

Change: Is It Really a Scary Proposition?

Change is inevitable and affects all of us at various points in our lives as we embark on new ventures. William Bridges, renowned for his work on transition, states that “change is the way that things evolve” and “...how we got to where we are and how we’ll continue the trip”. Change generates new opportunities for growth and development, both professionally and personally. Technology, science, medicine, and society in general have evolved tremendously because of new discoveries.

Nonetheless, people often fear and resist change, even if it is for the better. We generally don’t like to be outside our “comfort zone” and feel unsure of ourselves when we tread in foreign waters. Changes bring about a major learning curve and require an adjustment period. Change also causes a lot of anxiety and stress. We can, however, learn how to welcome changes with a positive attitude if we learn how to anticipate and tackle them proactively.

According to William Bridges, people go through 3 phases during a change process, known, respectively, as the “Letting Go”, “Grey or Neutral Zone” and the “New Beginnings” phases.

In the “Letting Go” phase (1st phase), we experience a sense of loss as we are undergoing changes. We tend to be agitated, fearful and anxious. To manage the 1st phase, we need to be able to let go of the past and make peace with what has been lost or left behind. Acknowledging that it’s okay to ask questions when you don’t know what to expect, or when you simply need to get something clarified, helps relieve a lot of stress. Information really is power, in that it gives people a clearer understanding and helps them decipher and separate reality from perception.

Change, by its very nature, puts us into a gray zone, as we transition between the old and the new. In the Neutral Zone (2nd phase), we feel a loss of power and control; we feel stressed and generally disoriented, a little bit like fish out of water. During the 2nd phase, we also tend to start putting up barriers, resisting the change. What are some of the telltale signs of resistance? People become concerned with trivial matters and repeatedly ask the same questions that have already been answered, questioning authority and the validity of change itself. The second phase is managed by learning stress management skills and regaining a sense of control and power. It is also managed by raising our self-esteem, as well as improving our self-image about our capabilities and potential. So how can we manage to maintain control when the situation is often out of control? It is essential, first of all, to take stock of the things we can control and let go of the elements that we have no control over, because they are energy wasters. Managing the transition (neutral zone) is a process that each individual must go through at his/her/own pace. According to Bridges, many efforts to change are not successful or well managed because many people are stuck in the neutral zone, unable to transition into the “new beginnings” zone. The important thing is to be aware and conscious of the changes and feelings that you are going through, and create a game plan that will help you manage change in the most efficient way possible.

The 3rd phase is characterized by the renewal of our energy, enthusiasm, self-esteem, and hope for the future. At this point, we are ready to embrace new challenges in a positive and constructive way!

Any organization that is undergoing a change, whether large or small, has to think about how employees will manage the transition. If the transition is not successful, the change effort will not be successful either. Employees are, essentially, the driving force behind any change strategy that a company may want to implement. In order for a change effort to be successful, it ultimately entails a lot of proper planning, design and preparation before moving into the implementation phase.

Change can and should be a very exciting proposition! Ensure that you start on the right foot, so that you and your organization benefit in the long run.

“Be the change that you want to see in the world.” Gandhi

Article by Caroline Samne, Principle of New Horizons, Organizational Effectiveness Consultants