

# **Personal transitions**

## **1 Introduction**

Transitions involve a change or discontinuity in a person's life which typically requires new behaviours and attitudes and involves changed assumptions. Transitions may be voluntary (you decide to change job, move house, get married) or involuntary (you lose your job, are severely injured, your partner leaves you). These are examples of major transitions but there are also countless more minor ones: starting a new project at work, renovating a house, having friends or relatives to stay for a while, etc. The key point is that all transitions have common features. The better you understand the process, the better you will be able to cope with your transitions or help others to.

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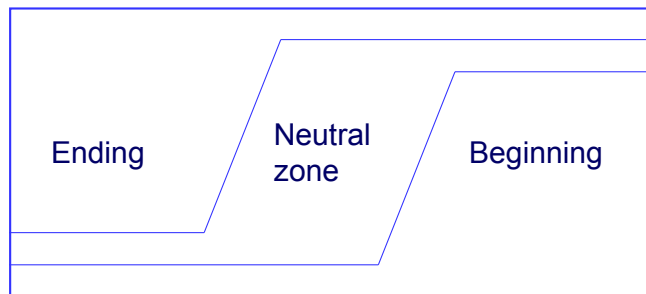
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## **2 The concept of transition and the stages in it**

The picture on the next page comes from the work of William Bridges (Managing Transitions, 1991). Paradoxically, it sees transition as beginning with an ending and then going on to a new beginning via a neutral zone. The neutral zone may take various forms: it may be a period of waiting once a change has been announced but hasn't yet happened, it may be a genuinely in-between period (e.g. of unemployment between jobs), it may be a period of exploration in which the new beginning is discovered.

There are both external and internal components to a transition. The external component is often over quickly but the internal can take a long time to work through. It is quite common to find that externally both ending and beginning have happened, but internally the person is still working on coming to terms with the ending and only slowly getting to grips with the new beginning.

## Transition



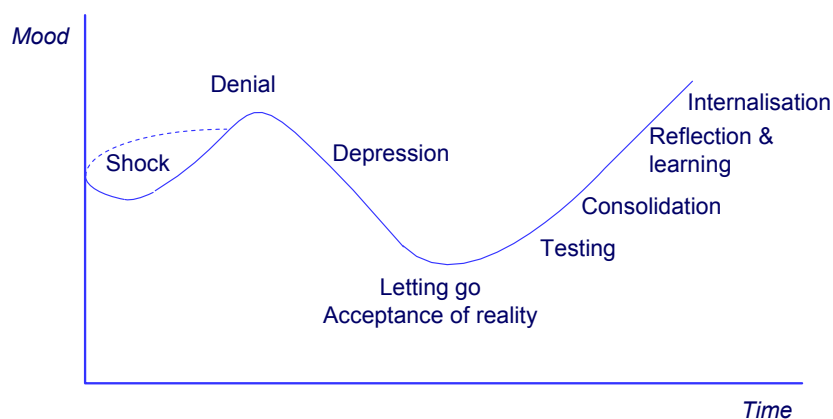
### Phases in a transition

People going through change experience a variety of emotional states. Transitions typically pass through the cycle of reasonably predictable phases described below. In each case it is suggested that it will be necessary to work through **all** of the stages if the transition is to be successfully completed.

The model presented below has been developed by John Hayes and Peter Hyde from the version which originally appeared in an article by Barrie Hopson and John Adams called "Towards an understanding of transition", published in *Transitions: Understanding and managing personal change* by John Adams, John Hayes and Barrie Hopson (Martin Robertson, 1976).

The cycle reflects variations in the degree to which we feel able to exercise control over the situation.

### Transition phases



## *Shock*

The initial phase of a transition is experienced by many people as a state of shock: of being overwhelmed, frozen, paralysed, unable to reason, plan or act. There may be an initial expression of grief, anger or euphoria - hence the mood curve may go up or down. The intensity of this phase will be influenced by the degree of preparedness and the desirability of the transition - it will be greater for an unexpected, undesirable change.

## *Denial*

This phase is characterised by a retreat from the reality of the change. Negative changes may be denied or trivialised and attention may be displaced onto other more immediate but less important matters. Energy and activity are devoted to the known and the familiar. Positive changes may induce euphoria and an unwillingness to consider any possible negative consequences. Denial may be highly functional if it provides time to retreat from the reality of a crisis and allow our internal forces to regroup to later face the challenge. However, if maintained for long, denial inhibits the ability to deal with the reality of a change.

## *Depression*

Eventually the reality of the change becomes apparent and this often provokes a feeling of depression. This is associated with feeling that the situation is beyond one's control. The phase may be characterised by anger, sadness, withdrawal and confusion. This drop in mood occurs even in changes which were initially embraced enthusiastically when the practical difficulties are faced. It is in the depression phase therefore that the change really starts to be experienced as stressful. If the change was a voluntary one, this may be the point at which the person gives up. In involuntary changes, the person may seek to leave the situation.

## *Letting go*

This phase involves accepting reality for what it is. It implies a clear letting go of the present or past. This may be experienced as a "little death" and often entails a process of mourning. It can help at this point to remember that the lowest ebb is the turn of the tide.

## *Testing*

A more active, creative, experimental involvement in the new situation starts to take place. New ways of behaving and being are tried out. More energy is available but anger and irritability may be easily aroused if the new behaviour is not successful. This phase may involve trial-and-error behaviour or a more active cycle of experience-review-conclude-plan may be employed. As some patterns are found which seem to work, this phase gradually gives way to the next.

## *Consolidation*

Out of the testing process come some new ways of being and behaving which are gradually adopted as new norms.

### *Reflection and learning*

This is a more cognitive process involving reflecting on what all the activity and emotion has really meant. It is at this point that learning and personal growth from change may become apparent, which may benefit future transitions.

### *Internalisation (or perhaps just completion)*

The transition is complete when the changed behaviour is now normal and unthinking and is the new natural order of things. Ideally the past has been left behind to an appropriate extent and no “unfinished business” remains.

### **Comments**

Each individual’s experience of a transition will be influenced by a number of factors including the importance of the transition, the intensity of its impact, the existence of other simultaneous transitions, personal resilience etc. It follows therefore that there can be no absolutely standard path through it. Some possible variations are noted below:

- The wave can be shallower or deeper and the overall shape of the curve may be skewed one way or the other.
- The time taken to pass through all the phases varies greatly.
- Although presented as purely linear process, regression may occur, people may slip back to an earlier stage in the process.
- People can get stuck at any phase, but especially denial or the depression phase and not complete the cycle.

Where multiple transitions are involved, people handle the situation in different ways. Some people keep the transitions firmly compartmentalised and deal with one at a time; others throw their energy into one as a displacement activity to get away from another (which is therefore held in denial); in other cases, one major transition predominates and swamps the others. There is no right way but it seems clear that that for each transition all stages of the cycle must be successfully accomplished.

### **Implications**

#### *For individuals*

- It takes time to make the adjustments required in transitions.
- It can help to know that one’s own experience is normal and will eventually come to an end.
- It helps to accept that there will be ups and downs.

- The process can be managed: there are things you can do to facilitate your own passage through it.
- Only you can change.

### *For manager, initiators of change and people trying to help others*

- It is important to recognise that there will often be a time lag between the announcement of a change and an emotional reaction to it: it is easy to mistake the apparent calm of the shock and denial phases for acceptance of the change.
- Different parts of an organisation will progress through the cycle at different rates and in different ways.
- Beware of getting out of phase with your staff - it is normal for managers or initiators to have reached an acceptance of change long before staff have and this creates great potential for ineffective communication.
- The cycle cannot be avoided, but there is much that you can do to facilitate people's passage through it.

## **3 Symptoms and indicators of each stage**

The model of personal transitions suggests that everyone goes through the same sequence of stages. However, it is also clear that there are wide individual variations in the rate of progression through these stages. In order to be able to help yourself or to help others you need to be able to diagnose where they are in the process. This section outlines the kinds of verbal and behavioural indicators which may be seen at each stage.

### **Shock**

There may be an initial outpouring of emotion, but the essence of the shock stage is numbness and paralysis. The indications therefore are:

- Stillness and absence of energy.
- Going through the motions - "robotic" behaviour.
- Inability to reason or plan.
- Lack of response to external stimuli.

### **Denial**

- Inappropriate cheerfulness or optimism.

- Energy devoted to unimportant tasks.
- Clutching at straws.
- “It will never happen.”
- “It won’t affect me.”

## Depression

The typical manifestations of this stage are: anger, sadness, confusion and withdrawal.

### Anger

Anger involves the recognition that what once was is no more. In particular, something which was valued has been lost - or more often, taken away. It is often associated with feeling a powerless victim of change. Anger may be expressed directly - in which case it is probably easier to deal with - or may be suppressed and come out in more indirect ways. Possible manifestations:

- Sarcasm and destructive criticism.
- Sabotage.
- Flare ups at slight provocation.
- Irritability and friction.
- “It’s not fair.”
- “It’ll never work.”

### Sadness

This occurs when something which the person identifies with and values has been removed (e.g. specific tasks, location, colleagues, expertise) and there seems to be nothing equivalent to replace it with. It is basically about hanging on to the past and is often coupled with a distorted view of the future.

- Dwelling on the past.
- Seeing the future in the worst possible light. Scaremongering.
- Tearful outbursts.
- “I used to be ...”

## Withdrawal

This involves reacting to a change by refusing to engage with it or by actually or metaphorically running away.

- Loss of interest, drive and enthusiasm (“quit and stay”).
- Quitting, request for transfer, early retirement.
- Illness, absenteeism.
- Unwilling to become involved or seek out information.
- “Anything you say.”

## Confusion

This happens when people have trouble making sense of the new order of things. They lose sight of where they fit in and what they should be doing. The main symptom is:

- Compulsive hunger for information coupled with a failure to take the information in.

The characteristic information hunger should not be taken entirely at face value. Change will always generate a need for information, but what distinguishes disorientation is its compulsive quality coupled with a failure to really take in the information when it is provided. It can best be understood as indicating difficulty in letting go of the old order, attachment to which is blocking the reception and understanding of new information. Another possible interpretation is that the person simply does not believe the information which is provided.

## Letting go

Signs which indicate that someone is *having difficulty letting go*:

- Constantly talking about the past.
- Associating mainly with old colleagues or in old locations.
- Resolutely using old names, concepts and language.
- Asides, “jokes” and put-downs.
- Seeking to form a “fed up club”.

Signs which indicate that someone is *beginning to let go*:

- Talking about the future rather than the past.
- Identifying new possibilities that might deserve further attention.

## Testing

The normal signs of this stage are:

- Gathering information about new possibilities.
- Taking risks.
- Experimenting with new behaviours.
- Mood swings from enthusiasm to discouragement.

The main sign of being stuck here is:

- Completely random and erratic behaviour (i.e. no sign of consolidation).

## Consolidation

This stage occurs alongside the testing one and gradually supersedes it. It is characterised by:

- Thinking and talking about the positive and negative aspects of new experiences and drawing conclusions.
- Developing a more concrete picture of the future and a realistic assessment of what needs to be done to make it a reality.
- Recognising and staying with a role, relationship or behaviour which seems to work satisfactorily.
- An increasing degree of predictability and stability in behaviour.

The main problem indicator is:

- Premature closure: one new pattern of behaviour is seized on as the salvation and testing stops too soon, before it is established whether there might be an even better option.

## Review

This stage is characterised by:

- Reflecting back over the whole experience of change.
- Identifying actions which might help one cope more effectively with future changes.

The danger sign here is:

- Giving way to regret and recrimination.



## 4 Helping others cope with transitions

This is particularly important where people have become stuck at a particular stage in the process. Possible actions are presented in relation to the stages of the process of transition.

### Announcement / shock

Sometimes the shock reaction can be minimised by:

- Preparing the ground and creating a climate of receptivity to change.
- Consulting and involving people in the decision making.

If this is not possible, the announcement will work best if you:

- Choose the most appropriate person to make the announcement.
- Do it face to face, if possible.
- Keep it simple.
- Show empathy and understanding for how people will feel.
- Are open about your own feelings.
- Say something about feelings **before** going in with the facts. (E.g. “I know this will be upsetting for you and I feel very sad about it myself, but ...”)
- Invite reactions and questions.
- Emphasise why the change is necessary.
- Keep calm and do not become defensive or aggressive in the face of questions.
- Allow time for people to digest the information and share their feelings.
- Ensure a consistent message is given to all.
- Where possible, ensure simultaneous announcement.

When people are in shock:

- Recognise the likely temporary performance impairment.
- Offer support, especially company.

## Denial

First diagnose **what** is being denied (e.g. the change wasn't necessary, is not real, won't happen, or does not affect them). Possible actions then:

- Confront what is being denied gently and supportively.
- Repeat the message.
- Draw people's attention to relevant examples, evidence and experience.
- Arrange demonstrations if possible.
- Establish and keep to a timetable to provide milestones and evidence of change.
- Make it inescapable for them to engage with the reality of the change.
- Take early action if at all possible.
- Get people to do practical things related to the change.

## Depression

### *Help them understand and accept the situation:*

- Provide support.
- Listen.
- Accepting and non-critical reaction to expressions of feelings.

### *Help them work on their feelings about the situation:*

- Help them get it off their chest.
- Provide space to grieve.
- Provide appropriate opportunities to vent emotion.

### *Help them identify opportunities to move on:*

- Don't let them wallow in feeling bad: gently confront and challenge.
- Help them identify other things they are good at.
- Provide further information about the change to help people envisage what the future will be like.

- Help them identify options and possible benefits.
- Help them focus their attention on the things they can do or can influence.
- Where possible, provide opportunities for the exercise of influence (e.g. consultation and involvement).

### Letting go

- Avoid rubbishing the past while focusing on the need to change.
- Challenge.
- Draw attention to deadlines.
- Eliminate the symbols of the past.
- Reminisce leading to a process of taking the best forward from the past.
- Mark the ending by rituals and ceremonies, wakes and leaving parties.
- Let people take souvenirs and mementoes.

### Testing

- Create the space, time and resources required to test.
- Promote creative thinking.
- Help identify options.
- Encourage risk and experimentation.
- Discourage premature closure.
- Don't punish mistakes.
- Inject new processes, tools and competencies that will help people help themselves.
- Eliminate the drivers of old behaviours.
- Act as a mentor.
- Praise and support successes.
- Encourage networking and cross fertilisation.

- Provide feedback.

### **Consolidation**

- Review performance and learning.
- Help identify characteristics of a more desirable state.
- Recognise and reward achievement.
- Get them to help others, share experience.
- Help build on successes.
- Broadcast successes.

### **Reflection and learning**

- Help them review the experience of change - ask questions, run review workshops.
- Formal Post Implementation Review.
- Get them to help others, share experience.

### **Internalisation**

- Switch to more of a task focus.
- Withdraw somewhat from the helping role.

## **5 Helping yourself cope with transitions**

All change involves both threat and opportunity and active self-management will increase the chance of growth and satisfaction and reduce the risk of stress-induced illness. The strategies described here can apply throughout the process.

### **Self-awareness**

- Take time out to review and reflect on what is happening to you.
- Be aware of how you are feeling and coping.
- Distinguish between current losses and old wounds.

- Make sense of your experience in the light of your understanding of the normal process of change.

### **Be clear about what you want**

If the transition was one you initiated yourself, the more clearly you have defined your goals the easier it will be to manage. You can plan, measure progress, feel a sense of accomplishment, etc.

If the transition was imposed, it still helps to be clear about where you stand in relation to it. There are basically only four choices:

- Resist – this can be the right course of action and may work, but it can also represent a form of denial.
- Refuse to accept it, although this is a guaranteed way to prolong the bad feelings
- Accept it grudgingly, put up with it - this can be a way to survive
- Accept it and seek to benefit or at least make the best of it - in this way growth may take place.

### ***Form a clear and realistic view of the future***

In order to prepare for a transition and plan your own course of action you need to have a clear idea of what it will mean. This essentially means collecting information about the change by actively seeking it and by asking questions and also trying to think through what it will be like and what the implications will be. Part of this is being clear about what is or will be ending.

The main problem with this simple rational process is fear and anxiety about what the future will hold. Fear may block us from any attempt to imagine what it will be like or may lead us to exaggerate the difficulties and the consequences.

“Being positive” is often advanced as the antidote to this state of affairs, but being unthinkingly positive may easily be self-defeating if it blinds you to the real needs of the situation. More helpful is to form a realistic appraisal of what is involved. First ask yourself (or even better, get someone else to ask you): “What am I telling myself about this change?” Then do a reality check using one or more of the processes listed below.

### ***Measure the extent or difficulty***

What do you really have to do? Often writing it down makes the inner list seem much more manageable. What really has to be done by the deadline? How much will really change? How many new forms and procedures will there really be? And so on.

### ***Rate the difficulty***

How difficult is your task really. Rate it on a scale of 0 to 10. Often, things which were seen as overwhelmingly hard are suddenly rationally assessed at only 6 or 7.

### *Rate your ability*

Have you ever encountered anything like this in the past? How did you cope then? What skills and abilities did you use? How does this challenge look now?

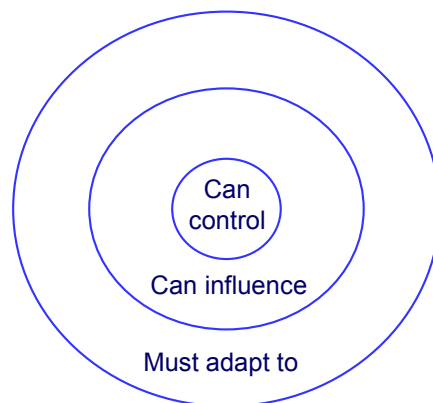
### *Imagine the worse*

Sometimes of course a mountain really is a mountain. Then the question to ask is, “What really is the worst that could happen?” Having confronted this, then consider how likely it is and how you would react.

### **Focus on what you can do**

Some things are wholly within our own ability to control (many aspects - some would say all - of our own behaviour); others we cannot control but can influence (most obviously the behaviour of other people); and others again are wholly outside our control and we must therefore adapt to. A helpful way of visualising this is through the idea of circles of influence.

### *Circles of influence*



The final outcome in most organisational changes and in relation to most personal goals does indeed often depend on external factors. Focusing on these in situations of change is all too easy, but it is also a recipe for anger, depression and frustration and is essentially a waste of time. Much more effective is to focus on the things which are under your own control and influence and ask what you can do now about those things e.g. by actively seeking involvement in the change.

## Look after yourself

Transitions are inherently stressful. You therefore need to look after yourself to maintain resilience and to speed recovery. The main areas under this heading are:

- Healthy diet.
- Sufficient exercise.
- Enough sleep.
- Give yourself treats and rewards.
- Learn to relax.
- Find some fixed reference points (another role, a person, a routine, a place etc.) to hang on to in the midst of turbulence.

## Seek support

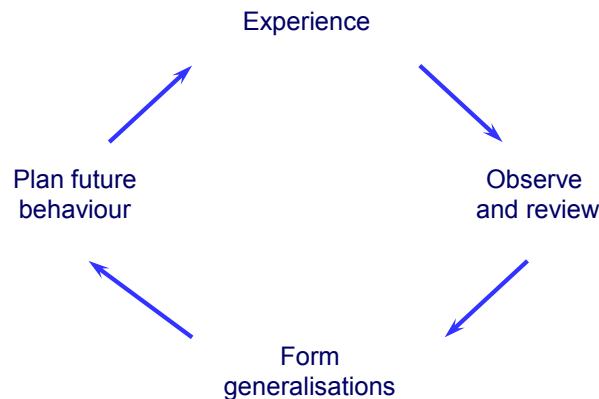
The main problems of transition are rooted in the emotional reactions which we go through. What helps most in dealing with these is talking to other people about how we are feeling. Other people can support us by providing:

- An opportunity to vent emotion .
- Sympathy.
- Reassurance.
- Information.
- Alternative ways of looking at things.
- Challenge.
- Confirmation of our worth.
- Help in clarification and reality checking.

## Learn from the experience

Consciously fostering our own learning will speed up the process of mastering a transition and also make the next transition easier. The learning cycle below describes the process by which we learn from experience.

### *The learning cycle*



The model suggests that we go through a series of stages which are endlessly repeated. We have experiences, observe or reflect on what happens, form generalisations on the basis of our observation and test these out initially by planning to behave differently next time.

However, it is said that some people have a thousand experiences while others have the same experience a thousand times. If the subsequent stages do not occur, the model indicates clearly enough how we can fail to learn from experience. This may mean that we are unsuccessful but do not know why we have failed or that we are successful but do not know what we did right and are therefore unable to transfer the skill to new situations or to teach others.

Some of the main implications of the learning cycle are:

- You can enter the cycle at any point, but if learning is to be maximised, the whole cycle must be completed.
- People will only learn a skill if they have opportunities to practice that skill.
- Practice is of little use unless there is feedback, either from the task itself, by self analysis or from observation by others.
- Learning is increased the more times one goes round the cycle. (This does not mean that the whole experience or task has to be repeated - it is frequently enough to repeat the part most in need of improvement.)

### *Learning from hard knocks*

Perhaps the main weakness of the learning cycle concept is that it is excessively rational. Where the experience to be learned from was of failure or rejection there seems to be an important emotional process involved which determines what if anything is learned. There are three main stages:



1. *Enduring the blow* and not being flattened or overwhelmed by it.
2. *Coping with the pain*. This is usually best done by private catharsis (i.e. letting out the anger, grief or whatever). It is important, if learning is to take place, not to give in to aggressive or self destructive urges.
3. *Accepting some level of ownership of what happened*. This does not mean accepting that it was all your fault, but rather recognising that you could have behaved differently and that, if you had, it would have had some effect on the outcome. If this stage does not take place, responsibility for the experience remains wholly external and nothing personal can be learned. Sometimes, of course, responsibility for what happened does lie wholly with someone else or some outside agency and in that case it can be quite appropriate for there to be nothing to learn.