps organizations and individuals deal more productively with change. He is the world’s authority in managing transitions. The most recent of his nine books is *Creating You & Co.* a handbook for creating and managing a 21st century career. Today, Bill Bridges is one of the most widely read and quoted experts on what is happening to jobs in today's organizations and the new strategies that individuals must use to find work. Contact – Tel: 415-381-9663; e-mail: [staff@wmbridges.com](mailto:staff@wmbridges.com)

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This excerpt was taken from *Profiles in Coaching: The 2004 Handbook of Best Practices in Leadership Coaching* (pages 79-81), edited by Phil Harkins, Marshall Goldsmith and Howard Morgan. This almanac of trends and best practices captures the state of the coaching industry today as well as the emerging issues shaping tomorrow. It features interviews with thought leaders and practitioners; essays that define best practice coaching in the areas of leadership, strategy, individual transitions and organizational change; the latest thinking on how to select and partner with a coach for maximum impact; detailed analysis of trends shaping the future of coaching; as well as benchmark data of organizations using external coaching today. For details on the book, go to: [http://www.linkageinc.com/products/coach\\_book/default.shtml](http://www.linkageinc.com/products/coach_book/default.shtml). To order your copy, go to:

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