

Managing Change and Transitions
THE HUMAN SIDE OF CHANGE

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PART I

It is a fact that change and transition are a part of our everyday existence. Managing change well, however, is up to us. In both our professional and personal lives, we've all encountered changes and new beginnings and endings. Such changes may have included: different teaching or school assignments, relationships beginning and ending, birth of a child, grown children leaving home... and occasionally returning home again.

Some change are small and not too hard on us while others seem to put our strengths and resources to the test. We've all had to adapt to planned and unexpected changes. Upon reflection, you may have not only managed the change with the resources that were available at the time, but may have found a new sense of strength and resiliency in the face of those changes that you have encountered. Some changes may have been very difficult and touched us deeply, but may also have renewed our faith in ourselves, in others, and in a higher power.

What is the meaning of change and how does it affect people? According to writer William Bridges in *Managing Transitions*, change isn't a problem. Rather, the difficulty lies in the transition of moving from the present state to one that is desired in the future. Somewhere in between the present and the desired, the transition begins with an ending and ends with a new beginning. The transition state is considered to be the most difficult. This is because it involves the internal, psychological process that people struggle with to finally accept change. You can't have change without a transition and that means experiencing varying degrees of loss and feelings such as sadness, anger, loss of trust, fear, confusion, physical pains, guilt, triggers to old losses, disillusionment, giving up, and wishful thinking. Any certain change includes a transition and you can't have one without the other. Even when we determine a change is a good one, for example, the birth of a child, or getting married, there is still a loss with giving up areas of freedom we once had before the change. New parents adapt to such changes over time, as do new couples during the early years of their marriage.

Getting married or having a new baby for the most part involve a choice and a time to plan. However, change and transition at work are often seen not as an internal choice but rather as the response to external conditions. We often will find that we don't have much control over our external changes, but we still have a choice in how to react. Characteristically, what people experience in the transition state are greater degrees of low stability, high emotional stress, and undirected energy. Control, or lack of it, becomes a major issues. Old ways of doing things become highly valued and conflict increases. Whether a change is a choice or not, the transition still carries some aspect of the present, the unknown, and some new beginning in the future.

What are some of the reasons change is so difficult? A lot has to do with our reaction to the change, the period of uncertainty, and the lack of predictability. Change requires adaptation and most educators find it difficult to remain peaceful and calm when they are tired, uncertain about the future, and feeling pressure from the demands that are required of them. Some of us cope with change by denying it or fighting it. Both of these coping mechanisms only deplete our energy further. Contrary to what most people think, denial takes an inordinate amount of energy and can lead to more serious physical and emotional difficulties later on.

Change takes time. According to Bridges, it take two to three years for specific innovations and another five or more years for institutional reforms. It helps to have the perspective that change is a process over a period of time. Utilizing a longer period, we can develop new perspectives on the difficulties that lie ahead as well as learn many lessons from the experience that we call life. As an educator, we create lessons for our students to stop and reflect, think and consider various perspectives, to come up with some logical and appropriate conclusions. Those approaches should also be applied to our own lives. Life gives us many opportunities and lessons to learn, while at the same time providing avenues to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. Someone once said, "It isn't the crisis that is the lesson, it is what you do with it that counts."

Change is also very difficult because it seems to occur in clusters. We know too much change over a short period of time puts us at risk for physical and emotional illnesses. It is important to be aware of any physical or emotional symptoms that speak loudly to us when we are sick, feeling tired or drained because they are signals that something within us needs

our attention and care.

What can you do to help yourself adapt and grow with change? Accept change as part of everyday life. Resisting can only make things worse for you and create undue stress. Consider change as a learning experience and, rather than focus on the outcome, focus on the process. You might ask yourself, what are the important lessons here for me to learn. Make a list of every change you don't like and reframe it into something positive for you. Be open to thinking differently about what's awful or undesired and let your creative thinking take hold. As discussed, the hardest part of change is the transition between the present and getting to the new beginning. Allow yourself time to grieve your losses. While respecting your time to grieve, keep in mind that you will need to let go and move on eventually. It is during the transition period where most people experience the greatest amount of stress and uncertainty. If your life is feeling highly stressful, you might examine how well you are, or whether you are properly taking care of your physical health and emotional well-being. We may learn that our old ways of coping need and overhaul and that we need to be proactive and commit to taking better care of ourselves, physically, mentally and spiritually. Steven Covey in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says that being proactive means "not only taking initiative, but also taking responsibility for your life". If we can take this transition time to focus inward and examine our internal beliefs, priorities and wants, we may find some answers of how we can better cope with the change. We may find that we need to slow down, reach out to family and friends, realign our priorities, be open to new learning, and determine what really matters most.

Develop trust in yourself and your abilities and know that untapped strengths to help you get through uncertain times. Have you taken the time to re-examine your values, lately or to think about what you want in your life? Look back over your life and remember your successful handling of past changes and uncertainties. During periods of change most people experience a heightened sense of fear of the unknown, frustration and anger. These are some of the normal reactions that occur but that can also be signals that there are some issues which remain outside of our awareness, or which need to be discussed and resolved in a way that provides a win-win solution.

In summary, it is helpful to understand aspects of change and prepare yourself for the changes occurring now and in the future. Be open to new possibilities and creative problem-solving. Try reframing what is happening into a challenge to think, feel and act in a different way. See this as an opportunity to grow and have new experiences, instead of a defeat. You can then be better prepared when changes do occur. Where do we find our hope and optimism in the face of change? One of the best places to start is with ourselves. Through letting go, grieving our losses and celebrating our strengths, we find our courage and determination. Perhaps, when the dust settles, we may find something altogether different that what we had previously imagined. Consider the possibility of a new outlook, a new energy, and a new passion for life overall.
