



Change Management

3 Tools to Help Leaders Steady Their Teams During a Transition

by Victoria M. Grady

3 Tools to Help Leaders Steady Their Teams During a Transition

by Victoria M. Grady

Published on HBR.org / March 30, 2021 / Reprint [H066DQ](#)



cagkansayin/Getty Images

When we experience a big change, we need support to help us make it to the other side. Developmental psychology, and particularly the [seminal work of D.W. Winnicott](#), offers a way to do this: through transitional objects. These objects — whether they take the form of a physical item (like a security blanket) or something more abstract (like a routine, habit, or action) — provide the necessary grounding to help us navigate uncertainty.

Over the course of 15 years and involving more than 100 organizations in seven different countries, my research team has studied the ways transitional objects provide pivotal support between an organization and its employees during times of change in the workplace. For example, when the founder of a UK-based, family-owned publishing house (and avid art collector) decided it was time to sell the business, he offered each employee the opportunity to choose a piece of art from his collection as a gift of appreciation. This act of generosity — and the literal piece of art — provided the employees with something from the past to help them move toward the future.

Not all transitional objects are as clear-cut, and sometimes we don't even realize we're using them to get through a tough time. But they're particularly important for managers to pay attention to today, as individuals, employees, and organizations around the globe have been managing through more major changes than usual amid the Covid-19 pandemic. As workplaces move toward a “new normal” — one that is still incredibly uncertain and has undefined boundaries — leaders can deliberately identify and integrate transitional objects for support.

In particular, leaders need to consider three important attributes that help people process transitions: choice, a connection to a purpose, and using something new as a bridge toward where you're headed. Understanding each of these will help you then identify the types of transitional objects that will provide the best support for your employees over another bumpy year.

Attribute 1: Choice

The literature around a neuroscience concept called neuroplasticity confirms that, in fact, our brains can be re-configured; they are malleable throughout our lives. This means that, in times of change, people are capable of letting go of old norms and embracing new ones. This isn't always easy; however, research shows change is more palatable if people feel like they're an active part of making decisions throughout it. A

transitional object that gives people choice can provide the support needed between these two states.

In organizations, this could look like giving employees a choice of where and how to work. One of the companies we studied went from a small office space to a much bigger one. Instead of assigning spaces to employees, it gave people a choice of a cubicle or an office with a door. This gave people a sense of autonomy and a clear role amidst a big change – and is clearly relevant today, as companies are making big decisions about where and when employees will be working in the future. In which aspects of this process can you give people choices?

In another example, a team from a Washington D.C. based global consulting firm decided to leave the organization they were working with after an incredibly productive five-year project. Their project team was devastated. To help manage the emotions of the transition, the consulting team's co-lead proposed several options for a longer-term growth plan the team could carry with them into the future. The team members felt more motivated when they were given a say in their future, particularly from a departing, trusted leader.

Other organizations might consider opening up certain decisions to a larger group when something particularly beloved comes to an end. When people feel like they have a role in shaping next steps, particularly when something negative or unexpected happens, it can help everyone move forward.

Attribute 2: Connection to a purpose or mission

Research indicates that western cultures are often more focused on individualism and less on collectivism. The massive change brought about by Covid-19 abruptly reminded these societies that there is great power when we work together and stay connected. In particular, a connection to something shared — a mission, purpose, or guiding star — can allow

people to focus on something bigger than the momentary pain of transition and uncertainty.

This can be particularly powerful in the workplace. Take, for example, the oft-told story of the [NASA janitor](#) who, when asked by JFK during his 1961 NASA visit, “What are you doing?” responded, “I am helping to put a man on the moon.” This is usually used to illustrate just how deep the organization’s mission runs, and how this helps NASA successfully achieve ambitious goals.

This is not, however, just a relic from the past. In 2016, our research team performed a multi-year analysis of data previously collected by the United States Federal Government to track federal agency metrics related to productivity, engagement leadership, and job satisfaction. The [study revealed](#) that over the 15+ years of data collection, those agencies with a deep connection to mission scored consistently higher in all performance metrics than those agencies who had little or no reliable connection to mission.

In particular, we found that [connection to mission](#) or purpose is a key supporting object during times of change and transition. And which government agency had the highest scores? NASA. To do challenging things, and to do them over time, all employees need to know how what they’re doing supports a bigger goal.

This might be particularly important if your organization is going through major growth or, conversely, is struggling due to the pandemic. Can you give your employees a clear purpose or mission to galvanize around while major changes occur? Much like a physical security blanket, a mission can provide people with familiarity and comfort – something they understand and can work towards when things feel uncertain.

Attribute 3: Establish a bridge

Covid-19 required us to reimagine everything from seeking medical care to educating our children to doing our jobs to grocery shopping. Stepping in to help (with varying success) were technology platforms: telehealth, virtual education, Zoom, and food-delivery services. In other words, technology became a bridge to support our ability to re-imagine “normal” daily life from the hospital to the classroom to the workplace.

Bridges like these are powerful because they both expose what’s not working in our societies and also introduce new (and sometimes better) ways to accomplish daily tasks. Although Covid-19 thrust us into a world filled with uncertainty and ambiguity, the outcome may be cultural and societal transformations in how we work that could have otherwise taken another century to occur. So, ask yourself: Where can technology help bridge our employees, clients, and customers as this model is reshaped?

Establishing a bridge does not only refer to technology, however. It can be as simple as an orange frog. This example, based on a parable of an orange frog who embraces its positivity amid a sea of negative frogs, is from an Iowa-Illinois based health care system that, at the time, was navigating major organizational changes driven by increasing costs and decreasing revenues. (Disclosure: I consult with this health care system, though not on this particular project.) The basic idea was that, even on dark days, there is probably at least one bright spot to focus on. This bright spot can help serve as a transitional object to get you and your employees from one day to the next amidst challenging circumstances. What orange frogs have you noticed today?

In these three ways, transitional objects provide support during all forms of change and uncertainty. So, as you shift back to your physical office space, resume travel, and establish a new post-pandemic “normal,” ask yourself three questions: Where can I give my employees choice? How can I instill purpose into everyday activities? And what new objects, innovations, or technologies can serve as a bridge to where we’re headed?

Not every transitional object will be easily identifiable; but they are fundamental to the quest to develop, optimize, and ultimately maintain organizational resilience through the current pandemic and beyond.



Victoria M Grady is an Associate Professor of Management/Organizational Behavior in the School of Business at George Mason University. Victoria is also the Professor in Residence for Healthcare in the People and Change Practice at Dixon Hughes Goodman (DHG) based out of Charlotte, North Carolina.