

A CYCLE OF CHANGE: THE TRANSITION CURVE

This case was prepared by Alison Young and Terry Lockhart.

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CHANGE OR TRANSITION?

This short article describes a figure called the Transition Curve, which is used to illustrate the phases of transition. The curve depicts a number of different stages which an individual experiences when he or she encounters significant change in their professional, social or domestic life. The transition model can equally be applied at the organisational level during periods of change; research suggests that an organisation will map a similar route to the one observed at the individual level.

Before moving on to describe the phases of transition, it is useful to pause in order to reflect on the two concepts already introduced in this article: change and transition. For they are not the same.

"Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy.

Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal."

(Addison-Wesley, 1991, p.3)

Hence, change is an *event*, a happening, which may or may not be announced; transition is the process which follows during which individuals or organisations get used to, make sense of, and start to live with the change. It is this transition process which is described by the Transition Curve.

TRIGGERS FOR CHANGE

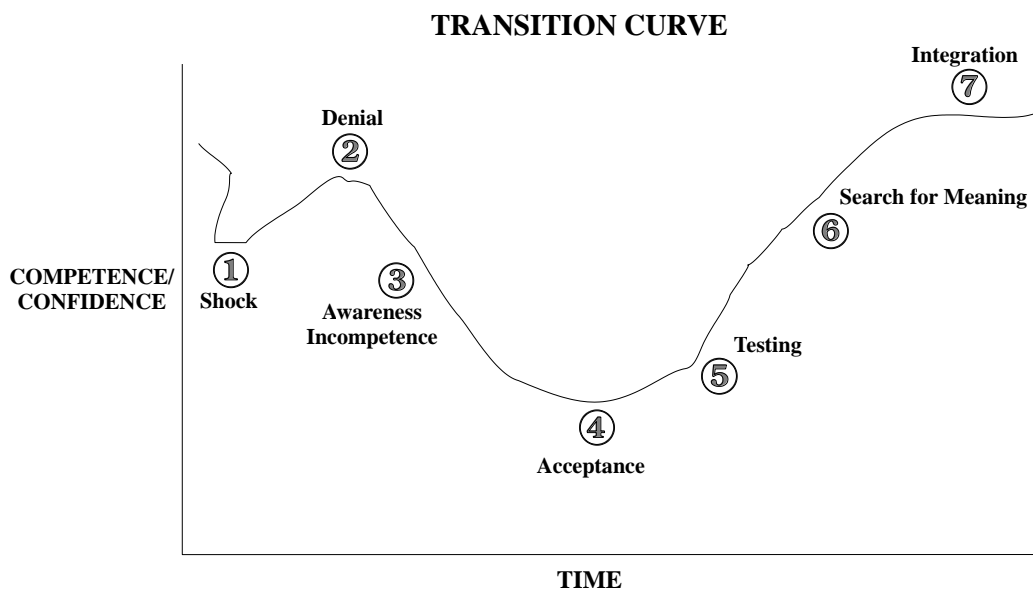
A variety of stimuli act on organisations prompting organisational and individual change such as: new legislation; changes within the market place; patterns of consumer attitudes; trends in buying behaviour; new technology; industrial relations; take-overs, mergers and other types of organisational transformation. Any kind of external trigger

may demand a new and uncharacteristic response from the organisation. These kinds of changes affect the organisation as a whole and when they are recognised, the organisation will respond in the appropriate way. But these kinds of change will affect the individual manager too, and will likely stimulate a personal transition. Although managers need to face a number of changes during the length of their career, some types of change will place significantly different and more onerous demands on the individual. A change in role or responsibility, or a move from a specialist function into general management, or participation for the first time in the organisation's top management team will each require personal change and transition. These types of change can present the individual with a range of new options for behaviour, status, and responsibility, and coupled with them come a number of new expectations from others. These may be stretching times while the individual manager learns to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty.

The seven phases of the transition curve below help to make sense of the feelings and reactions of managers at times like this. They describe the **process** of transition derived from managers' actual experience. If the model is applied to each new task or responsibility facing the manager, he or she will likely be at different stages on the curve depending on the task or responsibility in question.

The transition curve can also be applied at the organisational level. The change process is experienced by the organisation at large, but if parts of the organisation have different response times to the change - for example, depending on their proximity to it - then they will be on different points of the transition curve. This is a common feature of large or geographically dispersed organisations, and can add complexity to the organisation's journey through change.

Understanding the transition process helps managers to handle their own periods of change more effectively; it also provides insight for the introduction and management of **organisational** change. Hence, it acts as a personal support as well as a tool for helping others experience significant change.



Phase One: SHOCK

This first phase describes the reaction when the individual (or organisation) initially encounters the trigger for change. Shock or surprise arise from the mismatch between the way in which the individual manager believes things might be, and the way that they actually are.

As can be seen from the figure above, the individual's perceived competence or confidence (vertical axis) reduces in the face of the new change. If the change concerns the transition into a new role, then this axis indicates the individual's own sense of how "good" he or she is in the new role; that is, their own sense of value in terms of ability to perform the new work or responsibility effectively.

Confidence dips in this first phase as a result of the impact of experiencing the new set of circumstances or expectations which may not be as the manager expected them to be. The more unknown or unexpected these new circumstances, the deeper the dip as there is a greater mismatch between expectations and reality. The individual will experience a larger negative impact on their sense of competence the more inaccurate their perception and the more unexpected the change. In extreme cases, this may lead to the individual manager feeling immobilised - that is, unable to make decisions or plans, or giving the appearance of being unable to manage the required action. Although this vertical axis reflects the individual's own sense of confidence and competence, it is an important indicator as individuals' feelings of their effectiveness are strongly linked to their actual performance.

Phase Two: DENIAL

Following the shock stage comes a period of denial during which the individual makes his or her own conclusions about the new situation in order to minimise the dissonance experienced in the first phase. This justification or reasoning of events prompts an increase in the individuals' sense of competence - they gain a form of intellectual control over the situation.

Let us take a hypothetical situation: A promotion to a new job heralds a significant change in behaviour and attitudes, as well as a different set of responsibilities for the manager in question. A natural first reaction occurs: shock at the extent of the differences in this new role from the existing one - an unexpected discovery in which the individual's perceptions did not match the reality. In order to "cope" with this change, the manager may try to deny the reality - for example, that the new role is not that different after all - or he or she may try to explain it away - for example, by justifying exactly why and how they were awarded the promotion.

Moreover, if they believe that they were awarded the promotion based on track record rather than future potential, there is even less reason to change behaviour or attitudes because "what worked well in the past will work in the future". This denial of the need to do anything different can be a sticking point in the transition process and may prevent the individual from moving on.

Whether this stage is a hill as the figure depicts, or more of a plateau, the only way to move forward from here is through individual choice. Persuasion, encouragement or threat may provoke only compliant behaviour in the individual; what is required is an awareness of the change at a personal level. Once this occurs, and frequently with it an awareness of the individual's own strengths and weaknesses, the individual is able to accept others' views of himself or herself and the need to make the adjustment to achieve his or her potential.

A number of individuals who are reluctant to make a change will be "stuck" at this point in the transition; they are unable to accept a different view of themselves and of the need for the change to happen.

Phase Three: AWARENESS

While the previous phase corresponds with a perceived *increase* in competence while the individual ignores the reality of the situation, the third phase brings with it a greater awareness of his or her *real* level of competence in relation to the required level. This is an important phase as the individual becomes emotionally engaged in the situation, and so this time is frequently marked by feelings of frustration or confusion about how to handle the change process. The areas which have now been defined as "deficient" require attention and the individual may not know how to increase their level of skill or change their attitude.

Phase Four: ACCEPTANCE

The downward move in competence and confidence stops when the individual recognises and accepts the reality of the new situation. This is the lowest point on the figure. It requires letting go of attitudes and behaviours which have become comfortable and appropriate or effective only for the old situation. Feelings of depression may occur as a result of not knowing what to put in place of the old behaviours and attitudes.

Phase Five: TESTING

The identification of new behaviours is followed by the phase of starting to test them out. These new behaviours may be effective and achieve the desired outcome but at other times, the individual may need to work harder to practise or "polish" their new abilities. This phase of testing is characterised by success **and** failure at developing new skill areas. Hence it may not be a simple progression from left to right as failure at trying out a new skill may push the individual back along the curve while the individual questions its relevance or searches for alternative behaviours. This is a difficult time: "trying new things on for size" and seeing whether they fit can be time consuming and potentially costly in its result. Companies where individuals are allowed to make mistakes and not suffer recrimination for failure create the most supportive types of environment for this part of the transition.

Phase Six: SEARCH FOR MEANING

Learning from their success and failure helps the individual start to search for meaning in the new situation. Rather than just trying new behaviours on for size, this stage also involves a questioning of why certain behaviours are effective, and why others, or indeed the same behaviours but on different occasions, may be ineffective. This knowledge enables the individual to take more control over his or her action and to develop strategies for circumstances in advance.

Phase Seven: INTEGRATION

The final stage is characterised by the individual taking ownership of their recently acquired behaviours and thereby increasing their sense of confidence and competence to a level higher than before. Their new ways of doing things become part of their everyday activities and integrated into the individual's world view and natural reaction. There is little or no dissonance between the expectations of situations and the individual's perceived own ability to perform.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Experience with individuals and organisations suggests that individuals undergoing significant change may take between eighteen and 24 months to complete the transition phase. On some occasions, this may be longer than the organisation had anticipated and the manager in question may be expected to have reached optimum performance before they are ready. This may create dissonance between the organisation's expectations and the individual's abilities.

There may be ways to reduce the time an individual needs to complete the transition process. For example, having an awareness of the different stages and the features of each will help the individual actively to seek ways to move forward. Additionally, having previous experience of change and the ability to map and compare past elements of change with the present can help the individual anticipate the different steps. However, one of the most important factors to help staff and colleagues through the transition process is a supportive environment which encourages a dialogue about process and change issues as well as the tasks themselves.

Research and work in organisations seems to suggest that effective and successful managers are those who are able to learn from their experience and actively review past and present behaviours and attitudes. The transition curve is a useful framework for helping that review to take place. It can be followed as a route map to help the manager see with hindsight which stages were more problematic and so know where to focus their energy another time.

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