

Stages of Transition

Leading Through Change

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Overview

Transition consists of stages people go through as they adapt to a change in their environment. This transition can last as long as it takes for an individual to go through their personal process. Each team also has its own process and timing. You can't control those processes and timing, but you can heavily influence them through your leadership.

This guide describes what you will see in employees in each stage of transition and your role in assisting employees and the team in moving through each of the stages. These stages may be linear for some people and circular for others.



Endings - Letting go of what has been

Ending

When people realize a change is on the horizon, their tendency is to go into denial about it ("it'll never happen"; "they tried this before and it didn't work"). They do want more information about what will be different, even if they don't ask about it. It may also look to you like they have accepted the change, because you don't see a lot of change in their behavior. In reality, they are often thinking about what they will be losing.

Employee Characteristics:	Leader's Role:
The true meaning of the change is not understood	Acknowledge what will end and what won't
Continue to work as normal	Allow and accept people's feelings. Don't allow poor behavior
Numbness, withdrawal, confusion	Clear up unknowns as much as you can
Disengagement	Provide work with clearly assigned deadlines
"I've had it"	Don't try to sell the solution yet
"What's going to happen to my job/me?"	Communicate frequently

Neutral - The time in between what was and what will be

Neutral

The Neutral Zone has two stages. The first is called “resistance” and happens as people get over their shock about the change and start realizing it is going to happen and it is going to impact them. You will need to keep people focused on the facts of the change and you will need to be understanding about people’s reactions. Some people will see the change as a threat and may show their fear through anger. Those who see the change as a reward may show excitement and confusion as they quickly move to the second stage of “exploration”.

Employee Characteristics:	Leader’s Role:
Move from denial to self-doubt	Permit negative expression of emotions, but not poor behavior
Focus on how the change impacts them personally	Let people talk about their experiences with you and with each other
Productivity may decline	Be specific and candid with information
Increased focus on the negatives	Listen, respond with empathy
Anger, depression, blame, guilt	Make sure you over-communicate
“Why can’t we just keep doing what we were doing? It worked.”	Check in with everyone

“Exploration” starts as people begin to accept that the change will happen. They still may not like it and they may let you know. This is an especially important time for leaders to manage their frustration at wanting people to “just get on with it.” When employees start asking questions, celebrate. That means they are starting to re-engage and be curious. The questions may be repetitive and frequent. People will want to be clear about what they are supposed to be doing and want to make sure they are doing things the right way. Provide answers, structure and clear and negotiable deadlines.

Employee Characteristics:	Leader’s Role:
A renewed interest in work	Encourage renewed drive and remove barriers
The start of creativity and drive	Provide necessary resources
Focus on new bonds in work groups	Allow some degree of chaos
Perform new tasks, worried about doing it right	Continue to pay attention to people who are still grieving
“I’m not sure this will work for me.”	Clarify business goals, direction
“Well, at least this part is working ok.”	Remove excuses to hold on to old ways

Beginnings - Stepping into the new

Beginning

When employees move into “beginnings”, they are more letting go of the past more and more and turning their attention to the future. They are not done with transition, however. This is still an uncomfortable and uncertain time and you will be wondering if things will ever be “normal” again. Employees continue to need structure, clarity and deadlines. They will have ideas for refining and improving the work. Start by pulling them into the future and letting them know how their work impacts the department’s and organization’s future success.

Employee Characteristics:	Leader’s Role:
Discomfort, but willingness to try	Provide tools and opportunities for learning
Ready to focus on action	Fine tune processes, assignments and responsibilities
Ready to re-negotiate roles and responsibilities	Encourage mentor relationships
Able to do parts of job with worrying about them	Continue to pay attention to people who are at earlier stages
Looking forward	Provide learning opportunities
May go back to earlier stages temporarily	Allow others time to share what they’ve learned and experienced
Sense of accomplishment and hope	Re-articulate vision