

Ask The Expert: Communicating in Tough Times Using the William Bridges' Three Phase Transition Model

By Susan Mitchell Bridges and Nina Coil



Susan Bridges is President of William Bridges & Associates. She has provided leadership consulting and executive development services to individuals and organizations experiencing transition management issues for over twenty years, partnering with leaders who must initiate change and transition in their organizations.



Nina Coil is a Bridges Master Trainer and director of product development at Linkage. She has more than fifteen years' experience designing and facilitating learning programs for leaders at all levels. She specializes in creative train-the-trainer certification programs, and in the topics of change and transition. She has worked with leaders and staff of domestic and global corporations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and small businesses.

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Linkage recently hosted a webinar on Communicating in Tough Times using the William Bridges' Three-Phase Transition Model with presenters Susan Mitchell Bridges and Nina Coil. In this article, our expert presenters will address a few of the questions that we received from attendees on this important, timely topic. If you have further questions, please contact Susan Bridges at staff@wmbridges.com.

Question #1:

I could use some suggestions on how to get upper management more involved in our current change initiative. Currently they are a fly by the seat of your pants kind of group with very little communication.

Upper management comments like “just get over it” are symptomatic of two things: 1) the “marathon effect” and 2) a lack of understanding.

The “marathon effect” is the fact that senior leaders tend to forget how long it took them to wrestle with a proposed change—to get to the “finish line” and expect others to come in right behind them when they have not been included in the months of meetings and decision-making processes. Leaders often forget the length of time they have worked to understand the need for and shape of the proposed change. Major change requires months of strategic planning and reviewing of options, never mind the implementation planning process—reaching the “finish line” where they can announce the change. They have often forgotten how long this took them and only rarely share information about the process they undertook. It would help if they could recognize and share more of their process when making a change announcement. Individuals would still have to go through a process of transition themselves as they figure out what this means to them, but knowing they were not alone in adjusting to a new reality would take away some of the “sting”.

The “lack of understanding” we are referring to is that saying “just get over it” when people are dealing with endings makes them more entrenched and threatens the success of the initiative. Saying “just get over it,” “get on the bus because it’s leaving,” and “trust us – we know what we are doing” only slows the transition process down. This threat to implementation is real, and if leaders make people feel worse by the way they communicate, they will not realize the gains they hope for.

Question #2:

How do you influence your Senior Leaders to communicate in tough times when there is no information?

People look to senior leaders to continue communicating with them even if they do not have answers or new information. Leaders are often reluctant to communicate less-than-robust plans, or incomplete information. Communicating nothing while you wait for total clarity is both unrealistic and unwise. Even if they seem obvious or unnecessary, the following steps can be helpful:

- ◆ When you can’t tell people what, tell them how the what is going to be determined and when.

- ◆ When you run into a delay, explain.
- ◆ Tell them what you wish you could tell them.
- ◆ Tell them you know that this is a difficult time for them.
- ◆ Tell them that you hope that they will hang in there.
- ◆ Don't tell them "trust us", "be loyal" or "stop complaining." (see "just get over it" above)

Question #3:

How can you help cement the message that the work world will be different now because of the change? For example, moving an organization from change and control model to one that is more participative?

This question is about convincing people that the change is real, which is about helping them grapple with their endings. In order for people to begin their transition process they have to have help letting go of the old ways. The following strategies are a good starting place:

1. Make sure everyone understands exactly what is and is not ending.
2. Allow people to feel that their losses are acknowledged.
3. Carefully remove any excuses for people to hold on to the past.
4. Use boundary actions and events to mark a clean break with the past.
5. Understand and accept grieving as natural and necessary.
6. "Sell" the problem, but don't put down the past.
7. Give and get all the information you can.
8. Make sure you and others have a piece of the past – a memento – to take into the future.
9. Look for ways to soften the impact of the changes.
10. Use ceremony, ritual, or symbolic events to honor the past.

Question #4:

You noted "it takes six times" for information to sink in. Could you share some background as to where "six" came from?

It is generally accepted that with a large-scale organizational change it takes at least six repetitions—with slightly different wording and methodology—in order for people to fully take

the information in and to take it seriously. When people hear news that is difficult for the first time, they generally retain about 15% of what was said. This is why people going to the doctor to discuss unfavorable test results are advised to bring someone with them to help capture what is said.

Question #5:

What are your thoughts about sharing your [Three-Phase Transition]model with an entire organization to help people deal with change?

Linkage and Bridges have co-developed a certification process in the transition methodology, called Leading Organizational Transition, that enables practitioners to roll out a series of interventions. This series of interventions often includes making the model available to the whole organization, usually through a cascading process of programs geared to managers and to individuals. We have often seen that enabling everyone to use a common framework and language smoothes the process considerably. Investing in transition interventions is a very cost-effective way to retain the best and the brightest of your employees when times are tough, so that they will be there when you need them – at the “finish line.”

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With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com