



# Change & Transition

Why Understanding the Difference Really Matters

## Overview

Change and transition are words that are used interchangeably, when they actually mean two different things. By understanding this difference, you can unlock why you or others may be resistant (either overtly or unwittingly) to certain circumstances or events.

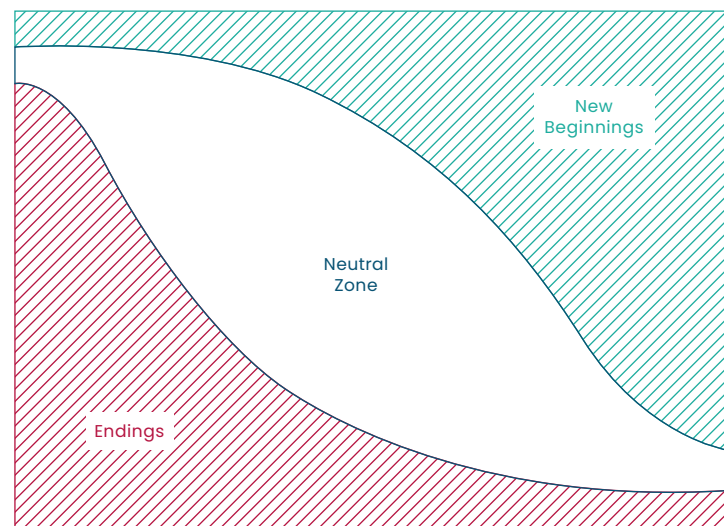
## Change is External

When we talk about change in an organization, we are talking about an attempt by the organization to capture opportunities and business benefits - for example, to deliver better customer service, decrease costs, improve productivity, or engage employees. Change is an event or system that you can outwardly see - something old stops and something new begins. It can be situational and is always external. Change is typically something that is announced and added to calendars and memos. On a personal level, the same occurs. One day you may live in Boston, the next day you've moved to San Francisco; one day you are single, the next day you are married, etc.

## Transition is Internal

Transition on the other hand, is the internal aspect to change. Specifically, it is the emotional and psychological process that people experience when confronted with a change. Understanding the predictive stages of transition helps us make sense of why we and/

## Diagram: Transition Model



or others may be resisting or feel taxed by a change, even if it is something we actually want. Managing the transitions for ourselves and our teams can mean the difference between a change that succeeds and one that fails.

## All Transitions Start with Endings

Ironically, all change, whether it is initiated by ourselves or thrust upon us, propels people through three predictive transition phases, always in this order: Ending, Neutral Zone and New Beginning.

### Ending

The first phase starts with an ending. This is paradoxical but true. Endings are all about negative emotions including loss,



**Not in his goals but his transitions, man is great.**

— Ralph Waldo Emerson



grief, hopelessness and despair that we initially experience in the change process. We are being asked or told to give up or let go of an old way of doing things that we were once comfortable with and had confidence in. People identify what they are losing and learn how to manage these losses. These losses may include such things as one's job role, status in the organization, or a shift in relationships and team members.

### Neutral Zone

This phase is the core of the transition process, the in-between time when the old is gone and the new is not yet fully operational. People are creating new processes and learning what their new roles will be while also in flux and possibly feeling confusion and distress. During this phase you might be feeling frustrated, disconnected, overwhelmed and confused, while also starting to feel hopeful because you're seeing glimmers of a new vision or of what good may be coming. **The Neutral Zone serves as a paradoxical function** during times of change. The gap between the old and new is when great creativity and innovation can occur, while working through the confusion. The Neutral Zone is a time of great revitalization.

### New Beginning

We arrive at this phase with new understandings, values and attitudes, the formation of a new identity. The new beginning is marked by a renewed sense of focus, energy and purpose. In this phase, you are now feeling a sense of ease, confidence and competence. You are back to "normal", though it is a new normal.

It is important to also understand that others may not be in the New Beginnings phase with you - they may still be stuck in the Ending or the Neutral Zone, and that is okay. Remember, transition is a process and can't be willed or forced, though it can be encouraged, supported and reinforced. Many executives fall into the **Marathon Effect** here - the phase where they are over the finish line (in the New Beginnings phase because they have been working through the change for weeks or months, for example) while those who are just hearing the news for the first time are back at the starting line (in the Ending phase).



## Keep in Mind

For each phase, it is important to **recognize what emotions you are feeling**, for if you can name it, you can manage it. The ability to label and understand what phase of the transition process you are in is empowering. It provides insight and helps you take responsibility for your transition. It is also important to understand that whatever you are feeling, those feelings are legitimate (there are no bad feelings) and are to be expected – they are a normal and natural part of the transition process.

**Transition is unique to you.** There are no right or wrong “ways” to transition, and there is no prescribed timeline for which you “should” complete your transition.

**Transitioning is like being a trapeze artist** – You have to first let go of one bar (Ending phase), travel through the air waiting and wondering if you will have the strength to hang on for the approaching bar (Neutral Zone) and then, confidently grab onto the incoming bar (New Beginning). That is the work of transition.

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### Source:

*Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* by William Bridges.

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