

CHANGES, CHANGES AND MORE CHANGES.....

Your wife comes home from one of her increasingly frequent evening business meetings and tells you she has actually been having an affair and is planning to leave you. Your mind goes into shock like a circuit breaker being thrown – you are dumbfounded, numb. Then dozens of implications of this news begin to swirl around in your head. Nasty, painful feelings like anger, fear and humiliation begin to emerge. You frantically begin to think of ways to make the pain go away quickly. You have just begun an unavoidable change process.

So has the 20 year employee who has been told that their job has been “downsized” or is being moved to Sierra Leone. So has the patient who has just been told they have cancer. So has the ambitious student who has just received word that they did not get in to medical school. So has the minimum wage guy who has just won the lottery.

While most of us would rather be the lottery winner if given a choice, all these situations require a person to go through a challenging change process, something change expert William Bridges refers to as transition – the inner process of dealing with life’s unexpected turns. Bridges defines three stages for this process: 1) ending what was, 2) a neutral zone where we may experience uncertainty, identity confusion and disorientation, and, finally 3) a new beginning. The stages are not neatly sequential, but rather overlap, ebb and flow. How we proceed through these stages will depend on our own personal style, our change history and the knowledge we have about the change process. Providing knowledge is the business of transition management. Transition management learning can occur through individual therapy or personal coaching or in organizations through transition workshops.

The impact of informing a person in throes of a dramatic change that they are going through a definable process with a beginning and an end can be profoundly grounding. People cling to the known. Relationships and jobs provide an anchor, a sense of family and identity. When these anchors are disrupted, a person feels out to sea. They may grasp desperately for what used to be or lash out at the instigator of the change. Alternatively, they may lunge prematurely for a new reality – the classic rebound relationship. If they know they are in the “neutral zone” (and that it will end), they may be able to calm down, take their time and make better decisions.

Transition management is a growing business due to the rapid pace of change in the modern world. Globalization, technological change, increased mobility and the breakdown of traditional family structures have created a situation where keeping a job or primary relationship for a lifetime is no longer the norm. This means that most of us will experience at least one significant change in our lifetimes, not including death of loved ones, in addition to the myriad of smaller changes that have become part of life. Formal education does not prepare us well for these inevitable life-altering changes despite Alvin Tofler’s comment that “the illiterates of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn”. While formal education does not prepare us well for the learning aspect of change, it particularly does not prepare us for the “emotional intelligence” aspect of change (the ability to manage our emotional life in response to adverse circumstances).

Transition experts provide some tips that can ease the road to transition:

- Accept that change is inevitable
- Deal with the loss of the old reality before you move on to the new
- Know your predispositions (e.g. are you a procrastinator? are you impulsive?) and consciously work to counter these habitual reactions
- Surf the neutral zone even though it may be uncomfortable - rash decisions to avoid uncertainty often result in poor outcomes
- Look for opportunities hiding in an apparently unpleasant change
- Visualize the positive in the new options
- Take care of your health (exercise, diet, relaxation) throughout the process
- Avoid self-medicating with alcohol, drugs or other vices
- Talk to trusted others

Now, about that lottery guy.....maybe we can all help him through the change.

Dr. Jim Browning

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