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“CHANGE INITIATIVES NEED TRANSITION SUPPORT TO SUCCEED”

“It isn’t changes that do you in, it’s the transitions.” This is the observation, supported by the hundreds of corporate experiences relayed to William Bridges, an international consultant specializing in the process of transition management. He is also the author of “Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change.”

While we tend to use the two words “change” and “transition” – interchangeably, they are not the same. “Change” is a situational event – new boss, new computer systems, new organizational structure, etc. “Transition” is the psychological process that people must go through to effectively adapt to those changes. Change is external; transition is internal.

As business managers and leaders face the challenge of perpetual change in their organizations, they face the greater challenge of helping their people to come to terms with those changes.

Managers frequently get frustrated that their people are “resistant to change.” In many cases, however, the employees are not resistant to change at all. Rather, they are resistant from not having adequate transition planning, communication and support. According to Bridges, the failure to identify and be ready for the endings and losses that change will produce is the largest single problem that organizations in transition encounter.

The problem frequently lies with leaders who are not educated about the transition management process, and or lack the patience to plan and implement one. Because transition is a human and therefore personal process, it cannot be rushed by executive decree. Effective leaders understand that an essential component of successful change is putting a transition management plan in place which will allow the people to process the impact, ultimately ensuring greater success with the change initiative.

The transition process actually consists of three distinct phases: putting closure to the past, a middle or neutral zone, and finally, embracing the new beginning.

The ending or closure phase of transition first allows people to identify and acknowledge their losses. Any change, regardless of how positive, necessary or appropriate, will entail endings or losses of some kind. For management to recognize the natural need to let go of the past, whether it be processes, structures, or relationships, is to give their employees the time and support they need to get through this essential part of the process.

The second phase of transition is the middle or neutral zone. This is a gray period: a time when things are uncertain, and frequently chaotic. It is this time that employees are neither attached to the old or the new. According to Bridges, it is this step in the transition process that people and organizations attempt to skip over or rush through – and it is to their detriment.

While uncomfortable to be in such an unclear and unfamiliar place, the neutral zone is also a time where the true beginnings of adaptation to the new change will begin to occur. The darkness, fuzziness and fear generated by uncertainty and ambiguity are the fertile soil where creativity and renewal will germinate and acceptance starts to blossom. This neutral zone, where people start to get their bearings, must be allowed to occur. It must not be curtailed by management with attempts to accelerate or override the process.

The third phase of transition is the acceptance of new beginnings. Remember that this can only occur if the previous two steps in the process have been supported and honored. If not, people will either stay “stuck” in the old mindset or leave the organization out of frustration.