

**Ray Foote:**

Hey, Ali Schultz, nice to see you.

**Ali Schultz:**

Hey Ray, how are you doing today?

**Ray Foote:**

You know, I'm doing pretty good. It's a good day.

**Ali Schultz:**

Nice. A good day in the neutral zone.

**Ray Foote:**

It's a good day in the neutral zone. Yeah, it is a good day in the neutral zone.

**Ali Schultz:**

We should probably back the bus up a little bit and give folks a little window in to the neutral zone. I wonder if we need to start with the framework of William Bridges.

**Ray Foote:**

Yeah, I think that's a great idea.

The context about what we're talking about today is this notion of the neutral zone, which comes from the work of William Bridges. And he wrote a book a number of years ago called Transitions. And when I say a number of years ago, I believe in the seventies. So it's kind of weird elder wisdom at this point. And he's done a number of follow on books around this. But there's a central core concept in that book, which is that when we're moving through transition, we go through three phases. But what he really starts with in this book is drawing a distinction between change and transition.

And change is the thing that happens to us externally. It can be a new job. It could be a new location. I know you and I both dealt with a lot of our clients as the pandemic moved into our world, and many of our clients went from everybody meeting in person at the office to within a month, everybody's remote. So that would be a change that binary. I was this way and now I'm this way.

And then he names this other idea, which is transition, which is our internal relationship to the change and how we metabolize the change actually. And that happens in a different timeframe. So a change may happen at three o'clock on Thursday, but a transition actually has a very different kind of a time frame.

So you can be, as a leader, you can be designing a change for three months and then launch it at three o'clock on Thursday. And for you as a leader, you've been living with this for three

months. But as someone receiving that change, they are hit with it right then.

And so we, then we turn to transition, which is the internal relationship I have to that change. And the way that he talks about that is in three phases. All transitions, ironically enough, begin with endings. And so something is ending, something is finishing. Some things aren't finishing, but really something is ending. And the second stage of transition is what he calls the neutral zone also refers to it as the wilderness. It is between what was and what will be, and then from this place of the wilderness or the neutral zone, as we often refer to it as we come into a place that is, emerging from that zone is new beginnings.

So that's essentially the setup, and I think what we're, well, what we're here to talk about today is, explore together is this idea of the neutral zone and how, how to start thinking about that because the neutral zone is a pretty fundamentally uncomfortable place oftentimes for folks.

**Ali Schultz:**

Yep. Newness, uncertainty, learning new things.

**Ray Foote:**

And it's the reorientation of what's coming. And so all kinds of things can be triggered in the neutral zone, like is this going to work? Why did we do this? Or even, you know, when are we gonna get back to the old ways of doing things, because this new way kinda sucks.

But we also kind of focus a lot, know, one of the ways there's a very interesting thing that kind of happens in the way that I see it is in order to actually move into the neutral zone, you actually have to come to terms and accept the ending.

**Ali Schultz:**

I think that in and of itself is a process.

**Ray Foote:**

Totally.

**Ali Schultz:**

Yeah. Can you anchor this in maybe a few contexts? Like maybe a personal story for one and then maybe an anonymized amalgam kind of client situation or stuff that we often see with clients.

**Ray Foote:**

Sure, I think that we kind of entered into this conversation, um, or sort of the inspiration for this conversation came from my own experience with realizing the nature of the neutral zone in a way that I never really had when I started to apply it to my own life and my own transition. So there's many examples I could explore about client work.

But maybe we just start and we'll just, you know, kind of that old narcissism joke, you know, enough about me, how do you like my shirt? We'll just make it about me.

**Ali Schultz:**

That's good.

**Ray Foote:**

So. You know, there was something that was happening to me. I was re studying the book again recently, *Transitions* by William Bridges, that is. And one of the things that grabbed my attention was some of the things that he was saying about being in the neutral zone, you know, asking questions like, well, three years after my new job, that I've taken. Why do I look back and remember how good I had it in my old job? Or, boy, there were some things I really loved about my old house, and I really missed them, or my neighborhood, or something.

And then he was also talking about this time when you actually are moving into a time of new beginnings, and actually, who you are is when you actually start feeling like yourself in this new way of being.

And I had the experience about seven months ago, I think, when I was doing a facilitation with a group of leaders. And I was working with them, and I suddenly found myself in a place where the agenda that we had designed was not working. And, and I suddenly found myself needing to improvise on the fly with this group of 12 people. And I had the, the experience that I had for myself in that time, is and particularly reflecting on it, is like, "wow that I felt like myself doing that."

And so that stuck with me. And I was like, geez, that's really interesting. And as I've been reflecting on it since that time, made me realize that this neutral zone that we talk about, I had always framed as being maybe, well, maybe it's a couple of months, maybe a year. But I've been doing this practice now for eight years since I exited my business.

And it was the first time that I had this really powerful somatic experience of feeling like myself, fully. Now I've had tastes of it, certainly when I'm doing one-on-one coaching and things like that, but in this group setting, which is tends to get me more activated and I'm more, you know, paying attention to what's going on in the design. But I was able to actually be fully emergent in that moment and move with the group much as I would have in being in a band and playing music with someone or people.

And so that got me into studying and revisiting this work a bit. And one of the really key points of the neutral zone that is a really important piece is, that in the neutral zone, we will often...that is actually a time to rebuild new connections with yourself and who you are in the world.

And one of the things that he talks about is that we will have a tendency in the neutral zone because it is so uncomfortable to rush forward or go back to the old ways. Right? So when we

were working with clients in the pandemic, there was a refrain that I often heard, I'm not sure about you, but it's like, boy, I can't wait until we all get back to the office. And I would just sit there and go, there's no way we're all going back to the office. There may be pockets of people going back to the office, but the world has fundamentally changed into a distributed model for working.

But I was really unaware of how long this neutral zone could last. And that seemed like a real reframe for me personally. And then as I studied it more, I saw the parallel that he draws to this is a time for putting on almost a new suit of clothes or actually feeling like you're in a new way of being. And it got me thinking a lot about neuroplasticity, and how this is actually a time for us to have neuroplasticity in our lives in the neutral zone and to actually let that happen to us and around us, rather than trying to say, wait, this is a new way of being and this is who I am. But actually, it has to emerge and evolve. And it happens in sort of streams and bits over time.

**Ali Schultz:**

Yeah, it makes me think too that...Like anyone's, any individual's capacity to like dance creatively and co-creatively with life is definitely a boon for that phase.

The neutral zone is a challenging phase for folks who need to have answers, don't like discomfort, uncertainty is hard, don't know how to regulate when they're stressed, like all the things. Because it can be so uncomfortable, because it's a different rhythm. It's a different everything.

And, there's something in that space like calling you to be different, begging you to somehow become more present in your life. It reminds me a little bit of why traveling can be so beneficial for folks, right? Because you're uprooted from your normal routine and you're somewhere else for a few days, a week, a couple weeks, whatever it is. And it kind of like shakes the dross out enough to put you back in your...old spot, but different. You're slightly different.

**Ray Foote:**

That's really, yeah, I really like that.

**Ali Schultz:**

I had a client recently, he was close to burnout, he took a break. This was a short break, this isn't pure neutral zone, but who knows what neutral zone may be upon him. But anyway, he took a short break, and they went up to the ocean, and he said, I came back, and I have tried to bring back, you know, or bottle that feeling of what it's like to be there, and to start integrating that into his current kind of situation and navigational thing.

So different, obviously, than the neutral zone. the neutral zone is, I mean, in some ways, the bottom drops out. When change happens, when a threshold has been crossed, you know, like John O'Donohue has said, like, it can be a phone call. As simple as a phone call. You get a phone call, someone died. Your life has changed. The threshold has been crossed. And now

what? Right? Like, you're in some ways forced into that neutral zone. And the length of that is how do you find your ground or reorient to life as it is in its new formation or different formation? And sometimes that different formation is who you are, and how you want to be shaped or live your life or be in certain ways.

**Ray Foote:**

Yeah, you're making me think of the transition that you went through with your herd and having your herd in a remote place and then having your herd near you.

And the difference between having to drive to go be with the herd and then drive and you're no longer with the herd. But now it's like right outside your door. And I'm curious, did you notice the, obviously there was a shift from when you were in town and then you moved out to the farm.

And then you have a new way of being, not instantaneously, but pretty close to it.

**Ali Schultz:**

It was pretty instant. mean, no one else was doing the work, you know? Yeah. I think luckily for me, like that's a pattern that I had known growing up. So, and it was a pattern I had been longing for, right? Like I just feel so off kilter if there's not a horse in my life or barn chores to do or a barn to just hole up in. But, this shift has been, I mean, you know, going from a boarding facility where everybody's, you know, there's a staff taking care of the animals basically to kind of doing it all yourself and managing a 40 acre farm. That's like a, that's a good part-time job right there.

So in many ways, was stepping into, I don't know, like the biggest and only dream I've had for myself, really. And I would say five years in, six years in, five and a half years in, I have a...I have it down.

**Ray Foote:**

Did you notice anything with the herd? Meaning did the herd relate differently to the new home?

**Ali Schultz:**

Yeah, they did. So how would they consider the transition?

It was a big change, but it was a good change. And folks that knew us at the old location, which was spectacular, by the way. But it's a boarding facility, so there are horses coming and going. There's like an undercurrent of stress, I think, in those environments that animals pick up on, for sure.

It's challenging here, it's different. mean, they all, they settled in, they have a routine, they know the routine. The routine is just like, this is what we do every day. And it helps everybody's nervous system. I mean, I remember I had a friend of mine years ago who used to say to me, she said, Ali Schultz, your life is so regimented.

And she said it just like, how do you have all these restrictions and rules and like patterns? But the Dalai Lama has said like routine, rhythm, ritual. It helps you settle into the day.

**Ray Foote:**

Yeah, the ritual piece is really a powerful, you know, or practice as I like to think of it. It's it's a really powerful cheat code to make it through the neutral zone while still holding it softly enough so that you're not trying to rush into this new way of being.

**Ali Schultz:**

Mm-hmm.

**Ray Foote:**

Right? I think particularly with the work that I do with teams and seeing teams that are driving change, particularly, you know, if they, you know, an executive team in particular, not only do they have to metabolize the change in the team, but then to all those they serve, and bringing in back in all that energy into the, you know, into the executive team. And one of the tendencies is to the, is this idea of, you know, rushing forward, when are we going to start seeing the metrics of the change taking? Right. And so, again, this is a time I believe when teams really have an opportunity to develop and to develop this neuroplasticity and to cultivate neuroplasticity because the whole team and I'm using that kind of as a metaphor like for the communications in the team and how everybody is relating to each other because it's actually when you're driving a big change the transition really has almost like a, you know, it's got a multiplied effect on everybody in all kinds of ways that are both above ground and below the ground. And the below the ground stuff in my experience is usually like 80%, it's like you can't see it. And so, figuring out ways to surface it and being with it and honoring the fact that it may take a while.

**Ali Schultz:**

Yeah, yeah. You know, you brought up horses so I can't help not think about it now since that's like prime thing in my brain.

**Ray Foote:**

Yeah, no, that's why I brought it up.

**Ali Schultz:**

But I did get a new horse during the pandemic because why not? People were buying toilet paper. I was like, I just I need another one. And he got to the farm after we moved here, or we had all the fence up and all the horses were here. Whereas the other two I had had, so there was our relationship to lean on, right, in the transition, through the transition into the new farm.

And this new guy, while I had known him when he was younger, because of the pandemic, I didn't go out to see him. I just bought him because I knew the farm that he was at and trusted all that. So he was really coming into a whole bunch of newness. New herd mates, new human

herd mate, and if that's even possible, a new primate friend really. It takes a good three years, I think, for any horse-human relationship to settle, but really for the horse to settle in its new location, or its new situation.

**Ray Foote:**

Yeah, I love this example.

**Ali Schultz:**

Yeah, I mean three years, that's a long ass time. And when I think about like what is required of most horses that are bought and sold and don't end up in my hands and they're in other, you know, situations in life, it's they're put to work right away. They're put to work, they're worked hard, they haven't even settled internally or found their own sense of confidence and ease in their space or with their new relationships, their new primate humans, right? But there's a neutral zone. I mean, in many ways, I think life is kind of a giant neutral zone, right? And we trick ourselves into thinking, but it's not, you know? But in many ways, it is.

**Ray Foote:**

Well, I think there is. I mean, there's constant change that's happening all around us. And the genius of this book is identifying the fact that we will often focus on the change and not pay as much attention to the transition.

**Ali Schultz:**

Yeah.

**Ray Foote:**

And until we can sort of step back and go, wow, I feel completely different now. And that was what my experience was. And even your reflection of the new of your new buddy, they're going like, wow, we're actually are this feels more like a herd now. And the beautiful thing about using horses as a medium to understand that is that you can't force horses.

**Ali Schultz:**

No. Yeah.

**Ray Foote:**

It's a lot different than forcing people, right? Because we will often think we can force people, but what we can be doing is pushing the transition that people are going through underground. And then that tends to leak in other ways. But even more sort of more detrimental to the process or where we can't squeeze as much value out of the process of the neutral zone, is that we bypass this time of actually building meaningful new connections to not only ourself, but to those we are in community with. Because those things take time. And because different people move through that process at different rates, we can sometimes be overshooting.

So the example I gave earlier of the, you know, of the leader of the team coming in, okay, we're

gonna drive this change. And they've already been living with it for two weeks, two months, two years. And finally, they get to do it, yay. And then everybody else is sort of like, what just happened? And you got some people who will never really recover from that.

And so there's really some moves that are super important to be able to make in leadership and in life really, is to actually take some time to be present with what's actually going on.

Right? When do I feel more like myself? Or when I really don't feel like myself? And with team, you know, teammates, being able to meet people where they are and actually have those conversations is critically important. Because you can have a time where people really have a lot of loss at an ending. Right. And for that loss can't really be made up for in a meaningful way with, let's say, an increase in salary or a bonus or some other weird external thing. Those can be nice, but it's not that doesn't make up for a loss oftentimes.

And so, actually understanding what is being lost, naming what is ending and what isn't ending is really key to moving into this wilderness, neutral zone space. But then while you're in it, actually having grace with not only that yourself, but your teammates and your community to the changes that everybody is sort of evolving through is critical to be on that journey together.

And then of course, you know, since it's all about me, noticing that it really can take a long time for this stuff to you can still be a high performer and still be in the neutral zone and to hold both those things and honor those is I've found to be a really huge unlock for me in just the past year as I've noticed this.

**Ali Schultz:**

Mm-hmm. Yeah, and I think too of how many organizations don't spend enough time tending to this space at the human layer. You know, humans not being software, they don't upgrade or change easily without a process.

And each individual on your team has their own process to acceptance and reorientation to whatever the new thing is. I like to think about, you know, PE environments where, you know, private equity has taken over a company, and it's kind of like driving hard and driving fast and...there's value to be squeezed out of every interaction and every anything. then it's like, who's the person monitoring the pulse in those types of organizations, right, for the people that are there to at least keep the human component alive through a lot of those external demands.

**Ray Foote:**

Yeah. And, you know, just to add to your, build on your PE example of, of an acquisition, for instance. So the acquisition happens on a Thursday at two, and those papers go through, but the integration of the business is now going to happen over the next who knows how long. And then setting it up to be then packaged and either cut up and sold off or, you know, repackaged and sold.

So all of those things just are complete, you know, amazingly fertile soil for stories to be told inside everybody's head. And if there's any fear in the room, which of course there will be, without the story, you will tend to make up the worst story possible to remain safe.

**Ali Schultz:**

Right, right, without the narrative from leadership or HR or something.

**Ray Foote:**

Without the narrative. That's right.

**Ali Schultz:**

Yeah, yeah. This really hits at culture pretty hard in terms of creating a framework for these transitions to happen with more ease. They're not going to be without thrash or without difficulty or challenge. But more ease is possible.

**Ray Foote:**

That's right. That's Yeah. And from leaders with grace, being able to bring grace to it. And that's not to say we can't move fast because we have to. But there's this, again, this double-sided thing that we need to hold on to both grace and standards, or grace and high standards. Strong back, open heart.

But I'm also thinking, you know, you gave the PE example, and I'm thinking, and what's so alive right now with just about really every one of my clients is the integration of AI into their work and into their environments. And this is a remarkably, you know, new technology, even though it's been around for a couple of years now in the mainstream, there isn't one client that I'm deAli Schultzng with, working with, that isn't asking this question, how do we integrate this technology? And there's some really interesting data coming out around how everybody is using, or many, many people are using these tools, and we're not seeing the benefits coming to the bottom line in the companies, right, in the enterprise level, they don't flow through. So there's a mismatch right now. And so, how do leaders create a context in which there is this change? And we know there's a change because our board is telling us, what's your AI strategy?

And so one of the pieces that is a constant topic and theme is how do I understand how we're using this? How do I help people use this in a way that they can feel like they're not going to get fired or they're not going to look stupid? Which tend to be the two biggest fears that are in the organizations, many of the organizations that I'm working with right now.

And so it's like trying to hold a space in which people can work through this time of profound transformation that we're having everywhere you look, and not have it be the only bright, shiny thing that we're looking at because we actually have to live our lives and be as human as we can while still being productive and figuring out how to work together and create an environment in which we can move through transition together because the change is going to happen and the tempo is doing nothing but picking up. So I think that's one of the biggest challenges and

very, very exciting times that I'm seeing and sitting in my chair in working with folks as we talk through this and how to hold the space and hold the container in which that transition causes as least harm as possible.

**Ali Schultz:**

Alright, thanks Ray.

**Ray Foote:**

See ya.