

# Dealing Effectively with Change

## Q&A with William Bridges by Melissa Delin and Meghan Tranos

For over twenty years, William Bridges & Associates has provided consulting and training to help people and organizations deal with change.

**Question:** What are the biggest changes people are wrestling with nowadays in the business world?

**Bill Bridges:** I'm not sure that the big changes change so much over time. Organizationally, they are merger, reorganization, changes in leadership; individually, they are death, birth, changing careers. The changes are age-old. What has changed is the amount of underlying change that people are trying to manage. The problem they have is that the new manager in the accounting department may seem to the CEO like a small matter, but layered on top of a whole pile of other changes, it can push the people in that department over the edge of their ability to assimilate it and stay productive.

What is "big" is the load that people are carrying, plus the fact that society lacks the old rituals to help them. Plus the mechanistic image we have of people -- that we expect them to just "adjust" and do it quickly, the way a mechanism could but a person can't. Plus our lack of good support systems to "hold" us while we go through these times of transition. Plus our exposure to a much wider range of changes (SARS, international terrorism, currency fluctuations overseas) than people used to be exposed to. Plus our society has an economy that depends on change; think of how each merger and reorganization that is announced is greeted as an improvement! No wonder we are up to our ears in change!

**Q:** Do you have any tips on how we can manage personal change without letting it negatively affect our work?

**BB:** You really can't, if the change is a big one. The best you can hope for is to move through it as quickly as possible, giving each of transition's three stages its due, and letting it do its work on you. You have to decide what it's time to let go of (and what it isn't necessary to let go of), then get yourself through the neutral zone and look for ways to use its ambiguity, fluidity, and amorphousness to your advantage.

A transition will disrupt your life, but it will also provide you with a way to reorient and renew yourself, and it will provide you with an opportunity to re-pattern your life creatively. The disruption, in other words, can be turned to your advantage. It is also possible to redesign certain things about the organization so that it is more "transition-friendly." That's worth doing.

**Q:** Why did you choose Linkage to take over the facilitation of your highly successful training programs?

**BB:** I chose to work with Linkage for four primary reasons:

1. Linkage has a lot of experience running professional development programs. I knew that it would be done well.
2. The Linkage people I have worked with are good people with real integrity. And they "get it" they see the program's rationale and its promise.
3. Linkage has the kind of broad marketing capability that my firm has always lacked.
4. Finally, my program has such a strong track record within the organizations that used it. I wanted a partner that was ready to carry that heritage on.

**Q:** With over twenty years of experience helping people deal with change, how has your work impacted your thoughts on how to *initiate* and *lead* change?

**BB:** As to leading, I am seeing more and more clearly that leaders need not only to be able to bring about a "change," but also to lead people through transition. That means that they need to understand what people in each of transition's three phases need from a leader. This isn't something to be delegated to the middle managers because "they are closer to the people" or assigned to HR people because they are "good with people." It is something that leaders themselves need to be engaged in. People need certain kinds of support when they are making an ending. They need to go through the neutral zone without rushing the process. And they need to make a real new beginning *after* they have done those other two things, not on Day One when the CEO tells them to hit the ground running.

As for initiating the change, transition resources need to be part of the planning from the very start not added on later, when the wheels are threatening to fall off.

**Q:** What is your greatest passion? What keeps you going?

**BB:** I suppose it is to take an idea, like transition or later, the concept of "de-jobbing" work and use it to clarify people's experience for them, to give them a handle on it, so that they feel more in control of their lives. Although I'm an idea person, I have little patience with purely abstract ideas. I want my ideas to be tools, to give people the leverage in their life situations that they need, and to make a difference in their lives. I love to hear from someone that my ideas or the strategies based on them really took a difficult time in their life and gave them some footholds and handholds for getting through it.