Managing Transitions

In schools of nursing across the country, summer is often a time of change. Deans and directors, faculty, and students move to a new career phase. That may be a new job, a similar job in a new place, a new organization or structure, or a change in status (e.g., from faculty to administrator, or from college student to nursing student). Bridges and Bridges (2016) identified these situations as changes; however, they proposed that successful change requires facilitating transition, a three-phase psychological process that allows people to optimally adjust. The three phases are (a) letting go, (b) the neutral zone, and (c) the new beginning. It’s important to note that the phases do not occur sequentially or in linear fashion. Rather, there is movement among the three phases throughout the transition process.

According to Bridges and Bridges (2016), “transition starts with an ending” (Chapter 1, Section 1, para. 8). In the examples identified above, these endings might be relationships with familiar colleagues, locations, routines, or roles. The key to successful transition is recognizing the ending for what it is and identifying the loss associated with it. Think back to the start of your clinical education. It was certainly much different than taking classes on campus. It was real life; for some it was scary. It started with the ending of student life as we knew it. Transitions also occur when starting a new role or position or possibly being assigned to a new course. It requires letting go of the past with its familiar patterns and routines. In the case of a new dean or director, faculty, staff, and students must leave behind the familiar way of doing business.

In facilitating your own transition, as well as others’ transitions, it is important to determine who is losing what. Each person sees transition differently and so accepting the reality and importance of the subjective losses is essential. Each person’s perception of loss is unique and reactions to the loss tend to follow suit. If the loss is perceived as significant to an individual, he or she may overreact. Listening with empathy can help others sort through their feelings of loss. Further, recognizing emotions from the grieving process as normal also assists with letting go. Individuals may express anger, bargaining, anxiety, sadness, disorientation, or depression. Facilitating discussions in a nonjudgmental fashion so individuals feel heard can assist with acknowledgement of loss. It’s important to treat the past with respect and honor accomplishments. Acknowledge how the past has created the foundation for a new beginning (Bridges & Bridges, 2016).

The second phase of transition is the neutral zone, “the psychological no-man’s land between the old reality and the new one” (Bridges & Bridges, 2016, Chapter 1, Section 1, para. 21). The neutral zone represents an important adjustment period in the transition. Some may become anxious in giving up the familiar and being uncertain about the future, which can play out as employee turnover during organizational change. The neutral zone can often be a positive phase, one in which innovation, creativity, and renewal occur.

One way to successfully navigate transitions is through building resilience. The American Psychological Association (2018) suggests 10 ways to build resilience:

1. Make connections.
2. Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems.
3. Accept that change is part of living.
4. Move toward your goals.
5. Take decisive actions.
7. Nurture a positive view of yourself.
8. Keep things in perspective.
9. Maintain a hopeful outlook.
10. Take care of yourself.

If you are facilitating colleagues or students as they move through the neutral zone, an effective strategy is to strengthen connections within the group. Foster open and honest communication. Encourage questions. Use creative problem-solving skills that maximize involvement and innovation (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). One set of strategies to consider is the use of Liberating Structures, developed by Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless (2013). They are a collection of 33 options that facilitate effective collaboration and are based on the following principles:

1. Include and unleash everyone.
2. Practice deep respect for people and local solutions.
3. Build trust as you go.
4. Learn by failing forward.
5. Practice self-discovery within a group.
6. Amplify freedom AND responsibility.
7. Emphasize possibilities: Believe before you see.
8. Invite creative destruction to enable innovation.
10. Never start without a clear purpose (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, n.d.).

Liberating Structures are effective tools to generate innovative and creative solutions. The website (http://www.liberatingstructures.com) provides comprehensive information about getting started with the use of these techniques.

The final phase of the transition process is launching a new beginning. Bridges and Bridges (2016) identified four Ps necessary for a successful launch: “the purpose, a picture, the plan, and a part to play” (Chapter 5, Section 2, para. 8). The purpose must be communicated clearly and resonate with others. It should be honest and straightforward. The picture follows the purpose and consists of visual representations of new work flows, organizational charts, or graphics that help illustrate the move forward. The plan provides details about the transition and the required adjustments associated with it. It identifies a celebration of the end, along with training and support to move toward the new beginning. Finally, it’s essential that people understand the role they play in the new beginning. It’s important that they see themselves as part of the change moving forward.

As summer draws to a close, think about the upcoming changes in your school. Is there a transition plan to facilitate growth and success as your school moves forward? How can you participate in moving your colleagues and students toward a new beginning?

References

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