

Getting them through the wilderness: notes on transition Based on william bridges



Introduction

Most leaders experience difficulties in changing organizations... the primary reason for this is because they don't understand the difference between CHANGE and TRANSITION... change is situational, transition is psychological; in other words, change is the transformation in circumstances; transition is the set of emotions and attitudes experienced by people who undergo change...

One of the best examples of how to manage change and transition is Moses:

'There is one management classic that provides an excellent account of a leader's successful transition-management project. It is the Old Testament book of Exodus, and the leader is Moses. It should be studied by anyone interested in how to lead a group of people from an old way of doing things to a new way'. (Bridges, p.4)

The story of Exodus begins with the people of Israel in bondage to an old and outlived system. This system was originally comfortable (in Joseph's day) but now – 430 years later – it has become decidedly oppressive. It's death on the Nile. Moses seeks to deliver the people from this bondage to an old system. Initially this system tightens its hold (which is often what happens). But then the first stage of transition begins properly. Bridges calls this the ENDINGS stage.

Endings

In this first phase of transition plagues of problems occur. These are literal plagues for Pharaoh. Today's plagues are likely to be different! The message transmitted by these adverse circumstances is the same: 'it's time to leave the old system behind'.

Moses allowed these plagues to escalate in order to accelerate change. He did not attempt to solve the problems. Nor did he simply wait until a slow incremental process of pressure had brought the patrons of the old system to a point of letting go.

In the endings phase, Moses allowed the level of discomfort to increase.

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The Neutral Zone

Once the old system is relinquished, people enter what Bridges calls 'the neutral zone'... this is the confusing 'no man's land' between the old way and the new way. It is THE WILDERNESS... which today is more likely to be a landscape of the heart and mind.

In Moses' situation, this wilderness zone begins at the Red Sea. When Moses and the people cross over, a decisive and clean break is made with the old system. The old system dies at this point. It is a 'boundary event'. The ships have been burned. There is no turning back!

Not everything in the past is drowned; Moses gathers up Joseph's bones and brings them over the sea.

This shows how important it is to celebrate the good things about the past and not to indulge in blanket denigration of what went before.

At the same time, the past cannot be brought back. The past did its job. 'The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there'. That was then. This is now - a new season.

The past has to be relinquished if the future is to be welcomed.

Once the people are through the Red Sea, they enter the wilderness, where they spend 40 years wandering.

Why so long? The answer is because it takes a long time for people to let go of the old system and the wilderness experience is necessary for change to take place... the old system follows people... As the saying goes, 'it's one thing to get the people out of Egypt; it's another thing to get Egypt out of the people'.

The neutral zone can be a very difficult place; it is often where people 'murmur' and complain, as in Moses' day.

Quick gains and signs are important in the psychological wilderness of the neutral zone; manna from heaven, water from a rock... these things are just what's needed.

In spite of these signs, Moses has to confront four attitudes in the wilderness. These are all impulses to escape the neutral zone...

Returning to the Old Ways – the longing to return to the good old days on the Nile

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Building the Golden Calf – the building and worshipping of golden calves (i.e. grace substitutes or idols)

Believing the Grass is Greener – imagining that the surrounding tribes had a better life and joining them

Arriving before we're ready – fast forwarding to the Promised Land before the proper time of preparation is over

Moses' answer to this was to walk among the people, to be accessible to them, and to communicate with them

As he does this, however, problems arise... being available to the people, because there are so many, begins to exhaust Moses (see Exodus 18)

This is when Jethro shows up

“This is not good!” his father-in-law exclaimed. “You’re going to wear yourself out--and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself. Now let me give you a word of advice, and may God be with you”. (Exodus 18:17-19)

With Jethro's advice, Moses decentralises the leadership... Jethro is like an early OD consultant at this point (Organizational Development); he advises Moses to regroup the people into tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands.

He also recommends that authority should be decentralised and delegated...

Moses does this and the workload becomes manageable.

In the next chapters (Exodus 19-20), Moses receives the commandments. This represents the creative opportunity of the neutral zone (it was during their voyage on the Mayflower that the Pilgrims created their new social order). The mission and the values of the people are clarified and consolidated in the wilderness. This is a time of social revitalization.

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Beginnings

After the neutral zone come the new beginnings... in Moses' case, it took forty years, the length of time for the ones who had known Egypt to die... and Moses didn't get to go in himself.

Moses didn't enter because a new kind of leader was required – a Joshua.

New beginnings require a new kind of leadership. This can be exercised by the same person who led the people through the neutral zone. But it is often the case that Moses-type leaders are followed by Joshua-type leaders. These are usually 'settlement-leaders' who must 'plant and harvest the fields for the day when the manna that fell from heaven is gone' (Bridges, p.18)

Conclusion

'What courage it takes for the leader to endorse disintegration and to embrace the emptiness and chaos that the neutral zone brings! But the wise leader knows that falling apart during a transition is essential. The same disintegration that is dangerous and frightening produces the new energy, identity and purpose that the organization needs for the next chapter of its life'. (Bridges, p.19.)

'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'. (Bridges, p.20.)

[The material above is based on William Bridges' classic essay, 'Leading them through the Wilderness'. The full text of this masterpiece is at:

<http://www.wmbridges.com/pdf/getting-thru-wilderness-2006-v2.pdf>

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[Below is from the end of William Bridges' essay 'Leading Transition' at <http://www.leadertoleader.org/knowledge-center/L2L/spring2000/bridges.html>]

Even a great leader like Moses faced a trying test of his leadership in the neutral zone. But he was up to the task, so take note of some of his methods:

Magnify the plagues: To make the old system (i.e., Pharaoh) "let go" of his people, Moses called down plagues -- and didn't stop until the old system gave way. At this stage, problems are your friend. Don't solve them, for they convince people that they need to let go of the old way.

Mark the ending: What a symbolic "boundary event" Moses had! After his people crossed the Red Sea, there was no turning back!

Deal with the "murmuring": Don't be surprised when people lose confidence in your leadership in the neutral zone: Where are we going? Does he know the way? What was ever wrong with Egypt, anyway? In periods of transition, look for opportunities to have contact with the individuals in transition; distance will be interpreted as abandonment. And show your concern for them by engaging them in conversation about the issues that are most on their minds; you may think there are more important things to talk about, but they don't think so.

Give people access to the decision makers: Moses (aided by his OD specialist, Jethro) appointed a new cadre of judges in the wilderness to narrow the gap between the people and the decision makers. Capitalize on the creative opportunity provided by the neutral zone:

It was in the wilderness, not in the Promised Land, that the big innovation took place: the Ten Commandments were handed down. It'll be in the neutral zone that many of your biggest breakthroughs occur. Resist the urge to rush ahead: It seems as though little is happening in the neutral zone, but this is where the transformation is taking place. Don't jeopardize it by hurrying.

Understand that neutral-zone leadership is special: Moses did not enter the Promised Land. His kind of leadership fit the neutral zone, where things are confusing and fluid. But it was Joshua who could lead in the more settled state of the Promised Land. A literal new leader isn't needed, though, just a new style of leadership. Establishment of a new beginning requires a much more logical approach with an appeal to the followers' understanding, while the fluidity and ambiguity of the neutral zone makes an emotional connection between the leader and the followers more critical..'