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Meet the MasterMinds: William Bridges on *Managing Transitions*

William Bridges is an internationally recognized authority on managing change in the workplace. For more than two decades, he has been helping clients with mergers, reorganizations, leadership changes and cultural shifts.

Bridges is the author of ten books, including the best sellers *Transitions* and *Managing Transitions*, which was updated and expanded for its second edition in 2003. He is a frequent keynote speaker at corporate meetings and professional conferences, and the *Wall Street Journal* named him one of the ten top executive development presenters in America.

MCNews had the opportunity to get both practical and inspirational tips from Bridges about how consultants can improve results for clients in a world of continuous flux.

MCNews: Why do so many change initiatives seem to cost too much, take too long and fail to meet their objectives?

Bridges: Because they do only half the job. They are change-heavy and transition-light. Change and transition are different, and both are necessary for any significant change to work.

As I use the term, change is a shift in the externals of any situation: a new boss, setting up a new program, the death of a relative, a move to a new city, or a promotion. By contrast, transition is the mental and emotional transformation that people must undergo to relinquish old arrangements and embrace new ones.

Transition has three phases: an Ending, a disorienting sort of "nowhere" that I call The Neutral Zone, and a new Beginning. If people don't deal with each of these phases, the change will be just a rearrangement of the furniture. And then we say, "It didn't work."

Maybe we start over again, or maybe we throw more resources at the problem, or maybe we fire the original consultants and hire a new batch. In all those cases, the change exceeds the time and cost estimates. And in most of them, the change doesn't do what we said it'd do. Look at the batting average in Mergers and Acquisitions. Look at those "big reorganizations" that were supposed to save tons of money. Look at how often joint ventures and outsourcing projects fail to meet the promised profit or cost figures.

MCNews: How is managing change different from managing transition?

Bridges: Well, the first difference is the one I just mentioned—change is the **way** things will be different, and transition is **how** you get people through those three stages to make the change work. But there are other distinctions too. Change is made up of events, while transition is an on-going process. Change is visible and tangible, while transition takes place (or more often, doesn't take place) inside of people.

Change can happen quickly, but transition takes weeks or months or even years. Change can, and usually should be, speeded up. Transition, like any organic process, has its own natural pace. Change is all about the outcome we are trying to achieve; transition is about how we'll get there and how we'll manage things while we are en route.

MCNews: Often, the biggest challenge to change is an organization's legacy of change initiatives. How can a consultant help an organization overcome the track record of the past and put a change program on a solid path?

Bridges: Our initial assessment of "transition readiness" provides an important early indicator of what lies ahead, and one of the things we inquire into is the organization's history of changes, both those that worked and those that didn't. Both the successful and the unsuccessful ones leave scars. And part of leading an organization—which is, of course, leading individual people—is dealing with those scars and showing people, with action more than words, that this is not just the same old same-old.

MCNews: When you work with executives sponsoring change initiatives, what's the most common area you see that needs improvement?

Bridges: Not surprisingly—given what I've already said—it's that they are so obtuse about the human side of the change they are trying to bring about. Too often, they just don't recognize that unless people, real live individuals, stop doing things the way they've been doing them, new things won't take root. They don't understand that "explaining the change" and "justifying it" do very, very little to encourage people to let go of the assumptions they've always had, the relationships they've always depended on, or the behaviors they've always used to get results.

These executives' detachment from the everyday work-work, which is so often defended as necessary to be "strategic," keeps these people from understanding what has to happen for changes to work as planned. But it is no accident that the great leaders, from Moses and Caesar to Lincoln and Lee, were people who deeply understood the people they were leading.

MCNews: The consulting industry is full of "change" consultants. How would you assess their competence?

Bridges: As experts on the planning and execution of change, some are excellent and others aren't. As people who know how to help an organization carry out a change, from first concept to final action, they are, by and large, very weak. But I shouldn't complain. I've never had to do any formal marketing for my transition-management services because I've gotten so much business from organizations that spent big bucks with well known consulting firms, and then called me up at the eleventh hour and said, "The change isn't working like they promised it would."

MCNews: What is the appropriate role for a consultant in a change initiative?

Bridges: The "right way" flows naturally from recognizing the transition-dimension of the change in question. It starts by encouraging the change leaders to ask "Who has to let go of what for this is to be successful? For this to happen, what has to end? What is it time for people to let go of?"

Once that is clear, the consultant then helps the client consider how to lead people through the ending and to manage the losses that people experience in that phase. Chapter three of the book

is about “How to Get People to Let Go.” These things aren’t hard to do, but people don’t do them because they are so intent on change and so unaware of transition.

MCNews: If you could give a program manager one piece of advice as they wrap up a change initiative, what would it be?

Bridges: It would be to do a careful debrief of what worked and what didn’t. Usually, companies are so anxious to get on to the next change that they fail to learn from the last one. I first realized that after helping a 50,000-person technology company close a fabricating plant. It went very well—they actually doubled productivity per person during the closedown process! But when they called to ask for help in shutting another facility, I discovered that they had “forgotten” what they had done with the previous shutdown.

Organizations won’t learn to manage change (and, of course, transition) until they treat every case of it as a tutorial program set up especially for their edification. What worked? What didn’t? What surprised us? What ‘mistakes’ turned out to be fortunate ones? What assumptions almost sank us?

MCNews: Last question, what’s on your reading list these days?

Bridges: I still read the business pages and I check out several magazines whenever I fly, but I’ve pretty well stopped reading business books. The “blockbuster!” mentality, the “hottest new idea” approach turns me off. In the past five years, I’ve found myself reading a lot more fiction and poetry. It feeds my heart better than business books, and the business world is seriously short of **heart** these days.

I think that if I was in charge of an executive development program, the first book on my reading list would be Roger Housden’s *Ten Poems to Change Your Life*. I think the next book that I write—if there is one—will be a novel for young people. It’s strange, but you can say much more important things to children than you can to adults.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

You can find out more about William Bridges, his books and services at www.wmbridges.com.