

# The Dispatch

## The April Dispatch: Managing Transitions

In An ancient Greek philosopher once said that the only constant in life is change. Every day it is the same — change or transition happens. Some of us embrace these transitions, seeing them as a harbinger of new possibilities. But for others change brings more sorrow and regret than joy. In this month's Dispatch we reflect on the issue of change or transitions. Davon starts us off, and Bill follows, with two stories of change as it relates to physical structures in our lives. Lance puts it all in a helpful perspective by proposing a framework for how to look at transitions. As always, let us know if you have any reactions!

---

### Letting Go—or Holding On?

[Davon Cook](#)

A family business with generational longevity often becomes attached to objects and places that memorialize the past and honor the legacy. I've seen many farm headquarters that added modern buildings around a historic barn or house, or even integrated historic structures into some stunning functional spaces. Those artifacts remind us of the generations that made today possible.

But what about the times those artifacts prevent progress? I heard a story about a family debating whether to tear down great-grandma's house. It stood unused and in disrepair in the middle of a productive field. After much soul searching, they ultimately decided it was ok to remove it—but a family member less emotionally attached bore the burden of managing the project. They concluded that the house in the field wasn't the only way to honor their heritage; rather, annual progress was the best way to honor it.

Another significant family change involves moving to town. In today's world where driving many miles is normal and technology allows constant connection, it's more feasible to live away from the farm and take advantage of school, health care, spouse's jobs, and social opportunities in town (regardless of the size "town" means in each case). We see this in both junior and senior generations, often for different reasons. Sometimes moving to town is perceived as an indication of one's lack of commitment to the farm or small community. Does living elsewhere mean one cares less about the farm? Or does it allow the farm to move forward in a transition to next generation leadership? Or does it allow next generation leadership to balance their own family's needs while pursuing this career?

These objects and places from our past can be powerful. As a diehard nostalgic, I err on the side of preserving them. I challenge us to examine reflectively when they are sacrosanct, and when letting go would move us forward in a more powerful way.

## A Difficult Good-bye

[Bill Long](#)

When I attended Seminary north of Boston MA in the mid-1970s, the high point of the week was to get off campus and join friends for a sumptuous dinner at the [Hilltop Steak House](#) a few miles away. The Steak House opened in 1961 and, by the time I was at school, it was already the largest restaurant by volume in the United States. You would wait in a glassed-in area that had a striking resemblance to a cattle pen and then, when your number and location were called, you would pile into one of the five huge dining rooms. Everything was larger than life at the Hilltop, and it led to an unforgettable dining experience. Everyone came in with empty hands but almost everyone left with a doggie bag.



I left Boston in the early 1980s and have only returned to the area for periodic visits. A few years ago I said to myself that I would love for old-time sake to return to Hilltop, to savor the atmosphere, eat another steak and reminisce on the forty years since I was last there. So I drove Highway 1 north of Boston, noting both the alluring and unattractive features along the way. Finally, I saw the distinctive green color of the building, but something was wrong. The signature 68-foot-high neon cactus beckoning passersby to turn in wasn't there.

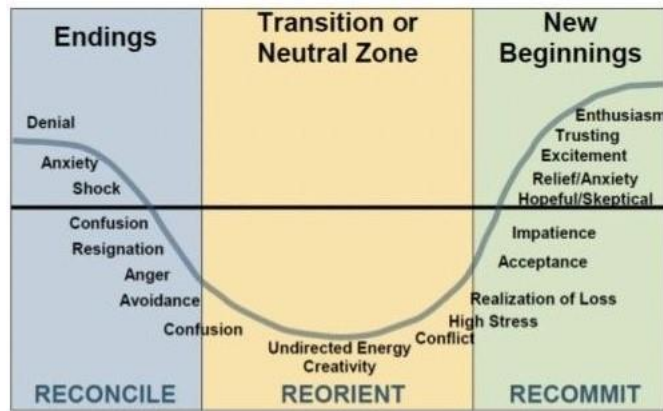
I drove past and turned around. Though the building was there, its signage and special features were gone. I knew that businesses close every day in America, but I never expected to see such a vibrant place, or such a place that reminded me of MY vibrant days, closed. I didn't really have a sense of grief or deep sadness but it was more like a sense of stunned quiet that is suggested by a verse from the Psalms, "Teach us to number our days that I may get a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). Hilltop is gone, but it remains embedded in my heart.

---

## Making the Transition

[Lance Woodbury](#)

Moving from what *was* to what *will be*, as Davon points out, involves history, relationships, emotions, and many difficult questions. [William Bridges](#) wrote one of the best books on the topic, [Transitions](#), and offers a [helpful framework](#) for thinking about move from where we were (or are) to where we are going. Bridges outlines three basic zones: Endings, or letting go; the neutral zone; and new beginnings.



Endings involve a recognition of what is being lost or changed. A physical object (like a house or move to town, or, in Bill's case, a landmark steak house), or a way of doing things, or even a person, may be the object of loss. But we acknowledge the loss and begin to move on.

We then enter a time when the old structure, team, or way of doing things is gone, but we can't quite see, or are still learning, what the new will bring. It can be a confusing or awkward time, when uncertainty about the future feels like a fog before the sun breaks through.

Eventually we arrive at new beginnings: renewed energy, a refreshed spirit, and a vision for what's next. Clarity gives us the confidence to move ahead. Consider using the Transitions model to help you navigate future changes in your family business.