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Transitioning Out: When A Leader Leaves

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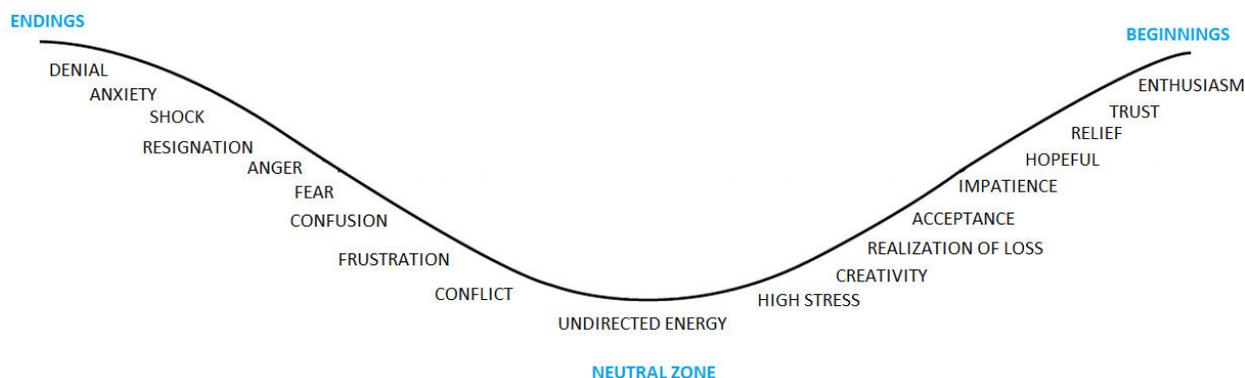
Many books and articles have been written for the leader who enters a new role, with guidance for making the “first 90 - 120 days” as effective and constructive as possible. Yet, it is interesting to discover there is very little written about how a manager or leader can best “transition out.” Perhaps it is a topic we would rather not deal with, or it is something that typically happens so quickly that there is little time to prepare. The reality is that human beings resist planning the ending of anything, not just a career position. Endings are typically more painful than beginnings, and we naturally want to focus on the excitement of something new. But transitions of all kinds involve leaving as well as starting, so it is important to disengage from a job elegantly and professionally.

I. PHASES OF TRANSITIONING

William Bridges¹ has studied the cycles and work to be done during transitions of all kinds, personal, organizational and professional. He has found that, no matter what the context, well-executed transitions are a time of transformation that comes in three phases. Curiously, he puts the “ending” as the first phase. In his view, a well-managed ending sets the stage for a successful transition. The three phases are:

- *Ending* – This means letting go of what and where you were, what you had, what you did. To become something else, or to take on a new role, you must stop being what you have been. The first task is to let go.
- *Neutral Zone* – This is a kind of limbo, or more accurately, a liminal space, where you are no longer where you were, but you are not yet where you are going to be. Crossing through this zone often brings confusion, chaos, pressure, doubt, and discomfort. It can also bring great creativity. This is actually a very important time, and it requires courage to mine this experience for the development and deep self-awareness it can bring, if you let it.
- *Beginning* – Those who make it through the neutral zone can begin again, in a new way, energized, invigorated, wiser and more self-aware.

Some cultures and societies have rites to mark a person’s passage through the neutral zone. Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist, is known for his work on symbols and rites of passage. His important works explore the threefold structure of rites of passage and expanding theories on the liminal phase or what Bridges calls the “neutral zone.” This is the transition from one reality to another. Many cultures consider this a sacred time, a chance to step back from the busy world we usually inhabit, to reflect and create. Some aboriginal cultures have walkabouts or pilgrimages and other rituals in which young people become adults, moving from one stage of life to another. Examples of liminal phases abound in popular culture as well. The tornado in “The Wizard of Oz” is one, bringing Dorothy from Kansas to the colorful world of munchkins and witches. The period between an engagement and the wedding is another, a shift from the state of being single to being married. “The Twilight Zone”, from the old TV show of the 1960s, could be considered a liminal space. These major life changes bring an emotional storm with them. Bridges outlines the emotional states as follows:



As you can see – and you know if you have experienced a transition – it’s quite a roller coaster! So – how do you manage a successful career transition, especially when you are leaving your job? How do you apply the lessons of transitions so that you get the most out of this potentially stressful situation?

II. ENDING

There is great value in a well-executed ending, and departing leaders leaving for any reason can make a big difference for their organization, their people, and themselves by exiting as effectively as they entered their role. Focusing on the ending is important for several key reasons:

- Management departures are highly visible and disruptive. They cause speculation and gossip, and this is a distraction to the normal work rhythm of the team or organization.
- Management positions are pivotal in the execution of strategy and policy, so leaving a gap in the organization will cause a stall, even if it’s brief, in the delivery of critical initiatives and projects until new leadership is effectively established.
- Finally, relationships are fractured by a manager’s departure. There will be an alteration in the dynamics of the team of which the person was a member, in the dynamics of the team he or she led, and in the many one-on-one relationships that have been formed with people at various levels in the enterprise. There is a loss, even when it’s seen to be in the best interests of all involved. And that loss will be felt and has an impact on morale for at least a brief period of time.

¹ William Bridges, “Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change,” Perseus 2003.

Therefore, there is value in being as deliberate in attending to transitioning out as to transitioning in at the managerial level. It's not just for the sake of the person leaving, but also for the people left behind. There is an impact on the person's boss, who will need to manage the fall-out of the departure, find and mentor the replacement, and possibly reorganize so that work of the organization can continue with minimal disruption. There is an impact on the support staff, particularly administrative or executive assistants, who will field many veiled and direct questions about the departure and who will also be coping with losing a boss and colleague, and training a new one. And last but not least, there is an impact on the direct reports and the associates who report to the person who is leaving, who will be left to continue the work of the organization with no excuses allowed for a dip in productivity. Following are some practical tips and guidelines to consider as you plan your transition out of an organization at any level:

- Stay grounded – you don't have to try to stay positive all the time, but do stay grounded. False positivity does more harm to people in these situations than a quietly grounded presence does. By "grounded" we mean much the same as an electrical ground: electrical connections to the ground limit the build-up of static electricity and sparks. In this transitional period, work on staying mentally and emotionally stable, unpretentious, and realistic (no static or sparks!)
- Work hard until the end. If you have a new job lined up, it might be tempting to disengage or pull back, but continue to give your position your best efforts, to leave a lasting, positive impression behind. At the very least, you'll be more likely to get a good reference. And you never know when you may run into or need those people again, so it's best to leave with your head held high, knowing you did everything you were supposed to, right until the end.
- Be clear on your intentions for the legacy or memories you want people to have of you when you are gone, and for what you're moving towards. Honor where you have been and share your enthusiasm, when appropriate and attuned to the listeners, for the future you're creating in your next move – including if it is to take some time off to think about what's next in your career.
- Be gracious, and honor those with whom you've worked. Thank them for what they have contributed to you while you were working with them. Be personal and clear about the difference they have made for you; your goal is to leave the human relationships as intact as possible.
- Do an exit interview – both to provide learning from the experience, and to make sure all the details are clear and agreed upon (benefits, severance, vacation days, etc.) In the interview, be honest about your experience, but take the high road. It's possible to give candid feedback without becoming overly negative.

III. THE NEUTRAL ZONE

Now that the ending is taken care of, it's time to immerse yourself in the "neutral zone." As said before, the neutral zone can be a time of frustration, loss, anger and disappointment. It can also be a time of great creativity and learning. Managers and leaders who find themselves "in transition" and can afford to take some time to reflect find that using this structure encourages them to give themselves permission to design their life, and then fit their career search inside of that context, instead of the other way around.

The transition process through the neutral zone is intended to release the tension, pressure, and intensity of work life by slowly shifting down the activity that has consumed you. Depending on the person, it usually takes from one to as many as six months to begin to do less and less "activity for activity's sake." People who have been working hard for years get used to a certain driving pace in their life, and it takes a while to reduce the adrenaline addiction that has developed. The intention is to give yourself the opportunity to feel and experience who you are and your life opportunities in a different context, in order to make new life decisions about your relationships, interests, work, positions, etc. Most people's tendency is to take a short vacation and then just jump into another job without taking advantage of the opportunity to reevaluate their life and what is important and meaningful to them.

Your job as the CEO of your life is to ask yourself how you are doing, what your vision and mission are, and what your long- and short-term goals are. What is your organizational culture like? What are your values and principles? It's important to monitor how you are doing with the downshift of activity, and look around to see what is fun for you and gives you energy, passion and insight about

Thinking about Transitions

Considering the "transitions" model of ending, neutral zone and beginning, and thinking about some change that you are experiencing:

- What is an ending you have encountered? How did that feel to you? What emotions did you experience?
- What did you have to let go of, to adapt or learn new things? How was that for you? What might you say to someone else to help him or her through this stage?
- What was the neutral zone like, in your experience? Was there creativity in the chaos, or just confusion and discomfort? What tips might you offer for making the most of it?
- What did the new beginning feel like? Did it become clear that something new was required? What helped you move forward?

your life. It is time to reflect on job opportunities that come up in the context of your vision, mission, values and principals. To start, focus on the most practical aspects. Another task is to notify your network that you are taking some time off, and that after that time off, you will pursue opportunities. Ask these colleagues to let you know if something interesting comes up during the transition

period. If you have outplacement as part of a severance package, negotiate a start date after the time you are taking for yourself. The goal is to fully disengage from what you were doing so you can have a different perspective as you reengage in the new work direction.

This can be called the “natural next step” in one’s work-life; finding the real rhythm and natural unfolding of what your unique journey is to be, rather than pushing forward out of duty and obligation. Depending on your personality, you may be wired to keep moving forward, but try to be gentle with yourself and give yourself permission to do the minimum required to stay engaged in the search process over this period, while maximizing the time spent on reclaiming what you really want in your life. Transitions can be an incredible gift of time to reconnect with your true essence, who we naturally are. So few people get the chance for extended time for reflection and opening to their life. This is a blessing in disguise of being between jobs, and the source of much potential freedom.

IV. BEGINNINGS

Leaders say again and again that their perception of themselves, the world, and what and how they want to contribute changes significantly from taking this transition time seriously and consciously spending time to re-engage with their lives outside of work. They say that they rediscover themselves, their family, spouse and friends, and experience a new vitality and meaning for life. Taking the time both transition out powerfully, and then to explore and discover during the neutral zone, leads to interesting and innovative ideas and possibly to a re-birth – a real new beginning.

Note: This article draws heavily on the decades of experience and thinking of David Kyle of Lind and Kyle Consultants, as well as on a deep body of knowledge and practice developed by our colleagues at Generative Leadership Group.

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