Harmonizing Human Energy for Successful Transitions

Two powerful forces are calling us to develop a high level of competence in moving through transitions.

The first, most obvious one, as the daily news reminds us, is that we are not very good at transitions in our organizations and communities, and the costs of that are high. In March of this year, a report by the Hay Group, a global management consultancy organization, indicated that more than 90% of corporate mergers and acquisitions are falling short of their objectives. The Hay Group studied over 200 major European Mergers and Acquisitions taking place over the last three years. Research indicates that such acquisition, which last year alone topped 1.35 trillion euros, is likely to continue throughout this year and beyond. The Hay report claims that firms focus on financial due diligence and compatibility of technology systems and neglect intangible assets such as human capital, organizational culture and company structure and governance (Hay Group Report, 2007).

We needn't be managing a merger, however, to experience the challenge of transitions. Many companies have invested in expensive information technology systems only to discover employees were using only a few of the features. Nor is money the only cost. When change is poorly managed, valued employees may leave. Valued customers may leave. Conflict among staff escalates and morale dips. We've all experienced most of these during times of change and transition.

While these realities may certainly stimulate us to enhance our abilities to lead through transition, a second powerful force influencing us is even more profound. Simply stated: Transitions – are all there are.

From Eastern philosophical traditions we've been taught that life continually unfolds. Gu Zhengkun, professor of Comparative Culture and Translation at Peking University, in his 2006 English translation of *The Book of Tao and The*, describes the philosophical system of Lao Zi. He interprets Chapter 42 in this way, "All things connote the Yin and the Yang; / And the Yin and the Yang keep acting upon each other / And thus things keep changing and unifying themselves." (p. 34).

Day becomes night, death becomes birth, the caterpillar becomes the butterfly.

Western quantum science is teaching us the same thing. All of life is interdependent. We are systems within systems within systems. A change in any part of a system may be felt in other parts of the system, or in other systems, that may be distant in time and space. Life is continually evolving and emerging.

Life is dynamic. Life is all about transitioning. This means that what we are about is not leading a group through one transition or even many transitions; what we are doing is teaching people how to transition, how to think about change and stability. We are teaching skills for living in a dynamic world.

This paper highlights research and theory that helps us understand what happens to individuals, groups, and organizations as they experience change and transition. It also describes practical models, application of theory, which can assist leaders in harmonizing human energy for successful transitions.

We know that when we want to get a group from "here" to "there," we need to get all of the energy roughly headed in the same direction. This is true whether we want people in our organizations to be more innovative, to work together more collaboratively, or to adapt to changes that have been made. Yet, the reality is, that every person in an organization, regardless of the position or job, perceives and responds to situations in his or her own way. This makes the task of leading organizations through transitions a challenging one.

Individuals and Transitions

Let's look at what is happening with individuals in an organization in the midst of change, or where change is imminent. First of all, whether we are merging with a different company, introducing a new product line, or shifting strategic direction – as a thinking human being, I need to know why this change makes sense, in terms of our company mission, vision and values. What is the purpose of the change? Individuals need more than announcements about change; they need to know the why. They need context.

Then I need to know how this will change my day-to-day experience.

- Will my role change? Will I still be in the same department, report to the same boss, work with the same colleagues, perform the same kind of work?
- Will my goals change? How? Will I be expected to learn new skills? Have new responsibilities? Will I be trained? Will I have time to perfect my skills?
- How will this change affect the reward system? How will I be measured?
- How will this change the comfort factors – the dress code, the facility where I will work, the work environment, the location and the commute time, hours, etc.?
- What new opportunities may accompany this change?

Recognizing that every individual is caught up in his or her own experience, concerns and expectations, it seems almost impossible to think we might be able to harmonize this energy. However, how we "frame" or think about a situation is important. As we think about harmonizing the human energy of an organization or a community it is useful to contrast "change" and "transition."

Change may be considered as an ***event***:

- We will shift our teaching emphasis from face-to-face classroom to on-line learning; resource allocations will reflect this decision in the next budget cycle.
- We will outsource certain aspects of our production.
- We will enter an upscale market for our product.
- We will reduce the levels of management in our organization and increase the scope of management responsibility.
- We will seek to serve an additional social need in our community.
- We will introduce new accounting software across the department.

While a significant amount of research, analysis, and deliberation went into deciding on such a change, the "change" itself can be concisely stated and dated.

Transition, in contrast, is a ***process***. It involves the actual movement from "here" to "there," the implementation of the change. It happens over time. It is dynamic. It is individual. It is both rational and emotional. Leaders can influence and guide this process in ways that allow individuals to work through how the change will affect them and to develop their own commitment to successful implementation of the change.

Two theoretical perspectives are useful in understanding how people move through transition. William Bridges (1980) calls attention to the fact that change begins, not with beginnings, but with ***endings***. Thus, the transition process begins with "letting go" of what has been. For example, if I am a manager and I know that a restructuring will eliminate some management positions and increase the scope of the remaining positions, I have to "let go" of my comfort level, my confidence in the way I have been working.

I also do not know what my new role will be, or even if there will be a role for me in the new structure. Bridges calls this in-between, this time and space of uncertainty, the ***neutral zone***. It often has a psychological impact similar to the trapeze artist who has let go of one swing and has not yet grasped the next one. One may literally feel, "up in the air." This is a very uncomfortable, anxious situation for most people.

Even ***beginnings***, as described by Bridges, are ambiguous in nature. When I know that I do have a role in the new structure, and that I am responsible for certain functions, I am not automatically competent in this new role. It will take weeks or months for me to fully understand this new role, and gain the knowledge and develop the relationships that will make it work.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1970) provides another valuable theoretical perspective that helps us understand the transition process. Her research with persons facing death and dying, revealed psychological patterns that we often experience when we face any significant change in our lives. She observed that persons often initially denied the information they were given. When they did begin to acknowledge the reality of their situation they often responded in anger. This was frequently followed by bargaining, by depression, and finally by acceptance and adaptive behavior.

This psychological roller-coaster – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – plays havoc with productive, energetic work. Realizing that individuals experience this process in their own way and in their own time helps explain increased conflict, malaise or lack of focus that often marks periods of significant change and transition in our organizations or communities. Realizing that every individual will be engaged in his own experience of endings, neutral zone uncertainty and beginnings, and that this is not a neat, orderly process, additionally highlights the chaotic dynamics that usually accompany any significant change.

This is valuable data for leaders! Understanding the personal psychological dynamics that will be occurring as persons experience change provides leaders valuable insight into ways they can harmonize this energy. Understanding that change triggers fears and insecurity, as people move from places of emotional and technical confidence through the unknown to new situations, likewise provides leaders practical clues about how they can harmonize the various experiences in cohesive and positive ways.

Later in the paper we will examine specific models, ways we can use this knowledge to develop effective transition strategies. It is useful at this point, however, to recognize what the role of the leader is. It is not the leader's role to remove all of the anxiety for each person. All of this discordant energy is like members of an orchestra tuning their instruments before a concert.

- It ***is*** the leader's role to ***provide information***, provide information, provide information. Over communicate. That's the only way to go. Realizing that people do often deny what they do not want to hear, knowing that people do not hear accurately when they are afraid, information about change must be communicated many times. Use every medium, but as much as possible use face-to-face. It is this information that provides the "tuning fork" for the individuals and teams in the organization.
- It ***is*** the leader's role to ***create an environment*** where individuals and groups can acknowledge their experience, be heard, and make their own meaning out of what is happening. This may mean providing skilled facilitators to host meetings where questions and concerns can be raised – which, incidentally, creates for leaders a receptive audience for providing more information. A Transition Team

(described later) can be an effective vehicle for creating the environment you went.

- It ***is*** the leader's role to model what you want. Fasten your own seat belt first. Have a heart-to-heart with yourself to acknowledge what you want out of this situation and what your concerns, uncertainties and frustrations are. Acknowledge to yourself what you need to "lot go of." And ***be as transparent as you can***. Don't be too concerned about raising fears. People welcome a genuine "I don't know." Or a heartfelt, "I'm very frustrated that the approvals we need are taking so long."
- It ***is*** also the leader's role to remain ***visible and accessible***. Even if you are an introvert and would rather stay in your office, this is the time you need to be as present as possible to the people who do the work of your organization.

Information gives individuals the ability to determine more clearly what will actually be different for them, what they will have to give up, what they may gain. It helps lessen the anxiety caused by uncertainty. **Engagement** gives them the opportunity to participate in the transition in a productive way. Engagement is a vehicle that prompts a shift in attitude from concern to possibility. There is a common assumption that people resist change, but close examination does not support this assumption. Instead, people reveal strong resistance to "being changed." There is a huge difference.

Groups and transition

A third source of theory helps us understand how **groups** experience change and leads us to practical ways of acting on all of this theoretical knowledge. Kurt Lewin, a German psychologist working in the United States and a pioneer in social psychology in the 1940s, discovered in his research three fundamental principles that can lead to effective and sustainable change:

- you cannot do things to people but only with them;
- when working with change, it is more effective to work with groups than individuals;
- we are likely to carry out decisions that we have helped to make (Weisbord, 2004).

Lewin's research revealed that people engaged in the work, people affected by community realities, were very capable of conducting research that provided new information, of reflecting on that information, making decisions and making changes in their work and their communities. One of Lewin's students, Alex Bevalas, applied this theory in a new pajama factory in rural Virginia. The workers in this new factory, even with training, produced only about half as much as their counterparts in another state. Bevalas sought to change the situation by involving people in setting their own group goals and in controlling their own group output.

The result – workers discovered that they were using many methods for the same job. As they discussed the pros and cons of various techniques, they not only learned efficient practices from one another, they also removed the barriers to change by deciding together what to do. (Marrow, 1969).

Lewin's research revealed that while motivation could be generated through providing information, motivation alone did not bring about change. In one research project new mothers were encouraged to give their babies orange juice and cod liver oil. Some mothers received individual instruction from a nutritionist. This was compared with a discussion and decision process carried out with six mothers as a group. Lewin writes that "In the first case the nutritionist devoted about twenty-five minutes to a single mother, in the second the same amount of time to a group of six." (Lewin, p. 231) Follow-up revealed that at four weeks all of the mothers involved in the small group decision were giving their babies orange juice and cod liver oil. (Ibid. p. 229).

While departments or divisions or work teams in an organization do not make decisions about strategic change, they are the groups that need to decide how a change will be implemented in their unit. ***This engagement and decision-making is the process through which alignment and harmonizing emerges.***

In my own experience consulting with organizations engaged in mergers, closing workplaces, introducing new technologies - engaging people who were being affected by the change in analyzing their situation and developing action plans led to highly successful transitions.

It is by engaging everyone in an organization as productive participants that leaders can begin to create "music" of the various discordant themes that may be operative in the organization.

Practical Applications

Lewin understood human behavior as systemic in nature - dynamic, continually changing as components interacted with one another. He believed behavior was a function of the person and his or her environment, that is, that these were interdependent variables. Out of this understanding, he developed two practical methodologies that serve to engage people throughout an organization or a community as participants in a change.

The first, **force-field analysis**, helps in analyzing what is creating certain behaviors and what might be effective in changing the behaviors. It involves identifying the field of forces holding a situation in a state of quasi-equilibrium, by determining what forces are driving toward change, and what forces are restraining change.

As Weisbord points out, this extremely useful methodology enables individuals and teams to analyze and act on situations that cannot be easily measured or quantified. (p. 83). It is particularly valuable because identifying the forces that are holding a situation stable, frequently leads beyond the rational, logical frame of the situation, to the emotions, attitudes and values which play a powerful, often overlooked role in resisting or supporting change.

Also it can be used in nearly any situation to deepen understanding. Executives, for example, may use it to explore major deterrents and potential support for a change that is to be implemented. Departments or teams throughout the organization can also use it to explore what will encourage or inhibit implementation at their level and location.

Lewin pointed out, that though it might seem counter-intuitive, reducing the restraining forces is usually more powerful than increasing the driving forces, as the later triggers increased resistance. Schools of non-violent martial arts, such as Aikido are based on similar principles. Removing obstacles to existing energy allows that energy to move naturally. One important role of a Transition Team, a strategy that will be discussed later, is to identify obstacles getting in the way of a change initiative.

The second methodology also based on the systemic understanding of human behavior, involves a three-stage **process of transition**:

- ***unfreezing*** – which involves reducing the forces inhibiting change,
- ***moving*** – which means changes in attitude, values, structure, feelings and behavior,
- ***refreezing*** – which means reaching a new balance of forces with support mechanisms which maintain the desired behavior. (Lewin, p. 228).

It is important to keep in mind the image of a system held in quasi-equilibrium by the tension of a variety of forces. “Unfreezing” and “refreezing” sound rigid and mechanistic. That is not the meaning. Rather, for a system to change, some of the forces must be shifted. And once any change has been made, the interacting forces must reinforce the change, otherwise behaviors will revert to what they were before. Refreezing may take the shape of changed policies or procedures, budget allocations, what is rewarded, what is recognized. This is key to sustaining any change. Many organizations, for example, have spent huge amounts on training employees to work together in teams. But if goals conflict or people continue to be paid for individual performance, the teamwork never delivers the desired results.

What does it look like?

Digital technology led senior management in a regional telecommunications organization to the decision to close some local offices and serve larger areas from strategic locations. At the same time it was crucial to maintain current levels of revenue and customer satisfaction. The leadership team was aware that the changes would trigger concern and fear among the workforce. At the same time they were aware that IF they could minimize those fears and the get the employees engaged in the process in an open way, the transition would be smoother and employees would experience less trauma.

The leadership team decided to develop their own force-field analysis initially to get a sense of the factors that would potentially block the change process and the factors that would support it. Some of the information that surfaced is shown below. The *union* was a bargaining unit that represented all non-management employees.

Driving forces →	Desired State: Smooth transition merging two customer service offices into one, reflected in no interruption of service, minimal inconvenience to customers, minimal lay-offs of employees. ← **Restraining forces**
Respected management team at local Office Loyal, competent employees Technology available to handle Customer needs remotely.	Employee, managers fear of job loss Union fear of loss of jobs Customers feel abandoned Community feels abandoned

This analysis helped the management team to recognize that their "unfreezing step" should be carefully planned and orchestrated. There were many stakeholders and the potential was there for most of the restraining forces to be shifted to driving forces ***if*** the various stakeholders felt included early in the process.

Thus, the ***"unfreezing"*** was initiated with a series of meetings with the union, and with the employees affected, with information going out to the community immediately following these meetings. The local management team played a key leadership role both in planning and conducting in these meetings.

The ***"change"*** involved including various stakeholders as partners in the transition process. The local management team was informed of the change first and involved in determining when and how the meetings with the union and the employees would be conducted.

Since about half the current employees could be absorbed into an office within 50 miles, and since the time frame of nine months allowed some of the workforce reduction to occur through attrition, the union was willing to cooperate in using long tem temporary replacements as attrition occurred. This was an exception to the current contract.

The employees in the office were the key to the success of this transition. As is often the case, they were both the persons whose best efforts were needed to maintain high levels of customer service, and, at the same time they had the most to lose, perhaps their jobs, at the end of the process.

Much information was provided to them regarding the desired condition, which was a smooth transition to the effective use of technology to serve a larger customer base from a single location. They were engaged in identifying what factors would help with the change and what would get in the way. This was the use of force-field analysis at the local level. They were involved, along with local managers, in analyzing this information and determining how best to deal with some of the restraining factors.

They selected representatives who served as a Transition Team. They met with a facilitator every two weeks until the office closed, to guarantee that concerns were surfaced and addressed, information was provided, and issues were resolved.

One of the interesting effects of having this representative group is that what the company could provide, in terms of information, career counseling, support was more valuable, appropriate and appreciated because it was in response to the requests of those involved. This group provided a “voice” for the employees and needs were surfaced and met; feedback was constant. It also empowered the employees to take responsibility for meeting their own needs in many ways. They created their own countdown ritual, shared job referrals and information with one another, found ways to honor the endings aspect of transition.

“Refreezing” was handled effectively at the closing site. A variety of support mechanisms were introduced and managed carefully to encourage the desired behavior. However, “refreezing” did not get serious attention at the central location and the integration of the “new” employees and the “new” customers created wasted time and energy and delayed the desired payoff of the consolidation.

More About The Transition Team

If we believe that people do have more commitment to plans they help create, the first action for leaders to take is to identify those who will be affected by a change and involve them in implementation plans. We’ve seen how this group contributed to the success of the office closure described above. In larger organizations and multi-site organizations, a Transition Team can also be a key success strategy for involving those who will be affected.

Sometimes called "diagonal slice" teams, members represent significant internal stakeholders, and sometimes external stakeholders as well, for example if a change involves key customers or suppliers. Collectively the Team should have representatives of each management level, non-management employees, each department and location.

The value of such a team is that each part of an organization literally "sees" different things. Bringing all parts of the system together will provide:

- knowledge and wisdom about the current situation
- insight about the interdependencies and how change in one area is likely to affect and be affected by change in another area
- an early-warning system that can identify problems that could have serious consequences if not addressed
- alignment of all aspects of the change
- peer ambassadors for "holding" the purpose and meaning of the change
- a microcosm of the organization that can develop and model respect and trust that will set the tone for an environment that leads to successful transition.

In a sense, such a team allows for the system to keep the whole and the parts connected and flowing in the same direction.

The Transition Team, consisting of 12 to 15 persons will meet directly with the CEO or the key executive responsible for a change. They should be chosen by their unit, or be natural leaders of their unit. This group will be key to the success of the transition. The time and energy invested here to surface questions, concerns, ideas will pay off throughout the transition and contribute to a robust organizational culture.

The task of this team is to support and monitor the transition. The boundaries need to be clearly defined. This is not a decision-making group. Decision-making belongs to line managers. The purpose of this team is to monitor the effects of the transition. William Bridges in the second edition of his *Managing Transitions* (2003) book emphasizes that this Team needs to be educated about transition. They are responsible for monitoring the effects that transition is having on people.

- Are any groups getting forgotten in the rush toward the future?
- Is the communication getting through?
- Is the information being believed?
- Are there policies, practices, or structures that are impeding transition?
- What information, skills, or assistance do people need? (Ibid., pp. 148-149).

It is often valuable to provide some basic skills training for this Team. This may include communication skills, and group participation skills such as brainstorming, multi-voting, using action priority matrix. Transition Team meetings should be led by a skilled facilitator and the training integrated into their work together.

In some situations the mere existence of such a Team triggers individuals and groups to bring questions and concerns to Team members. In other situations Team members more actively seek out feedback by interviewing groups throughout the organization. As people see that issues they bring to the Transition Team are recognized, and expressed needs are taken seriously, an environment of safety and trust begins to replace unproductive anxiety.

The Transition Team for a telecommunications company introducing a quality management strategy included the VP of Finance, a state operations manager, engineer, union steward (installation worker), first line customer service supervisor, construction crew worker, information systems technician and human resource manager. The union steward, known for his antagonistic attitude toward management, was simply awed by the complexity of the transition when he sat side by side with those representing other functions and work units. He also felt respected. He could see his concerns taken seriously.

Much of the disharmony experienced during transitions comes from the fact that individuals and groups tends to think only of their immediate concerns and do not relate to the larger system of which they are a part. A Transition Team can bring a broader perspective.

Forces that are challenging us today – dramatically changing technology, globalization, the reality of climate change, the failures of our economic and political systems and shifts in the social structure – clearly indicate that developing skills for managing successful transitions is a competence that is required of all of us.

These skills enable us to remain centered in times of upheaval, to see opportunities and be innovative as a natural part of our work, to learn quickly and create new approaches, and to remain aware that the impact of our actions may be distant in time and space. Realizing that change is continual, and we can’t “stop the train” while we reorganize, or shift our strategy, understanding the dynamics of change and transition enables us to move into the future with confidence and excitement.

Something that is alive, such as a tree, is always growing. Leaders who harmonize human energy are contributing to the growth of individuals and enabling those individuals to collectively create and nurture an organization that is also alive and continually growing.

References

Bridges, W., (1980). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes*. New York, NY: Perseus Books.

Bridges, W., (2003) 2 Exp Upd edition. *Managing transitions: Making the most of change*. New York, NY: Perseus Books Group.

Gu Zhengkun,(2006). *The Book of Tao and The*. Beijing, CN: Peking University.

Hay Group Report (2007). Mergers and Acquisitions: Dangerous Liaisons – the Integration Game. Executive Summary, March 8, 2007. Retrieved June 10, 2007, from http://www.haygroup.nl/HayWeb/HayWeb.nsf/Images/Mergers.pdf$file/Mergers.pdf

Kubler-Ross, E. (1970). *On death and dying*. New York, NY: Macmillan Company.

Lewin, K. (1947) Frontiers in group dynamics. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Field theory in social science; Selected theoretical papers* (pp. 188-237). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Midway Reprint. (Reprinted from *Human Relations*, 1947, I, 2-38. Reprinted by permission of *Human Relations*.)

Marrow, A.J. (1984) *The practical theorist: The life and work of Kurt Lewin*. Annapolis, Maryland USA: BGDR Learning Products, Inc.

Weisbord, M. R. (2004). *Productive workplaces revisited: Dignity, meaning and community in the 21st century*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.