

Leading Transition: **A Talk with William Bridges**

by John Alexander

Editor's Note: *For more than twenty years William Bridges has been helping people understand change and take effective action in its wake. He has done this by authoring an impressive series of books (listed in the sidebar), developing a popular range of training programs, consulting with hundreds of companies, and speaking to diverse groups around the world.*

His success in this work has been widely acknowledged. For instance, in 1993 The Wall Street Journal listed him among the top ten executive development consultants in the United States.

One of the reasons for this success is that his practical message, for both individuals and organizations, is backed by a set of clear and related ideas. At the center of this framework is a distinction between change and transition: change is a shift in the external world, whereas transition is an internal process that people go through in response to that shift. Given this, Bridges makes the observation that transition involves three distinct phases: endings (where a loss occurs and people must let go of the old and seek closure), a neutral zone (where people feel the chaos of change but have nothing yet to replace the loss), and beginnings (where people gain new understandings, values, attitudes, and identities). And given this, he develops many insights into how organizational change (and the accompanying transition) can be managed effectively. For instance, successful transitions, according to Bridges, must begin in endings.

Recently, William Bridges visited our Greensboro campus and met with CCL president John Alexander to discuss his ideas from a leadership perspective. This interview presents a part of that talk.

JA: In your work, you talk about a neutral zone: a time of transition in organizations when

the old is decommissioned but the new isn't yet in people's minds and hearts. It is usually a period of great anxiety. What can leaders do to help with that?

WB: When I talk with executives about managing transitions, I like to emphasize the two C's and the four P's.

The two C's are *connection* and *concern*. When people are in transition, they feel abandoned very, very easily. The leader must maintain a connection with them.

This is partly literal. A leader who goes off on an extended trip during a transition contributes to the feeling of abandonment. But it is also psychological. People must feel that the leader sees them, that he or she knows what they are going through.

At the same time, the concern of the leader must also be evident. He or she must not only see what people are going through but also clearly care about it.

The four P's are *purpose* (Why was it necessary to do this? What would have happened if we didn't?), *picture* (How is it going to look, feel, work?), a *plan* (Step by step, how do we roll this out? What do we do on Tuesday?), and *parts* (What roles can people play in this?). I think the leader must address each of these.

There is always a purpose behind change, but frequently it is not discernible to people in the organization. This may be because it has not been explained to people in terms that mean something to them or it may not have been explained at all. The leader needs to clearly explain the purpose behind a new beginning.

The picture is sometimes an evolving thing; part of the leader's task is to get the

people involved in filling in the picture. Consequently, the leader doesn't want to be too detailed about it at first.

Some people really respond to the picture, and once they have it in their heads, they will move ahead. But other people require more details about the specific steps that they personally will need to take. Leaders tend to be picture oriented, but they shouldn't ignore those who need a plan.

Finally, people need to be given two parts to play. One involves their role in the new scheme of things once the change has taken place. The other, which is equally important, is the role they will play in the transition. Leaders need to see that people feel involved in the planning and implementation of change. It is true that people implementing something get a kind of investment in it that they don't have if they are not involved.

Another thing that is really important for leaders to remember is how far ahead of the followers they are. They have typically been wrestling with these issues for months and months – even years – while many of their followers probably haven't questioned some of the things that ultimately will have to be changed. So there is quite a mismatch as to where people are in the transition process.

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Of course, all the way through transition, you have different people at different places. Some people move through fast; some people move through slowly. So I think this role of leading the human side of change is an underestimated piece of leadership.

JA: What are some of the signs of a difficult transition? And what are some of the pitfalls that leaders face in such a situation?

WB: Often a leader is so impatient with people in transition that he or she becomes frightening, and people think, "Don't tell the leader that!" And thus the leader gets a very distorted impression about where people actually are.

And I often see leaders who think, "We have to end this initiative (or policy or whatever), but if we don't say it is over, we won't offend the people who want to hold onto it." That kind of thinking is understandable, but it's ultimately self-defeating. People need to know what is over and what isn't. They may make some choices on the basis of that. Some decide that this isn't the place they signed up with and they need to move on. Others decide this isn't the place they signed up with but it is kind of interesting – maybe they'll stay on a while. That sorting process has to be allowed to go on.

JA: There is so much to sort today. You often hear that changes are coming more rapidly now than they did even just a few years ago. Do you agree with that? Is change happening more rapidly today?

WB: I think there are certainly differences between today and the past. One is that the people who are in transition feel less secure in the rest of their lives than they did twenty years ago. Families are in transition more. So sources of solidity that people had in their lives often feel a little shaky or a little more questionable.

Is there more change? Yes, I think there is, but I don't think that is the whole story. One of the important parts of the story is that modern communication puts us in immediate contact with every change almost instantaneously. When there was an earthquake in Turkey, we all knew about it virtually as it happened. So the interconnectedness that we have and the rapidity with which information moves means that changes that used to be filtered out by time and

distance aren't filtered out any more. We are exposed to a great deal more change than in previous times, and we have lost our buffers.

JA: I think leaders can do some buffering.

WB: I think you're right. Sometimes leaders can say, "I am really not worrying about that one too much. I am putting my attention over here." It can be a relief to know that we don't have yet another high-priority item that is dropped on our plate to deal with this week.

JA: In your work you have made the point that change has to make *sense* to people. How do leaders help things make sense?

WB: There are a lot of kinds of sense that people can make of a situation. One of them is business sense. I think that a leader can help some people see the connections between new external situations and the well-being of the institution. Making such connections is natural to a leader but not to many of the people who do the day-to-day work. A leader should also make it clear how the connections are important to the things that people care about.

JA: You work with a lot of leaders. What is the one thing that they don't do now, that if they did do, you think would make things better?

WB: I think the one thing that I see them failing to do is to think through the implications of change at the level on which people work and in matters with which they are concerned. They talk strategically; they talk organizationally. But the people that they are trying to lead are operating at a much more concrete level – they are concerned with getting something done by the end of the day or with failing to get a raise this year. Leaders talk about becoming a world-class organization and fail to carry that down to the level of attitude and behavior where an actual person can recognize himself or herself. It's a question of altitude, I suppose.

Leaders are operating at a different altitude, and it makes for a huge gap in communication.

JA: Look at it from the other side, what do you find that leaders are doing well?

WB: I think the good news is that most of them really are about their organization and the people who work in it. I certainly meet a lot of leaders who are really admirable in the amount of anguish and concern they have about the impact of things on people. But that isn't always translated into a form that people can see, appreciate, understand, and believe.

JA: Do you have a definition of leadership that you use in your work?

WB: I don't think a lot in terms of a thing called *leadership*. I really think a lot in terms of what somebody can do to help people come to terms with change.

JA: What about the people you work with? Do they think a lot about being leaders or of a larger process of leadership?

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WB: They sometimes do – although I think they are more likely to be lost, embedded, in the actual issues of what they have to do: "This merger is breaking down; we need to pull it back. What happens when we are trying to integrate a group that hasn't been part of us before?" I think most leaders don't think much about leadership per se. They think about the challenges that they actually face. People who

observe what leaders do extrapolate out of their actions something they call leadership.

To tell you the truth, and I hope this isn't the wrong place to say it, I sometimes wonder if *leadership* is as useful a concept as we once thought it was.

JA: I think this is the right place to say it. At CCL, if we didn't question the value of the concept of leadership, I don't think our work would be as useful as it is. Of course, despite its difficulties, we continue to think that there is something important, albeit, often very complex, to which to word refers.

WB: I admire your courage in this. It's difficult work.

JA: Let me shift our focus here. You have a background in American literature. Until 1974 you were a professor at Mills College. Is that experience useful to you now that you have made the transition to your current work? Do you ever go back for the things that literature has taught you?

WB: Some of it has been my North Star. My reading of and my appreciation of writers like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman (who are among my favorites in American literature), with their emphasis on speaking your own truth, trusting that a sequence of things has a shape to it even if you can't perceive the shape, and having faith that your own voice is the one that is right to speak with rather than some other voice, have been central to everything that I have done. It was such a funny experience twenty-six or twenty-seven years ago to be

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struggling to publish one of my first articles and having my wife say to me, "You don't sound like you. Why don't you write in your own voice?" Emerson talks over and over again about this – tell me what you believe, what is true for you? I think I was very slow to believe that. I sometimes look at the management books that get pumped out, seemingly by the millions, some of them about leadership, and I think these are not human beings talking. They are not talking about things that human beings care about. They are talking about something that a business school somewhere has identified as a subject to be taught. So I am humanistic, I guess, in the broadest sense.

JA: Some people believe that cultural figures – say a poet like Whitman – can be seen as a kind of leader.

WB: You could say that. But I happen to be one who resists, at least mentally, the notion of extending the idea of leadership so broadly to cover so many positive qualities and positive behaviors that everything becomes leadership. I think we lose something when we attenuate the idea of leadership to the point that it covers everything.

JA: Do you see that happening in organizations?

WB: I see it happening not so much in organizations as I see it happening in books about leadership in organizations. There are writers who say that everything is leadership. Everybody needs to be a leader. I think everybody needs to exercise initiative, everybody needs to take responsibility, everybody needs to produce results – but that to me doesn't add up to being a leader.

JA: What writers or thinkers out there today do you think are particularly good on leadership?

WB: You know there are a couple of people that I especially look forward to a book from. One is Peter Drucker. What I appreciate from him is not so much his insight into organizations as his ability to draw on so broad a storehouse to teach about organizations. I just always learn something.

The other is Charles Handy. I like his, for want of a better term, *humanism*; he can do justice on the one hand to the most hard-nosed profit-and-loss concerns and on the other and to the place of the heart in the workplace. He has that kind of a grasp that he is able to connect those two things. That is something that I think leaders need too – to be able to be the conduit of the energy running between those two things. With Handy's work, I find myself underlining and doing things way beyond what I do with most books. So I guess Drucker and Handy are personal heroes of mine.

It seems as if these days when you read about organizations in the popular press, it is financial concerns that are given by far the most attention. We're hearing mostly from financial analysts. They seem to know everything, and they seem to pretty much dictate everything. It is almost as if leaders are Gulliver-like figures with this army of analysts around them telling them what to do, what not to do: "Yeah, you had a good quarter, but it wasn't good enough."

I just wonder about the human side of the equation. Of course, it's always there under the surface, and if you look into organizations very long and very hard, it's going to be there. But now more than ever it seems to be masked to me by these other forces – financial, global, technological – and there is this sense that people in leadership positions have a very narrow window in which to operate, in which to be successful. If they are almost not immediately successful in very short period of time, unless they have a very patient board, they are out. There is a sort of sense that somehow there has been a disgrace – you know, they just didn't perform and they are out. Then someone else comes in, and by gosh, not always but sometimes, things improve. You just wonder

how healthy this really is and what it really means. I think the pendulum is certainly swinging that way – mergers and acquisitions, lawyers, the high-flyers, the M&A specialists, and the analysts seem to be controlling what goes on in organizations.

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I think if leaders in general took a stronger stand, the power of analysts might be moderated, and organizations would find it easier to address a range of neglected but crucial concerns.

JA: One of those concerns that occurs to me is trust. Let's end by talking about that. You've done a lot of thinking about what some call the *new employment contract*. At one time there was a tacit agreement that if a person were loyal to the company he or she would be guaranteed lifetime employment. The company trusted the employee to be loyal, and the employee trusted the company to provide a stable job. This kind of agreement is clearly no longer possible. Do you have a notion of what the new contract would be in the sense of how people would redevelop trust for their organizations and vice versa?

WB: There is a book about this by Robert Bruce Shaw which I think is pretty good. It's called *Trust in the Balance: Building Successful Organizations on Results, Integrity, and Concern*. It was published in 1997 by Jossey-Bass. I recommend that people take a look at it.

The fact is, most of the leaders who talk about regaining trust don't really want to do what it would take, or perhaps they experience

themselves as unable to do what it would take. I think it takes a degree of transparency in the process that decisions are reached by. It takes sharing the real information about the organizational situation, and very often leaders say, “Well, we can’t let shareholders know that.” But they are really just scared of operating in an open environment where people see clearly what is going on. For such leaders, I think the idea of regaining trust is illusory.

I don’t know any shortcut to trust – other than saying what you will do and doing what you say, showing some definite concern for people, and showing that you see what they are dealing with. I am almost embarrassed saying things like that because it is very simple stuff. Yet when somebody comes in and says, “You know, we are having a little problem with loyalty here and want to know how to regain it,” you say about three sentences, and you realize

that they don’t want to do any of the stuff that would be necessary to regain loyalty. Furthermore, they have really destroyed it to the point where it can’t be regained. I don’t mean to say that you can’t get commitment from people. I think in most organizations the better direction to go is away from trying to rebuild loyalty into reconstituting the organization on the basis of commitment. I certainly see the two as quite different. Commitment is dedication to an undertaking, to a person, to a team, to an outcome: “I will do that. I am committed to that.” Loyalty suggests to me the notion of being a vassal, as in the Middle Ages, and we have killed the vassals. ■

Books by William Bridges

- *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1980.
- *Surviving Corporate Transition: Rational Management in a World of Mergers, Layoffs, Start-Ups, Takeovers,, Divestitures, Deregulation, and New Technologies*. New York: William Bridges and Associates, 1990.
- *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991.
- *The Character of Organizations: Using Jungian Types in Organizational Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1992.
- *JobShift: How to Prosper in a Workplace Without Jobs*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994.
- *Creating You & Co.: Learn to Think Like the CEO of Your Own Career*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997.