

Change is in the Air

Bob Adams

Transitions are all the news lately. Of course, the biggest is what is taking place between now and January 20 as President-elect Obama assembles his team and prepares to assume the Presidency. In the church world, the ongoing differences between the two Robert Schullers, father and son, over the pastorate of the Crystal Cathedral are but one story of transitions in church leaders. On a much less public stage (but none the less important), my own church recently extended the call to a new associate pastor for students.

On the surface, these situations all are about change; in reality, they are about transition. In the world of church development that I live and work in, change is a constant. Most often, though, change is not handled well by the parties involved. William Bridges, author of *Transitions* and *Managing Transitions*, has provided a powerful model of working through change that church staff leaders should be aware of. Here's a brief synopsis of his work:

Unless transition occurs, change will not work. *Change* is best seen as situational event or an outcome – a new building project completed; new schedules put into place; or a new staff member coming on board. When you think about change it is natural to focus on the outcome that the change will produce. If your church is relocating, all the excitement is on the new place you will be worshipping and serving in. If you begin a new program to reach an unreached segment of your community, the focus is on the results.

Transition is different. Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal. The starting point for transition is not the outcome but the ending that you will have to make to leave the old situation behind. Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you have before the change took place. Nothing undermines organizational change as the failure to think through who will have to let go of what when change occurs. It's not the change that will do you in – it's the transitions!

Transition starts with an **ending** – another of life's paradoxes. Even in good positive changes (think of the birth of a child) transitions begin with having to let go of something (time alone with spouse, regular sleep, spontaneity of going places, etc.). The failure to identify and be ready for the endings and losses that change produces is the largest single problem that organizations in transitions encounter. Once you have learned that transition begins with letting go of something, you have taken the first step in the transition journey.

The second step of that journey is understanding what happens after letting go: **the neutral zone**. This is the no-man's land between the old reality and the new. It's the shady, hazy time when you are between the old sense of identity and the new. It is that place where the old way is gone but the new doesn't feel comfortable yet.

The neutral zone is of critical importance to completing a transition. If you don't understand its importance you are likely to try to rush the process and become discouraged when you don't make it through. You may also become frightened or overwhelmed in this limbo-land, and be tempted to bail out – which would derail the transition and place the whole change in jeopardy. Most importantly, though, would be the loss of opportunity if you chose to leave the neutral zone prematurely.

The neutral zone provides the individual and the organization the greatest opportunity for creativity, renewal, and development – in short, innovation. Even in a time of confusion and chaos, the seeds of new birth are planted.

The final step of the transition occurs only when ending and the neutral zone have been completed. Now it is time for the **new beginning**. Like any organic process, beginnings cannot be made to happen by a word or act. They happen when the timing of the transition process allows them to happen. Beginnings take place only after people have accepted the ending of the old, navigated the uncertainty of the neutral zone, and see themselves as ready to undertake something new. Beginnings involve new understandings, new values, new attitudes, and most of all, new identifies.

Most organizations try to start with the beginning rather than finishing with it. They pay no attention to endings. They do not acknowledge the existence of the neutral zone, and then wonder why people have so much difficulty with change.

Church leaders must learn how to lead their churches through change. If there is anything certain about the future, it is that there will be change. We may not be sure what it will look like, we may try to resist it, but the only certainty is that between here and there will be a lot of change. Where there is change, there will be transition. Learn how to end well, navigate the neutral zone, and embrace new beginnings, and you will be able to look back successfully at change, ready to welcome the next change coming your way.

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