

Andy Crissinger:

Hi everyone. Andy Crissinger here, Director of Coaching at Reboot. I wanted to reach out again, and talk to you all about an issue that we see coming up quite a bit as of late in client sessions, and the issue is how to lead teams through times of significant change. Um, many of my clients have noticed over the past several weeks and months, um, along with, I'm sure many of you listening who are entrepreneurs and business leaders, you're faced with this issue of having to lead teams through... teams and organizations through significant transitions. Some of the ways that we're seeing this show up are, for example, things like reductions in force, um, significant furloughs, uh, massive changes in priorities for an organization, shifts in strategy, um, some cases even having to completely retool or remodel a business, uh, with an existing team, just a complete change in direction.

And, our clients are experiencing this. Many of them are, uh, perhaps many of you listening are as well, and so, I keep finding myself as a coach, um, walking with clients through how in the world do I show up, and lead a team through these kinds of, some cases drastic transitions, so I wanted to share a framework that I found helpful. I've found myself coming back to it quite a few times in the last couple of weeks especially, and I wanted to share it in a succinct way with you, and then, hopefully, also point you in a direction if you want to go a bit deeper into it, um, that you'd have some resources to be able to explore further, so first things first, let me just say I'm indebted to the late William Bridges for this particular approach to leading through times of change. Bridges wrote a book called Transitions, simply titled, but very profound work.

He also followed that up with a book called Managing Transitions, which speaks, uh, a bit more specifically to the business and organizational context, but the idea that I think is most significant that Bridges brought up was this distinguishing between the idea of change and transition, and I think this is incredibly important for leaders to understand as they are attempting to lead groups of people through times like these, so the way Bridges distinguishes transition from change, he says, "Change is what happens out there." It's, I- in other words, it's the new roadmap, it's the new strategy. Um, it might be even something as simple as the new office building, um, or the (laughs) not going into the office building anymore. The new office being my, my home office, or my living room, or my, my bedroom, s- so that's the change. It's the, it's the thing that if someone were watching from the outside, they could see, "Oh yeah, you just went from, from A state to B state."

On the other hand, transition is what happens inside of people. It's the internal process of coming to terms with the outward change, and this is key, because most of the time when leaders are seeking to lead groups through times of significant change, we tend to be focused on the outward. Things like, is the plan sound? And even, is the plan well communicated? Um, does it make sense? Uh, is there a roadmap? And then, once... I- if we can resolve some of those questions, we think, "Oh, okay, the, the, the work is mostly done. We've figured it out." But the challenge is we're working with people, not machines, and anytime groups of people, groups of individuals have to come to terms with a

new way of doing things, you know, leaving the old and stepping into the new, there's an internal psychological and emotional process that people go through, and that's what Bridges work really seeks to expose and help us understand, and he gives a framework for that.

So, key before I go any further is just change is what happens out there, it's situational. Transition happens inside. It's internal for the people who are involved. It's an emotional, psychological experience of coming to terms with the new way, so we might think of change management as things that are focused on clear vision, strategy, communication, execution, building momentum, all really, really important things. Transition management, on the other hand is focused on supporting our people through their inner reorientation process that is required for those changes to integrate and stick, and again, this is important, because we're not dealing with machines, we're dealing with human beings. So, I- let me share Bridges model.

Um, Bridges started his career before he became a management consultant as a humanities professor, and so, he studied the great, um, mythological traditions of history, you know, he was steeped in things like the Odyssey and Beowulf, and what he noticed is that over, uh, over centuries of human civilization that there's this pretty standard, um, movement that cultures understood, uh, would support people through times of great transition and change, and so, he identified these three phases, uh, that take place anytime we go through big shifts in our lives. The first phase he called endings. The second phase he called the neutral zone, also sometimes referred to as the wilderness, and then, the third phase is the new beginnings, so those three phases are generally the trajectory that people go through when faced with huge shifts in our lives, significant shifts in our lives.

Now, we go through those at different paces, and similar to say the stages of grief, they're not always linear. It's not like a formula that I can just share with you. Oh okay, it takes the typical person three weeks to go through this phase, and two weeks to go through this phase. It doesn't quite work like that, but generally speaking, the center of gravity of our teams will move through those three phases, and people will generally go through them, um, one by one. What you'll notice though is that some people might be very quickly able to kind of grok the new way and, and be excited about the new beginnings, whereas other people may have a really hard time getting through the ending phase, and this is something that's come up a lot recently in my conversations with clients where, uh, I- I've been talking with say a, a very, a highly motivated, driven founder that sees a way through this current pandemic crisis, uh, for their business and thinks, "Okay, we have to stop doing X, and we have to start doing Y."

But, he's frustrated because only a small subset of their team is able to really get behind them right now and head in that direction, whereas it feels like the rest are kind of dragging their feet or disengaged, and so, what I try to do with clients in those situations is make them aware that, hey, there is an inner reorientation process that people are going through, and there're actually some

things you can do as a leader that will support them moving through that process more cleanly, and you'll have a better chance at living into this new way, and bringing people along with you as opposed to maybe turning around in a couple of weeks, and realizing there's no one behind you, and so, that's how this particular framework can be helpful, so let me just share really quickly about these three phases.

The, the, the, the gist of the endings phase is really around, uh, grief, and that's kind of the umbrella experience. When- whenever we are stepping into a call to step into something new, we're necessarily leaving behind something old, and it, it bears naming that this is not just with difficult transitions like say COVID-19, and its impact on our economy, and on our companies. It can even be, we see this even with companies who have, uh, just experienced great success. Perhaps they've raised a big round of funding. Perhaps they've, um, had a successful IPO, perhaps they have found, um, you know, they've been scaling, and have found profitability, and, and great success in that way. Even in those cases, there is an old that people are necessarily having to leave behind that is worthy of grieving even if the new thing that we're headed towards is something that we're all excited about, and can see, uh, reasonably is a better reality. We're still leaving something behind.

So, the endings phase is really about naming what is ending, which is an incredibly important part of the grief process. We have to be able to speak] with definitiveness and specificity about the thing that's coming to an end, and if there's an experience of loss, there needs to be space to name that, so practically speaking, if you're a leader, and you are trying to turn a ship around in the middle of say, uh, uh, an incredibly disruptive pandemic, and you're retooling the business on the fly, it may be tempting to just put heads down, and go completely in the new way, but even if you could spend an hour or two hours making some space, say in an all hands to just name with, with definitiveness and specificity for your team, listen, this is the old way that we're leaving behind, and making some space for people to even talk about the feelings of loss associated with that. Even that little move there can be supportive in helping people move into the new.

The challenge with not doing that is there is a, there's a cognitive dissonance, and an emotional dissonance that people experience even if they're on board with you and they want to follow you. The fact that we're not naming and honoring the thing that is ending can often keep us kind of jumbled up, and foggy in our thinking, and in our emotions about where we're headed, so in the ending phase, the key is naming with specificity. Don't try to sugarcoat it. Don't try to convince people of all the, of, uh, ju- you know, just keep convincing people of why this plan is sound. It makes the most sense. It, it probably does make sense. It probably is the most sound plan, but slow down, make some space for people to at least name what's coming to an end. Grieving may not even be a concept that's on people's radar, and that language may even be a little bit off putting for some folks. You don't have to call it that, but that's essentially, like behind the curtain that's what's happening.

The second phase that Bridges talks about is the neutral zone or the wilderness, and this is really, um, I like the wilderness as a descriptor here, because it really describes well this time of being between two worlds. You know, think about the old. I've come to grips or beginning to come to grips with the fact that the old way is done, but I have not quite settled into the new way yet, and during the wilderness or neutral zone phase, this is where you may seem people, uh, see people be a bit disoriented, um, almost like they are uh, a little bit lost, wandering, um, not as productive as they typically would be, and it's important to, to recognize that, that's normal. It doesn't mean it's going to be there forever. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with the team, or even necessarily something wrong with the individual, but that's, it's pretty normal for teams, and individuals to go through a phase where, um, we're a little bit lost in the middle.

The, the challenge there as a leader is not wanting to, to push forward too much so that we are, um, we're missing the opportunity of this time, and also, not to, there's also a temptation sometimes to just go back to the old way. Like, oh, this isn't working. We must, we should, we should kind of go back to what we, what we knew what was familiar. If you can have a little bit of patience in that, uh, wandering time, it can allow for inner reorientation, so think about the way the ground lies fallow during the winter. There's no outward signs of growth, but there's often very much happening underground that's beginning to eventually give way to the new, the new growth that we will be able to see, so some things that you can do, uh, leadership moves you can make in the new, neutral zone, shet, set shorter range goals, realistic goals, continue to validate people's experiences.

You know, that those experiences of being a little bit lost, a little bit discombobulated, that's normal. Um, if there are things you can do to sort of, um, shorten the timeframe of, of cycles of work, so for instance, instead of maybe operating on, uh, month long cycles of work, we might really shorten that down to week-long sprints. That can be really helpful, and just helping people understand, okay, we're just going to take, put one foot in front of the other. We'll take this one day at a time, one week at a time. The other thing to watch out for in the neutral zone phase is people can start to get really, really sensitive about their, their place of belonging in the team, and so, look out for that. There may be ways that you can signal to people, hey, you, you do have a role here. You do have a part to play. We need you. Um, that can be important, um, during this time as well. So, that's the neutral zone.

And then, finally, the new beginnings. This is where we are beginning to step into, live into, embrace this new opportunity, this new way of being. The key here is we had to come through a couple of steps before, before we could really, um, escalate into this place, and that's where I think leaders can struggle, is we want to just hit the gas right away and expect that people should just be able to be on the same timeline we are when often we've been going through the first two phases, um, days, weeks, months, even in advance of the people

that we're leading, and so, we need to recognize that there's, there's going to be a little bit of a slowing down to go fast aspect to this.

So, in the new beginnings, this is when we're stepping into a new sense of identity, who we are as a team, and some things that you can do during this phase, create an image of the way forward. People's brains want a picture of where we're headed together, so this is a time to be continuing to articulate that north star. This is where we're headed. Enable quick action, so let's, let's, let's ensure that people can, the team can begin to take steps, and even those small wins we're going to celebrate, because we know that, that's going to help us gain momentum, and then, the other thing is to help speak in terms of identity. Okay, now we are the team who does X. This is who we are. We are, we are now the company that is doing X or Y. Speaking on that level of identity, incredibly important.

So, just a quick summary again of those three areas. In the endings phase it's about acknowledging and honoring what's ending, really giving people a bit of space to, to even grieve. In the neutral zone, setting shorter term goals, staying sensitive to, to group belonging concerns, and then, in the new beginnings it's really providing a clear picture of the way forward, and enabling quick action toward the vision, so the, I- in closing, what I want to say is, it is absolutely understandable that many of you would feel the pressure right now of needing to move quickly, and definitively in making the changes that you're making to, for your businesses, your organizations to thrive and survive. Um, what I'm not suggesting right now is that, that sense of, uh, high stakes, and that sense of gravity and importance of that, uh, should be minimized in any way.

All I'm saying is that when you're, you're, you're needing a group of people to be with you in order for that vision to be realized there are some things you can be doing tending to the transition of the group as opposed to simply the outward change that can, that can actually be supporting the better outcomes for your teams. Um, so I hope this has been helpful. If you'd like to go deeper on this topic checkout, uh, William Bridges, work *Transitions, Managing Transitions*, both really, really wonderful books, and, and I think a nice, um, augmentation to some of the other great work that's out there on change management, which I think is also quite helpful, but transition management often is undervalued and, and, and not quite as well understood by leaders, so hope this has been helpful and, uh, hang in there everybody.