

# Case Studies



**Bridges, William with Bridges, Susan. Chapter 2: “A Test Case” in Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change. 1991, 2003, 2019, 2017.**

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***“We think in generalities, but we live in detail.”***

—Alfred North Whitehead, British philosopher

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## Case Study 1: Software Company

**Taken from: *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, Chapter 2.**

Chapter 1 of *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* was fairly theoretical. Unless you understand the basic transition model, you won't be able to use it. But only in actual situations can you use it, so let's look at a situation that I encountered in a software company. I was brought in because the service manager wanted to make some changes, and his staff was telling him it wasn't going to be as easy as he thought.

He told me that he didn't see why that should be so. The change made perfect sense, and it was also necessary for the firm's continued leadership in the field of business software for banks. "Besides," he said, "no one's going to lose a job or anything like that."

Bearing in mind what you read in chapter 1, see what you think.

The company's service unit did most of its business over the telephone. Individual technicians located in separate cubicles fielded callers' questions. The company culture was very individualistic. Not only were employees referred to as "individual contributors," but each was evaluated based on the number of calls he or she disposed of in a week. At the start of each year a career evaluation plan was put together for each employee in which a target (a little higher than the total of the previous year's weekly numbers) was set. To hit the target brought you a bonus. To miss it cost you that bonus.

Purchasers of the company's big, custom software packages called to report various kinds of operating difficulties, and the calls were handled by people in three different levels. First the calls went to relatively inexperienced individuals, who could answer basic questions. They took the calls on an availability basis. If the problem was too difficult for the first level, it went to the second tier. Technicians at that level had more training and experience and could field most of the calls, but if they couldn't take care of a problem, they passed it on to someone on the third level. The "thirds" were programmers who knew the system from the ground up and could, if necessary, tell the client how to reprogram the software to deal with the problem.

Each tier of the service unit was a skill-based group with its own manager, who was responsible for managing the workload and evaluating the performance of the individual contributors. Not surprisingly, there was some rivalry and mistrust among the different levels, as each felt that its task was the pivotal one and that the others didn't pull their weight.

As you may have surmised, there were several inherent difficulties with this system. First, customers never got the same person twice unless they remembered to ask. Worse yet, there was poor coordination among the three levels. A level-one technician never knew to whom he was referring a customer—or sometimes even whether anyone at the next level actually took over the customers when he passed them on. Customers were often angry at being passed around rather than being helped.

Managers were very turf-conscious, and this didn't improve coordination. Sometimes the second-tier manager announced that all the "seconds" were busy—although this was hard to ascertain because each technician was hidden in a cubicle—and then the service would go on hold for a day (or even a week) while the seconds caught up with their workload. In the meantime, the frustrated customer might have called back and found that he had to start over again and explain the problem to a different first-tier worker.

Not only were customers passed along from one part of the service unit to another, but sometimes they were "mislaidd" entirely. The mediocre (at best) level of customer satisfaction hadn't been as damaging when the company had no real competition, but when another company launched an excellent new product earlier that year, it spelled trouble.

The general manager of the service unit brought in a service consultant, who studied the situation and recommended that the unit be reorganized into teams of people drawn from all three of the levels. (This reorganization is what in the last chapter I called the change.) A customer would be assigned to a team, and the team would have the collective responsibility of solving the customer's problem. Each team would have a coordinator responsible for steering the customer through the system of resources. Everyone agreed: the change ought to solve the problem.

The change was explained at a unit-wide meeting, where large organization charts and team diagrams lined the walls. Policy manuals were rewritten, and the team coordinators—some of whom had been level managers and some of whom were former programmers—went through a two-day training seminar. The date for the reorganization

was announced, and each team met with the general manager, who told them how important the change was and how important their part was in making it work.

Although there were problems when the reorganization occurred, no one worried too much, because there are always problems with change. But a month or so later it became clear that the new system not only wasn't working but didn't even exist except on paper. The old levels were still entrenched in everyone's mind, and customers were still being tossed back and forth (and often dropped) without any system of coordination. The coordinators maintained their old ties with people from their former groups and tended to try to get things done with the help of their old people (even when those people belonged to another team) rather than by their team as a whole.

Imagine that you're brought in to help them straighten out this tangle. What would you do? Because we can't discuss the possibilities face to face, I will give you a list of actions that might be taken in such a situation. Scan them and see which sound like good ideas to you. Then go back through the list slowly and put a number by each item, assigning it to one of the following five categories:

- 1 = Very important. Do this at once.
- 2 = Worth doing but takes more time. Start planning it.
- 3 = Yes and no. Depends on how it's done.
- 4 = Not very important. May even be a waste of effort.
- 5 = No! Don't do this.

Fill in those numbers before you read further, and take your time. This is not a simple situation, and solving it is a complicated undertaking.

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## Possible Actions to Take

Explain the changes again in a carefully written memo.

Figure out exactly how individuals' behavior and attitudes will have to change to make teams work.

Analyze who stands to lose something under the new system.

Redo the compensation system to reward compliance with the changes.

"Sell" the problem that is the reason for the change.

Bring in a motivational speaker to give employees a powerful talk about teamwork.

Design temporary systems to contain the confusion during the cutover from the old way to the new.

Use the interim between the old system and the new to improve the way in which services are delivered by the unit—and, where appropriate, create new services.

Change the spatial arrangements so that the cubicles are separated only by glass or low partitions.

Put team members in contact with disgruntled clients, either by phone or in person. Let them see the problem firsthand.

Appoint a "change manager" to be responsible for seeing that the changes go smoothly.

Give everyone a T-shirt with a new "teamwork" logo on it.

Break the change into smaller stages. Combine the firsts and seconds, then add the thirds later. Change the managers into coordinators last.

Talk to individuals. Ask what kinds of problems they have with "teaming."

Change the spatial arrangements from individual cubicles to group spaces.

Pull the best people in the unit together as a model team to show everyone else how to do it.

Give everyone a training seminar on how to work as a team.

Reorganize the general manager's staff as a team and reconceive the GM's job as that of a coordinator.

Send team representatives to visit other organizations where service teams operate successfully.

Turn the whole thing over to the individual contributors as a group and ask them to come up with a plan to change over to teams.

Scrap the plan and find one that is less disruptive. If that one doesn't work, try another. Even if it takes a dozen plans, don't give up.

Tell them to stop dragging their feet or they'll face disciplinary action.

Give bonuses to the first team to process 100 client calls in the new way.

Give everyone a copy of the new organization chart.

Start holding regular team meetings.

Change the annual individual targets to team targets, and adjust bonuses to reward team performance.

Talk about transition and what it does to people. Give coordinators a seminar on how to manage people in transition.

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## ***Category 1: Very important. Do this at once.***

**Figure out exactly how individuals' behavior and attitudes will have to change to make teams work.** To deal successfully with transition, you need to determine precisely what changes in their existing behavior and attitudes people will have to make. It isn't enough to tell them that they have to work as a team. They need to know how teamwork differs behaviorally and attitudinally from the way they are working now. What must they stop doing, and what are they going to have to start doing? Be specific. Until these changes are spelled out, people won't be able to understand what you tell them.

**Analyze who stands to lose something under the new system.** This step follows the previous one. Remember, transition starts with an ending. You can't grasp the new thing until you've let go of the old thing. It's this process of letting go that people resist, not the change itself. Their resistance can take the form of foot-dragging or sabotage, and you have to understand the pattern of loss to be ready to deal with the resistance and keep it from getting out of hand.

**"Sell" the problem that is the reason for the change.** Most managers and leaders put 10% of their energy into selling the problem and 90% into selling the solution to the problem. People aren't in the market for solutions to problems they don't see, acknowledge, and understand. They might even come up with a better solution than yours, and then you won't have to sell it—it will be theirs.

**Put team members in contact with disgruntled clients, either by phone or in person. Let them see the problem firsthand.** This is part of selling the problem. As long as you are the only one fielding complaints, poor service is going to be *your* problem, no matter how much you try to get your subordinates to acknowledge its importance. To engage their energies, you must make poor service *their* problem. Client visits are the best opportunity for people to see how their operation is perceived by its customers. DuPont has used this program very successfully in a number of its plants. Under its "Adopt a Customer" program, blue-collar workers are sent to visit customers once a month and bring what they learn back to the factory floor.



**Talk to individuals. Ask what kinds of problems they have with “teaming.”** When an organization is having trouble with change, managers usually say they know what is wrong. But the truth is that often they don’t. They imagine that everyone sees things as they do, or they make assumptions about others that are untrue. You need to ask the right questions. If you ask, “Why aren’t you doing this?” you’ve set up an adversarial relation and will probably get a defensive answer. If, on the other hand, you ask, “What problems are you having with this?” you’re likelier to learn why it isn’t happening.

**Talk about transition and what it does to people. Give coordinators a seminar on how to manage people in transition.** Everyone can benefit from understanding transition. A coordinator will deal with subordinates better if he or she understands what they are going through. If they understand what transition feels like, team members will feel more confident that they haven’t taken a wrong turn. They’ll also see that some of their problems come from the transition process and not from the details of the change. If they don’t understand transition, they’ll blame the change for what they are feeling.

**Start holding regular team meetings.** Even before you can change the space to fit the new teams, you can start building the new identity by having those groups meet regularly. In this particular organization, the plan had been to hold meetings every two weeks. We changed that immediately: the teams met every morning for ten minutes for the first two months. Only such frequent clustering can override the old habits and the old self-images and build the new relations that teamwork requires. And you can give no stronger message about a new priority than to give it a visible place on everyone’s calendar.

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## ***Category 2: Worth doing but takes more time. Start planning it.***

**Redo the compensation system to reward compliance with the changes.** This is important because you need to stop rewarding the old behavior. But do it carefully. A reward system that comes off the top of someone’s head is likely to introduce new problems faster than it clears up old ones.

**Design temporary systems to contain the confusion during the cutover from the old way to the new.** The time between the end of old ways and the beginning of new ones is a dangerous period. Things fall through the cracks. You'll learn more about this when we talk about the neutral zone, but for now, suffice to say that you may have to create temporary policies, procedures, reporting relationships, roles, and even technologies to get you through this chaotic time.

**Use the interim between the old system and the new to improve the ways in which services are delivered by the unit—and, where appropriate, create new services.** This is the flip side of the chaotic “in-between” time: when everything is up for grabs anyway, innovations can be introduced more easily than during stable times. It's a time to try doing things in new ways—especially new ways that people have long wanted to try but that conflicted with the old ways.

**Change the spatial arrangements from individual cubicles to group spaces.** Until this is done, the new human configuration has no connection with the physical reality of the place. Space is symbolic. If they're all together physically, people are more likely to feel together mentally and emotionally.

**Reorganize the general manager's staff as a team and reconceive the GM's job as that of a coordinator.** Leaders send many more messages than they realize or intend to. Unless the leader is modeling the behavior that he or she is seeking to develop in others, things aren't likely to change very much. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “What you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you say.”

**Send team representatives to visit other organizations where service teams operate successfully.** People need to see, hear, and touch to learn effectively. Talking to someone who's actually doing something carries more weight with a doubtful person than even the best seminar or the most impressive pep talk. If you can't take people to another location, invite a representative to your location and get a videotape that shows how work is done there.

**Change the annual individual targets to team targets, and adjust bonuses to reward team performance.** It's hard to get people who are used to going it alone to play on a team, and you'll never succeed until the game is redefined as a team sport. Annual performance schedules are part of what defines the game. Make this important change as soon as you can.

### ***Category 3: Yes and no. Depends on how it's done.***

**Bring in a motivational speaker to give employees a powerful talk about teamwork.** The problem is that, by itself, this solution accomplishes nothing. And too often it *is* done by itself, as though, once “motivated,” people will make the change they are supposed to. This method should be integrated into a comprehensive transition management plan to be effective.

**Appoint a “change manager” to be responsible for seeing that the changes go smoothly.** This is a good idea if you have a well-planned undertaking, complete with communication, training, and support. But if you merely appoint someone and say, “Make it happen,” you are unlikely to accomplish anything. If the person isn't very skilled, he or she may become simply an enforcer and weaken the change effort.

**Give everyone a T-shirt with a new “teamwork” logo on it.** Symbols are great, and you should use them. They have to be part of a larger, comprehensive effort. (A lot of issues come back to that point, and so will we.)

**Give everyone a training seminar on how to work as a team.** Seminars are important because people have to learn the new way. But much training is wasted because it's not part of a larger, comprehensive effort.

**Change the spatial arrangements so that the cubicles are separated only by glass or low partitions.** You're on the right track—individual cubicles *do* reinforce the old behavior—but this solution doesn't go far enough because it doesn't use space creatively to reinforce the new identity as “part of a team.” See Category 2 for a better solution.



**Give bonuses to the first team to process 100 client calls in the new way.** Rewards and competition can both serve your effort, but be sure not to set simplistic quantitative goals. Those 100 clients can be “processed” in ways that send them right out the door and into the competition’s arms. In addition, speed can be achieved by a few team members doing all the work. You want to reward *teamwork*, so plan your competition carefully.

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### ***Category 4: Not very important. May even be a waste of effort.***

**Explain the changes again in a carefully written memo.** When you put things in writing, people can’t claim later that they weren’t told. Memos are actually better ways of protecting the sender, however, than they are of informing the receiver. And they are especially poor as ways to convey complex information—like how a reorganization is going to be undertaken.

**Give everyone a copy of the new organization chart.** An organization chart can help to clarify complex groupings and reporting relationships, but this solution is pretty straightforward. It’s the new attitudes and behavior we’re concerned with here, not which VP people report to.

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### ***Category 5: No! Don’t do this.***

**Turn the whole thing over to the individual contributors as a group and ask them to come up with a plan to change over to teams.** Involvement is fine, but it has to be carefully prepared and framed within realistic constraints. Simply to turn the power over to people who don’t want a change to happen is to invite catastrophe.

**Break the change into smaller stages. Combine the firsts and seconds, then add the thirds later. Change the managers into coordinators last.** This one is tempting because small changes are easier to assimilate than big ones. But one change after another is trouble. It’s better to introduce change in one coherent package.

**Pull the best people in the unit together as a model team to show everyone else how to do it.** This is even more appealing, but it strips the best people out of the other units and hamstring the other groups’ ability to duplicate the model team’s accomplishments.

**Scrap the plan and find one that is less disruptive. If that one doesn’t work, try another. Even if it takes a dozen plans, don’t give up.** If there is one thing that is harder than a difficult transition, it is a whole string of them occurring because somebody is pushing one change after another and forgetting about transition.

**Tell them to stop dragging their feet or they’ll face disciplinary action.** Don’t make threats. They build ill will faster than they generate positive results. But do make expectations clear. People who don’t live up to them will have to face the music.

As you look back over my comments and compare them to your own thinking, reflect on the *change-transition* difference again. When people come up with very different answers than I have offered, it is usually because they forgot that it was transition and not change that they were supposed to be watching out for. Change needs to be managed too, of course. But it won’t do much good to get everyone into the new teams and the new seating arrangements if all of the old behavior and thinking continue. As you read the rest of the book, keep reminding yourself that it isn’t enough to change the situation. You also have to help people make the psychological reorientation that they must make if the change is to work. The following chapters provide dozens of tactics that have proved helpful in doing that.

In chapter 8 you’ll find another case and another chance to try your hand at a transition management plan. But first let’s look at some well-tested transition management tactics. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with how to manage, respectively, endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings. Chapter 6 talks about the stages of organizational life, and managing nonstop change is the subject of Chapter 7. When you reach the next case study, you’ll be full of ideas.

