



PHOTO: STEVE WOOT

Successfully Navigating Transitions



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the way things will be. You might second-guess your decision, wondering if you did the right thing. You could apply this “neutral zone” to the adoption of cover crops or new tillage practices, the use of a new bookkeeping system or the switch to a new CPA or marketing adviser. Those changes involve moving to something new, but it takes awhile to become clear about how the change will fully play out.

The new beginnings phase might apply to a member of the next generation—or even a new, non-family employee—

becoming fully integrated in the business, or to your efforts to hold weekly management meetings or to develop new family communication patterns. You can see people beginning to increase their contributions or hitting their strides in their new roles.

PRACTICAL TIPS. To make any transition go better, Bridges suggests three useful guidelines. First, recognize the consequences of putting off a decision when the time is ripe

for a transition. Many families have told me, sometimes too late, they should have started the communication and transition process much earlier. Not making a transition when the time is ripe slows your progress in the future.

Second, help people in your family and business see why you need to make the change.

Bridges calls this “selling the problem.” Too often, we become focused on making a change when not everyone understands why a different approach is needed.

Finally, make sure your communication process includes Bridges’s “Four Ps”: Communicate the “purpose” for the transition or change, the “picture,” or the intended goal or outcome of the change, the “plan” for how the transition will work and each person’s “part,” or role, in the transition.

Bridges doesn’t promise that transition will be less difficult from a psychological perspective, but he offers a kind of compass by which to navigate the path of change. If you understand the phases of transitions, if you help people see the need for change, the importance of timing and the consequences of your current actions, and if you communicate regularly about key issues, your family and business will be better at navigating transitions. ●

While preparing for a recent talk on change management, I read William Bridges’s “Managing Transitions,” a helpful book containing both conceptual models and practical strategies for thinking about family and business transitions. While we often talk about transitions in the context of succession planning and retirement, I see several other transitions in family farms and ranches to which Bridges’s ideas apply:

- ▶ the transition in ownership from a couple (parents) to a group (children/siblings)
- ▶ the transition from a small business to a more professional organization
- ▶ the transition from doing the physical work to managing people
- ▶ the transition from a simple entity structure to a more complex system to manage risk, farm programs, expand partnerships or mitigate income or estate taxes
- ▶ the transition to more acres, more business diversity or different farming practices.

TRANSITION’S THREE PHASES. In any significant change, Bridges suggests we go through three psychological phases: letting go, the neutral zone and new beginnings.

Letting go involves the realization that the way you have done things in the past will not work for the future and includes the physical act of stopping specific behaviors or tasks. In the case of a retiring family member, examples might include letting go of being the primary relationship with a landowner or vendor, or letting go of daily decisions and supervision.

The neutral zone is that unsettled place after you have chosen to let go, but you are not yet fully comfortable with

“It isn’t the changes that do you in, it’s the transitions.”

—WILLIAM BRIDGES

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