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Changes vs. Transitions

It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions. Change is not the same as transition. **Change** is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. **Transition** is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal.

The Three Phases of Transition

Unless transition occurs, *change* will not work. The starting point for transitions is not the outcome but *the ending that you will have to make to leave the old situation behind*. Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place. Nothing so undermines organizational change as the failure to think through who will have to let go of what when change occurs.

Phase one: Transition Starts with an Ending

Think of a big change in your life: your first managerial job, the birth of your first child or the move to a new house. Good changes, all of them, but as transitions, each one started with an ending.

With the job, you may have had to let go of your old peer group and the type of work you really enjoyed doing. Perhaps you had to give up the feeling of competence that comes from doing that work and your habit of leaving your work at the office may have stopped when you took on the round-the-clock responsibility of a managerial job.

With a new baby, you probably had to let go of regular sleep, extra money, time alone with your spouse and the spontaneity of going somewhere when the two of you felt like it. Here, too, your sense of competence may have come to an end as you found yourself unable to get the baby to eat or sleep or stop crying.

With the move, a whole network of relationships ended. Even if you kept in touch it was never the same again. You used to know where to go for what: stores, the doctor, the dentist. You have to let go of the feeling of being at home for awhile.

Even in these "good" changes, there are transitions that begin with having to let go of something. There are endings and losses. ***The failure to identify and be ready for the ending and losses that change produces is the largest single problem that organizations in transition encounter.***

Phase Two: The Neutral Zone---Space Between the Old and New Realities

The neutral zone is the limbo between the old sense of identity and the new. It is a time when the old way is gone and the new way doesn't feel comfortable yet.

Moving to your new house, getting a promotion or having a baby, contributed to rapid changes in your life. However, those were just the external, situational changes. Inwardly, the psychological transition happened much more slowly. Instead of becoming that new person as fast as you changed outwardly, you actually struggled for a time in a state that was neither the old nor the new. It was a kind of emotional wilderness, a time when it wasn't clear who you were or what was real.

It's important to understand this neutral zone for several reasons. First, if you don't expect it and understand why it is there, you're likely to try to rush through it and to be discouraged when you cannot do so. You may mistakenly conclude that the confusion you feel is a sign that there's something wrong with you.

Or, you may become frightened because of the lack of definition and experience and try to escape. (Employees do this frequently, which is why there is an increased level of turnover during organizational changes.)

Abandoning the situation however, just aborts the transition both personally and organizationally and jeopardizes the change.

Third, if you escape prematurely from the neutral zone, you'll not only compromise the change but also lose a great opportunity. Painful though it may be, the neutral zone is the individual's and the organizations' best chance for creativity, renewal and development. During this gap between the old and the new, is the time when innovation is most possible and when revitalization begins.

Phase Three: The New Beginning

People make the new beginning only if they have first made an ending and spent some time in the neutral zone. Yet most organizations try to start with the beginning rather than finishing with it. They pay no attention to endings. They do not acknowledge the existence of the neutral zone and then wonder why people have so much difficulty with change.