

WILLIAM BRIDGES & ASSOCIATES

RESOURCES FOR ORGANIZATIONS IN TRANSITION

Getting Them Through The Wilderness

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**A Leader's Guide
to Transition**

by

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The Problem at NewTech

The problem at NewTech is one that is becoming increasingly familiar today: the marketing department in that large manufacturing company¹ needed a stronger hand and a clearer direction. The company's old, technology-driven strategy was starting to give way to a more customer-oriented approach, and a new vice president had been brought in to "straighten things out" and "start doing some real marketing."

He had studied the mess and decided to reorganize the department. He had taken his managers off on a retreat and with them had hammered out a new marketing strategy—as well as a different departmental structure that was more appropriate to the new strategy. Reporting relationships were changed. Some of the less productive old-timers were weeded out. New priorities were proclaimed, and a no-nonsense management style became the order of the day. The new VP was confident that his organizational renewal effort was the kind of thing that a turnaround requires.

My organization conducted an assessment of the results two months later and found that what had taken place was not a renewal but something approaching a disaster. The changes that were meant to invigorate the organization had weakened it. Several of the best upper-level managers had left the company, and absenteeism had doubled. Projects were way behind schedule, and the grapevine was full of stories about subtle acts of sabotage to the departmental data bank. People were self-absorbed, anxious, and resentful, and the teamwork that the department had always prided itself on was breaking down as a "musical chairs" mentality began to turn everyone's attention to whether there would be a place for them when the reorganization music stopped.

The executive who had begun with such great plans was confused and discouraged. Most of the changes that he had undertaken were sensible ones, and he had communicated his intentions clearly. He had set up a special transition team to solve problems that arose during the change-over. He had held "visioning" sessions for his direct reports and had asked them to do the same with theirs. He had solicited employee input and instituted a plan for productivity bonuses. Telling me all this, he threw up his hands and asked, "What more could I have done?"

¹ This Fortune 500 company has been disguised by name, and a few details have been changed to protect the company's anonymity. But the reorganization effort and the resulting demoralization are accurately described.

Transition: The Shadow Side of Change

The executive's problem was not that he should have done more, but that he had made a basic mistake that has become increasingly costly in today's constantly changing environment: he had planned the organization's changes carefully and forgotten to deal with the people's transitions. When I said that, he objected, "But we have a transition team." Like most leaders, he confused "transition" with "change"—assuming that transition just meant gradual, extended, or unfinished change.²


But transition is very different from change. Change is situational: the reduction in the work force, the shift in the strategy, and the switch in reporting relationships are all "changes." Transition, on the other hand, is a three-phase psychological reorientation process that people go through when they are coming to terms with change. It begins with an ending—with people letting go of their old reality and their old identity. Unless people can make a real ending, they will be unable to make a successful beginning.

After the ending, people go into the second phase of transition, the neutral zone. This is a no-man's land where people are (in Matthew Arnold's graphic image) "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born." The neutral zone is a time and a state of being in which the old behaviors and attitudes die out, and people go dormant for a while as they prepare to move out in a new direction. It is a dangerous time for organizations, but it is also a time when innovations and experiments have an especially good chance of succeeding.

Only after going through each of these first two phases of transition can people deal successfully with the third phase: beginning over again, with new energy, a new sense of purpose, a new outlook, and a new image of themselves. And that is where the executive at NewTech missed the boat. He tried to get people to make a new beginning without seeing to it that they went through the other two phases of transition first.

The executive's mistake is certainly a characteristic American one. Perhaps it is our frontier heritage, which emphasized starting over again (and again and again) whenever things did not pan out and viewed the past as something you could always walk away from. Perhaps it is the fact that,

² For more information on transition, see William Bridges, *Surviving Corporate Transition: Rational Management in a World of Mergers, Start-Ups, Takeover, Layoffs, Divestitures, Deregulation and New Technologies*, paperback edition, available from William Bridges & Associates, 38 Miller Ave., Suite 12, Mill Valley, CA 94941.



unlike older nations that evolved slowly from a vast, dark past, our nation was the product of a series of intentional changes. Perhaps it is our mechanistic turn of mind, which suggests that you can just start things up if you know how to turn on the switch. Or perhaps it is our positivist outlook, that views painful endings as signs that people are “clinging to the past” in some unnatural way. Whatever the reason, Americans have always believed that healthy people and organizations just make up their minds to change and then do it. No wonder American executives and managers make changes with so little understanding of what people will have to go through if the changes are to work!

The Cost of Not Managing Transition

Understandable as that blindness is, it is simply a luxury that has become unaffordable today. Today the changes come too fast and from too many unexpected angles. There are too many stakeholders now—too many groups whose transitions, if mismanaged, will undermine the change. The old Light Brigade mentality (“Theirs not to reason why,/Theirs but to do and die”) no longer works, especially with the younger generation of workers. Employer liability has increased vastly, and organizations today get hauled into court for management behavior that only yesterday was just “a little authoritarian.” (In California, according to a recent Rand Corporation survey, it costs more than \$200,000 to defend the average wrongful discharge suit, and awards are averaging close to three quarters of a million dollars.)

Finally, today’s companies and institutions are operating with much narrower margins of profit and good will than they enjoyed less than twenty years ago. If the change takes half again as long and costs twice as much as expected, today’s executives can no longer cover their mistakes with inflation-raised prices or expect the market to give them a grace period in which to catch up.

Many leaders fail to realize the importance of managing transition, believing that if the structural, technical, or financial changes go well, the human transitions will take care of themselves. But unless people can make the transitions that the changes require, those changes will simply not work. They may happen, but the result will be (in the words of one of our recent clients) that “everything has changed, but nothing is different.” Such an organizational change is like the old medical joke about the operation that was a great success . . . although the patient died.

Our management books tell us much more about change than transition. We’ve all heard stories of leaders who have played a vital role in planning and executing organizational change, but there are fewer tales of leaders who have successfully managed transition. There is, however, one management classic that provides an excellent account of a leader’s successful transition-management project. It is the Old Testament book of Exodus, and the leader is Moses.³ It should be studied by anyone interested in how to lead a group of people from an old way of doing things to a new way.

³ Actually the story runs through three books of the Old Testament, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The bulk of the narrative is, however, in Exodus.

Moses Makes an Ending


Moses' "organization" was the people of Israel. Before his time, in the days of Joseph, they had lived in Egypt contentedly and held considerable power. But in Moses' day, they were—to use the Biblical term—in bondage. This is always the case in an organization that is approaching a change: in some sense or other, it is "in bondage" to an outlived way of doing things, thinking about things, or evaluating things.

Whether the outlived way is a seat-of-the-pants management style that used to work when the company was a start-up, or a bureaucracy's complex system of checks and balances, most problems are old solutions that have outlived their utility. Moses did what the transition leader always had to do: he looked for ways to get the system to "let my people go."

He discovered that it's difficult to break a system's hold on people. What he found is that the hold at first actually tightens. When Moses made his first effort, the Pharaoh (the symbol of the power of the status quo) replied that not only would he not let the people go, but that in fact they were going to have to do what they were now doing with even fewer resources. He announced that he would no longer provide the straw for their brick-making, but that instead the Israelites would have to gather their own straw. Of course the Bible does not actually term the tactic, "doing more with less," but the gambit sounds very contemporary.⁴ (As you can see, poorly managed "productivity improvement projects" have been causing systems to break down for three thousand years!)

As usually happens during the first phase of transition (ending), plagues of problems began to develop. In Moses' world the plagues were rather graphic: blood in the water, swarms of frogs and gnats, livestock diseases, hailstorms, and locust invasions. Today's "plagues" are likely to be different, but just as disruptive of our organizational effectiveness as Pharaoh's were of his: the appearance of unexpected competition, the loss of important accounts, the defection of talented employees, and the development of legal difficulties and labor unrest.

⁴ Even the argument has a familiar boss-employee ring to it: "Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, 'Why do you deal thus with your servants? No straw was given to [us], yet they say to us 'Make bricks!' And behold [we are] beaten; but the fault is in your own people'... But [Pharaoh] said, 'You are idle... Go now and work; for no straw shall be given you, yet you shall deliver the same number of bricks.'"



But the message conveyed by the plagues is the same: “The old ways aren’t working any more.” It is a difficult message for the beneficiaries of the status quo to hear. They “harden their hearts,” just as Pharaoh did. But in doing so, they push the old system closer to destruction.

Moses did what wise leaders always do when gradual, incremental change is no longer enough. He did not solve the problems; instead, he let them escalate. In so doing, he upped the ante until the interests of the old order began to coincide with the necessities of creating a new order. As the troubles mounted, Pharaoh grudgingly recognized that he really had to get the Israelites out of Egypt.

Now, letting problems escalate is a difficult course to take, and some leaders will even view it as a mistaken one. If a little tinkering with the system will put it to rights again, then Moses’ strategy is indeed the wrong one. But fixing things becomes counterproductive where radical market, regulatory, or technological changes demand a profound organizational transformation. An out-of-date factory, for example, needs to be transformed or replaced. Incremental changes not only won’t do the job, they will delay the more radical changes until it is too late to make them. In such cases, Moses’ technique of letting the “plagues” increase the discomfort level is the better one.

Protecting the Seeds of the Future

But Moses did more than just feed the fires of discontent. He also saw to it that the increasing difficulties did not damage his people. He protected his people from the full impact of the plagues by making a symbolic mark on the doorposts of the Jews, so that God's wrath would pass them by. Besides its theological meaning, this action (which is the origin of the Jewish Passover celebration) illustrates an important managerial act. That is to handle matters in such a way that the destruction of the old system does not damage the elements from which the new system will be built.

For today's transition leader, this means identifying, gathering together, and educating the pivotal people who will help realize the new vision, the organization's "Promised Land." It means beginning to create among them the basis for a new identity and a new culture. It means giving them a new sense of mission. Otherwise, these people may well be lost in the chaos that accompanies transition.

Every Organization Needs a "Red Sea"

When Pharaoh finally let Moses' people go, some of them surely thought that the Promised Land was just around the corner. But Moses was not so naive, for he saw that he still had two problems. First, he had to draw a line of no return between the ending and the neutral zone. Second, he had to keep people in the neutral zone long enough for them to be fundamentally changed by the wilderness experience. Let's look at these two realizations separately, starting with the first.

Whatever the old system is, it always "follows" people and tries to pull them back, just as the Pharaoh's army did. In the case of a technological change, the old machines try to pull people back; in the case of a strategic change, it is the old strategy that holds onto people; in the case of a reorganized work force, it is the old reporting relationships and the old peer groupings; and in the case of a culture change, it is the old values, symbols, and ceremonies that exert the pull on people.

This pull must be broken, and Moses did that by a symbolic act. He called on God to part the waters of the Red Sea so that his people could cross over, and then just as Pharaoh's troops entered the sea bed he called on God to close the waters again. The pursuers were drowned.

Making a Clean Break

There are two elements to this action that today's transition leader ought to note. The first is that there needs to be a clean break with the past. There must be no pieces of the past lying around to suggest that perhaps it is not gone, after all. Those pieces might be policies that were justified by the old goals, tactics that were justified by the old strategies, missions that were justified by the old vision. The pieces could be people who held positions because they were particularly effective in or sympathetic to the old way of doing things. The past needs to be "drowned," as the Pharaoh's army was.

A word of warning, however. Leaders must be careful, as they break up power centers of the old order and dismantle systems that made the old way work, not to denigrate "the past" in the general sense. The eradication of the past should not be done vindictively or with any suggestion that those who were loyal to the past were mistaken or ineffective. If you do that, you are likely to lose some of your best people, for many of them were loyal to that bygone organization that you are not just doing away with but also denouncing. Instead, make it clear that the past did its job and got you where you are today. It was fine for its time, but its time is past. New situations call for new things.

Moses knew that people's identities were too tied up in the past to reject it entirely. He cut off ties to the immediate past, but he also gathered up Joseph's bones and carried them along into the wilderness, thereby tying his current efforts to the collective origins of his people.

Some leaders can even capitalize on this longing for the lost past by giving people a piece of it to take with them. It may be a brick from the old factory or cutting from an uprooted rose garden. It may be a plaque or a t-shirt with the old logo on it. Or it may be a book of photographs recording a historical past that is being both built upon and left behind.

The Symbolic Event

The second aspect of the Red Sea experience that the modern transition leader must understand is that it is a symbolic “boundary event” and that such events are an excellent way to capture people’s attention and carry the message that the old way is gone and beyond recovery.

- Rene McPherson created such an event when he became CEO at Dana Corporation by piling all the policy manuals that were then in force into a two-foot stack, and then toppling them. He held up in their place a one-page statement of the new company principles. His message: I want you to understand our principles, but I think you are intelligent enough to translate them into effective actions.
- The Spanish explorer, Cortez, created another such boundary event, although it is rather traumatic for most organizational situations. After his men landed on the forbidding coast of Mexico, he burned the ships. His message: there is no turning back now!

The effect of the boundary event is not just to keep the past from invading the present; it is also to keep the people from turning around and returning to Egypt. People react to the neutral zone by idealizing the way things used to be. The Old Testament authors said that in the wilderness the Jews began to “murmur.” Today the people murmur about the wilderness at AT&T, GM, Apple, and other companies where an old way of doing things has been left behind. In the corridors of such organizations, you hear variations on a theme from Exodus:

“What was so bad about Egypt anyway?”

“Do you think Moses really knows where he’s going?”

“I’d never have left if I knew it was going to take this long!”

It's A Long Way to the Promised Land

Moses knew what we too often today forget: that people have to take a long journey through this second phase of transition before they can be transformed into the people who are ready for the Promised Land. Moses knew, you might say, that it is always easier to take the people out of Egypt (or any old system) than it is to take the old Egypt-system out of people. Only a long time in the psychological wilderness state of the neutral zone can do that.⁵

This is an idea that is foreign to most modern people, although their own life experiences would give them plenty of examples of how the neutral zone works. They have experienced it after all the big endings in their lives. Nevertheless, they tend to forget transition and imagine that change (which can take place much more quickly) is all that is necessary. They admit that “it takes a little while to get used to” whatever Promised Land they have been seeking, but they apologize for that fact. And they refuse to build the transition process into their plans when they make an organizational change.

The psychological insights of Exodus are very accurate. Every time we make a change of any depth or extent, we find ourselves in a confusing no-man’s land between the old way and the new for some time. That time in the wilderness can begin before we actually leave the old way, for as soon as we decide to leave we find that the old way starts to lose its hold on us. And it certainly can last long after we arrive at our destination, for there can be months and even years in the new situation before we really “feel at home” there.

⁵ When I gave a talk on transition management in Israel, I learned that a Jewish writer named Ahad Ha-am had made a similar point about Moses in an essay he wrote in 1904. (So much for the idea of “new ideas”!) I am indebted to Sydney Engelberg for sending me the essay. It can be found in Ahad Ha-am, Selected Essays (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., n.d.)

Keeping People Going

Since the wilderness can be so wide and Promised Lands can take such a long time to reach, people need some quick successes to reassure them. So the Red Sea incident was more than just a boundary event. Not only did the destruction of the Egyptian cavalry break the ties to the past; it also demonstrated dramatically that Moses' "organization" was indeed on its way to the future and that heaven was watching over it.

Few modern executives or managers have Moses' gift for invoking divine intervention, but most successful transition leaders are said to have worked a miracle or two in the early days of a transition. The trick is to find areas where quick and sure successes are possible and push toward those outcomes quickly, even if it takes more resources than the importance the success might otherwise justify. One money-losing operation turned around, one big customer signed up, one department reorganized quickly, one regional office where the new information system or management style is working—these are worth far more than vague and gradual progress across the board. When these things happen, the doubters can be reassured for a while, the critics can be silenced a little longer, and the opponents can be temporarily confounded.

Going Slowly Enough

Paradoxically, the quick success needs to be part of a plan that ensures a slow journey through the wilderness. Moses could not get his people into the Promised Land—so the tradition goes—until the ones who had known Egypt had died. If we take that literally, it is a pretty discouraging message. But if we take it symbolically, it makes good sense: the old attitudes and behaviors that were appropriate to Egypt must die and new ones must be generated, or else the Promised Land will prove to be just a new Egypt. And today, all too many changes prove to be new names for the old behaviors and attitudes.

The First OD Consultant

Moses discovered early in his journey that the old tribal structures didn't work very well in the wilderness. They depended on the existence of tribal territory or turf, and the wilderness did not provide that. Modern transition leaders usually discover the same thing—that the ending they make has destroyed the conditions that made some of their old structures, policies, cultural norms, technical solutions, and strategies function properly.

Moses turned for an answer to the first OD (organizational development) consultant in recorded history, his father-in-law Jethro. Jethro noted that the wilderness had created what today we would call a “span of control” problem, and he suggested that people be re-grouped into arbitrary administrative units of 10, 50, 100, and 1000. He also recommended that authority be decentralized, urging Moses to set up judges to settle disputes within their groupings so that Moses himself wouldn't use up all his time doing that. Jethro's promise to Moses sounds like one that many modern OD consultants have made to their clients: “If thou shalt do this thing... then thou shalt be able to endure.” And Jethro was right.

What the modern transition leader needs to take from this story is the idea that the wilderness demands new and temporary arrangements to give people a sense of cohesion and purpose. It may be (as in Moses' case) a temporary structure or a temporary decentralized decision-making system. Or it may be a temporary policy for determining qualifications for advancement or retirement, during the time when the whole promotion or pension system is being changed. Or it may be temporary technological solutions for a time between fixed technological systems—a way to process invoices, for example, while the information system is being shifted from a mini-computer to a network of workstations.

The Dangers of the Neutral Zone

In the neutral zone the old cultural and social mores of the Jewish people were being transformed, but to be transformed they first had to be dissolved. That is always the pattern: first dissolution, then transformation. Picasso put it well when he said, "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction." But throughout the story, Moses runs the fearful possibility that the disintegration necessary for a new form to take shape can, if not managed properly, lead to destruction.


The danger is still a real one, for at least three different negative outcomes are possible:

- The danger that the disintegration will be terminal, a fatal entropy that leads nowhere; in such a case, the organization would slowly come apart.
- The danger that, in its weakened state, the organization will be conquered from outside; in that case the organization in transition is either defeated or acquired by a competitor.
- The danger that the disintegration of the old order will release destructive inner forces that the old order kept in check; in that case, the organization would be engulfed by old, unresolved conflicts or overcome by old inherent weaknesses.

All of these dangers are very real. Organizations (and, for that matter, individuals and whole societies) fall prey to them all the time. Russia is in just such a neutral zone as I write these words, and the news analysts have suggested all of the three previous possible outcomes to its transition.

The fear that an organization will become a victim of its transition lies behind the panic that often sets in when things are changing. Voices are raised suggesting four different paths of escape:

1. **A return to Egypt.** The pull of nostalgia is very strong when everything is up for grabs. Even after the Red Sea Experience cut off literal retreat, Moses had to contend constantly with the people who undermined morale by pining for the Good Old Days on the Nile. And so it is with today's transitions, as every transition leader quickly discovers.

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2. **A flight into Weird Answers.** Moses found that while he was visiting with God atop Mt. Sinai, some of his people began to worship golden idols made from their melted down Egyptian jewelry. Symbolically you might say that they were vulnerable to strange new symbols fashioned from the remnants of their old values. A similar thing happens today when a demagogue appeals to people in the neutral zone, using scraps of familiar traditions.⁶ Hitler is only the most notable example of that.
 3. **An exit to Greener Fields.** Moses had to contend with this one, too. His people looked longingly at some of the tribes that they passed along the route, and more than a few people left to join a group that promised respite from neutral zone stress. (Today, we call this “turnover,” and it always rises when an organization is in the wilderness.)
 4. **An impulse to Fast Forward.** Again, Moses knew all about the problem. He had people who didn’t see why they couldn’t enter the Promised Land much sooner, and early on they even sent a group in to look around. But the people weren’t inwardly ready, and they were overcome with doubts. So it was back to the wilderness for “years and years.”

⁶ I am indebted to Jim Kellso of Intel Corporation for pointing out the symbolic significance of the Golden Calf to me, as well as reminding me of the group that wanted to rush forward into the Promised Land before the neutral zone had done its job.

M. B. W. A. = Moses Been Wandering Around

Moses knew that the way to deal with the impulse to escape from the neutral zone was by maintaining close, personal contact with people. In too many organizations in transition, “communication” means memos and announcements passed on from one level of managers to the level below. Moses could communicate in that way too. In fact, he had the first Public Information Officer on record, his brother Aaron.

But Moses knew that he needed much more direct channels of communication. At night, he wandered among the campfires, talking to people, listening to them. His people felt connected to him and they could talk to him face-to-face. Coupled with his honesty, this style built a level of trust between him and his people that served to bond them during the difficult years in the wilderness.

Such a practice of Wandering Around is very different from the carefully staged visits that many leaders mistake for close contact with the rank and file. Such visits are planned to stick to a schedule and to exclude the unexpected. They send the message, “I want to look good and to reassure myself, so for God’s sake, don’t tell me anything unpleasant or ask me a question I can’t answer!” And they do nothing to build trust.

The dangers posed by the neutral zone are very real, but staying out of the wilderness to avoid them is abandoning all hope of reorganizational revitalization and transformation. Instead, the answer lies in protecting the vulnerable organization during its wilderness journey and encouraging the new growth that is taking place during the time between the ending and the new beginning.

The Positive Side of the Neutral Zone

It is during these in-between times, the states of wilderness that open up between the demise of an old order and the birth of a new one, that innovation is most likely to occur in any organization. This is true for a sociological reason and a psychological one. Sociologically every organizational arrangement has a kind of built in “immune system” that protects it from dangerous and destructive ideas. That is valuable under everyday circumstances, but when things are changing rapidly and radically, that immune system filters out the kinds of intuitions and ideas that could give the organization the creative answers it needs in order to adapt to the new environment. Ironically, however the arrangements of life in the Promised Land may differ from those in Egypt, their immune system will do the same thing. It is only in between, when the old ways disintegrate and the new ways haven’t yet taken shape, that creative answers are discovered. As Henry Adams wrote, “Chaos breeds life, while order creates habit.”

In Exodus, the creative aspect of the wilderness is embodied in the holy mountain, Mt. Sinai. Moses climbed that mountain alone to receive divine guidance, and he returned from those visits with the Ten Commandments, a different value-system that became the basis for a new Jewish culture.

We have paid more attention to the theological implications of Mt. Sinai than the psychological message, and that is a shame since although few of us are likely to achieve such experiences of religious revelation, anyone can tap into the creative breakthrough that the neutral zone makes possible. It is in the wilderness interim between the old and the new that an individual or an organization needs to do its brain-storming, its metaphorical thinking, and its creative problem-solving. This is the time for the experiments that people have been thinking about for years. This is the time to have suggestion contests and operations improvement campaigns. The neutral zone is the most naturally creative time the organization and its people will ever have.

Moses’ example of neutral zone discovery is not an isolated one. It was during the Long March in China in 1935 that Mao Tse Tung took control of the Chinese Communist Party and set in place the structures and systems that carried it through to its final victory after World War II. It was during their ocean voyage that the Pilgrims created their new social order in the Mayflower Compact. It was during his exile in the rural wilderness that the courtier, Machiavelli, came up with his insights into the hard realities of political life. The historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, made a study of such creative

“wilderness” experiences and concluded that they held the key to the revitalization of societies and organizations.⁷

What Toynbee called the “withdrawal and return” pattern exists whenever an old order is gone and a new order does not yet exist. Today’s organizational leaders would probably be considered grandiose if they announced that they were receiving divine guidance at such times, but they do have access to inspiration and discovery. If it isn’t quite the voice of God, it is nonetheless a voice from those parts of the unconscious that are difficult to hear during the times of business-as-usual. The combination of need and possibility is the open space and the fertile ground in which creative ideas germinate.

Moses capitalized on that space to elaborate the Ten Commandments into a new culture, and in the process launched history’s first recorded culture change efforts. Today’s leaders must find ways to do the same thing. It is no accident that many management teams go on retreats (often in wilderness settings) during times of transition. They may say it’s to get away from the telephone, but in fact it is to leave behind the old reality and to gain access to the “wilderness” frame of mind.

⁷ See his book, *The Study of History* [abridged], (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

On Not Being Allowed to Enter the Promised Land

Sometimes when I have talked to groups of managers about the Exodus story, some member of the audience has raised a hand and reminded us that Moses died without ever being allowed into the Promised Land that he had sought for so long. “Does that mean we have to get rid of the CEO?” the manager has sometimes asked. The question always generates a laugh.

Well, the answer is yes and no. In the Biblical story it is clear that Moses had done his job, and that when they reached the Promised Land his task was over. He did not enter the Promised Land because a new kind of leadership was needed, a Joshua who could lead the people in battle, settle a new territory, balance the sometimes conflicting demands of the various tribes, and build the wilderness vision into a successful society.

But I believe that that is a symbolic statement. In modern organizations, this new kind of leadership can sometimes be exercised by the same person who led the organization through the wilderness. Such a person needs to be multi-faceted and flexible. He or she needs to be ready to let go of one leadership style and take on another. That transition is not a small one, but like any transition it can be made if one sets out to make it consciously.

It is true, however, that the Moses-leaders of the world have frequently been followed by less exciting consolidators who administered the process of settling in to the new order of things. Winston Churchill was followed by Clement Attlee. Franklin Roosevelt was followed by Harry Truman. Mao, DeGaulle, and Gandhi were all followed by people who turned their organization’s attention back to the everyday world after the profoundly creative focus of the wilderness.


The settlement-leaders (who characterize the final, new beginnings phase of transition) must plant and harvest the fields for the day when the manna that fell from heaven is gone. They accomplish important things, but they do not have a gift for the miracles that pulled everyone together when their faith was weakening in the desert. They tend to come up through the normal succession channels rather than being called to leadership by the burning bush of crisis. Their communication is full of information, with less emphasis on staying connected or being inspired. They are, of necessity, realists: The Land of Milk and Honey has turned out to be dry and stony, and their task is to till it.

The Transition Leader, in Conclusion

Most of today's leaders have been taught to measure themselves by their ability to keep things from falling apart and to fix them when they do. What courage it takes for the leader to endorse disintegration (those "plagues" that accompany the ending) and to embrace the emptiness and chaos that the neutral zone brings! But the wise leader knows that falling apart during a transition is essential. The same disintegration that is dangerous and frightening produces the new energy, identity, and purpose that the organization needs for the next chapter of its life.

Today's leaders can be excused, because they have a problem that Moses did not. In the actual wilderness, people did not have to be told that they weren't in Egypt anymore, nor that the Promised Land still lay ahead. But in the metaphorical, psychological wilderness that is created by organizational change, people lack an understanding of, and even a name for, the state that they are in. To make sense out of what otherwise would seem to be only a thousand different private and personal distresses throughout an organization that is changing in some significant way, people need to be told about transition and the neutral zone wilderness. They need to understand what it does to people, and how to get through it. Otherwise they will blame others for their pain, lose confidence in their ability to reach the goal, and sink into unproductive rationalizations and dangerous subterfuges to hide their bewildered state. Since today's wilderness is not a literal one, but a landscape of the heart and mind, our society has not paid much attention to it. Because of our heritage, we have historically viewed wilderness areas as territory waiting conquest and settlement. Whenever we want to get somewhere, we take the shortest route and the fastest conveyance. We see change as something akin to crossing the street—something that is dangerous to do slowly. In that context transition seems to be nothing more than the time it takes to get across. We imagine that we can create new behaviors and attitudes as quickly as we can rearrange the organization chart or revise the budget. But the story of Moses tells us otherwise.

In the years since World War II, so many things have needed fixing that we have celebrated the role of "change agent." Only recently, with the round of mergers, downsizings, and restructurings, have we begun to discover that



change itself can be a problem and that we need leaders who not only create change but manage transition. That is why Moses is such a valuable example. He could not only break the bondage of the past and convey the vision of a future, but also get the people through the wilderness that always comes between where we are and where we want to be.

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