It isn’t the changes that do you in; it’s the transitions. Change is not the same as transition. Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external; transition is internal.

Several of the important differences between change and transition are overlooked when people think of transition as simply gradual or unfinished change. When we talk about change, we naturally focus on the outcome that the change will produce. If you move from California to New York City, the change is crossing the country and learning your way around the Big Apple. The same is true of your organization’s change to a service culture or to a flatter organizational structure or to using electronic mail to communicate internally. In each case the new arrangements must be understood if we are to be ready for the change.

Transition is different. The starting point for transition is not the outcome but the ending that you will have to make to leave that old situation behind. Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place. Nothing so undermines organizational change as the failure to think through who will have to let go of what when change occurs.

Transition starts with an ending - paradoxical but true. Test this fact in your own experience. Think of a big change in your life: your managerial job, or the birth of your first child, or the move to a new house. Good changes, all of them, but as transitions, each one started with an ending.

With the job, you may have had to let go of your old peer group. They weren’t peers anymore, and the kind of work you really liked may have come to an end. Perhaps you had to give up the feeling of competence that came from doing that work, and your habit of leaving your work at the office may have stopped when you took on the round-the-clock responsibility of a managerial job.
With the baby, you probably had to let go of regular sleep, extra money, time alone with the spouse, and the spontaneity of going somewhere when the two of you felt like it. Here, too, your sense of competence may have come to an end as you found yourself unable to get the baby to eat or sleep or stop crying. With the move, a whole network of relationships ended. Even if you kept in touch, it was never the same again. You used to know where to go for what - stores, the doctor, the dentist, and the neighbor who'd keep an eye on the house when you were gone. You have to let go of feeling at home for a while.

Even in these “good” changes, there are transitions that begin with having to let go of something. There are endings. There are losses. I'm not trying to be discouraging - just realistic. The failure to identify and be ready for the endings and losses that change produces is the largest single problem that organizations in transition encounter.

The organization institutes a quality improvement program, and no one foresees how many people will experience the “improvement” as a loss of something related to their jobs. The organization builds a beautiful new headquarters building, and no one foresees how many people experience the relocation as a loss.

Once you understand that transition begins with letting go of something, you have taken the first step in the task of transition management. The second step is understanding what comes after the letting go: the neutral zone. This is the no-man’s land between the old reality and the new. It’s the limbo between the old sense of identity and the new. It is a time when the old way is gone and the new doesn’t feel comfortable yet.

When you moved to your new house, or got the promotion, or had the baby. The change probably happened pretty fast. But that is just the external situational change. Inwardly the psychological transition happened much more slowly, because instead of becoming a new person as fast as you changed outwardly, you actually struggled for a time in a state that was neither the old nor the new. It was a kind of emotional wilderness, a time when it wasn’t clear who you were or what was real.

It's important to understand this neutral zone for several reasons. First, if you don't expect it and understand why it is there, you're likely to try to rush through it and to be discouraged when you cannot do so. You may
mistakenly conclude that the confusion you feel is a sign that there’s something wrong with you.

Second, you may feel frightened in this no-man’s-land and try to escape. (Employees do this frequently, which is why there is an increased level of turnover during major organizational changes.) To abandon the situation, however, is to abort the transition, both personally and organizationally, and to jeopardize the change.

Third, if you escape prematurely from the neutral zone, you’ll not only compromise the change but also lose a great opportunity. Painful though it often is, the neutral zone is the individual’s and the organization’s best chance for creativity, renewal, and development. The positive aspect of the neutral zone will be discussed further in a later chapter, but here let me note simply that this gap between the old and the new is the time when innovation is most possible and when revitalization begins.

The neutral zone is thus both a dangerous and an opportune place, and it is the very core of the transition process. It’s the place and the time when the old habits that are no longer adaptive to the situation are extinguished and new, better-adapted patterns of habit begin to take shape. It is the winter in which the old growth returns to the soil as decayed matter, while the next year’s growth begins to stir in the root underground. It is the night during which we are disengaged from yesterday’s concerns and prepare for tomorrow’s. It is the chaos in which the old form of things dissolves and from which the new form emerges. It is the seedbed of the new beginning that you seek.

Ending - neutral zone - new beginning. People make the new beginning only if they have first made an ending and spent some time in the neutral zone, yet most organizations fly to start with the beginning rather than finishing up. They pay no attention to endings. They do not acknowledge the existence of the neutral zone, then wonder why people have so much difficulty with change.

When I say that “organizations” do these things, I mean, of course, that people do. Only people like you can develop the new attitude toward change by recognizing that it is dependent on transition. Only people like you can learn to manage transition so the changes do not become unmanageable. Only people like you can implement change in such a way that it does not end up hurting the organization more than helping it.
Question: In your own professional or personal life, have you gone through a transition where you had to let go of certain things? Do you remember what the “neutral zone” was like for you?

STOP: 6 minutes to share reflections. Use ordered sharing.

PART II - 3 minutes to read

Chapter 3 - How to Get Them to Let Go

Before you can begin something new, you have to end what used to be. Before you can become a different kind of person, you must let go of the old identity. Before you can learn a new way of doing things, you have to unlearn the old way. So beginnings depend on endings. The problem is, people don’t like endings.

Yet change and endings go hand in hand: change causes transition, and transition starts with an ending. If things change, at least some employees and managers are going to have to let go of something. It isn’t the changes themselves that the people resist. It’s the losses and endings that they are experiencing, and the transition that they are resisting. That’s why it does little good to talk about how healthy the outcome of the change will be. Instead, you have to deal directly with the losses and endings. But how do you do that? Here’s how:

• Identify who’s losing what
• Accept the reality and importance of the subjective losses
• Don’t be surprised at “overreaction”
• Acknowledge the losses openly and sympathetically
• Expect and accept the signs of grieving
• Give people information, and do it again and again
• Define what’s over and what isn’t
• Mark the endings
• Treat the past with respect
• Let people take a piece of the old way with them
• Show how endings ensure continuity of what really matters
A Final Thought
With all of the foregoing emphasis on foreseeing and softening the painful effects of loss on employees, the reader might assume that I am urging slowly taking things away a piece at a time. That would be a misreading of my advice, for the last thing an organization needs is too small an ending or an incomplete ending that requires a whole new round of losses to finish the job before the wounds from the old ones have healed. Whatever, must end, must end. Don’t drag it out. Plan it carefully, and once it is done, let there be time for healing. But the action itself should be sufficiently large to get the job done.

Conclusion
The single biggest reason organizational changes fail is that no one thought about endings or planned to manage their impact on people. Naturally concerned about the future, planners and implementers usually forget that people have to let go of the present first. They forget that while the first task of change management is to understand the destination and how to get there, the first task of transition management is to convince people to leave home. You’ll save yourself a lot of grief if you remember that.

Question: In our school’s transition to the Common Core State Standards, what kinds of losses might people be feeling? What can we do as staff members to support our colleagues through this time of perceived losses?

STOP: 6 minutes to share reflections. Use ordered sharing.

PART III - 5 minutes to read
Chapter 4 – Managing the Neutral Zone Successfully
Just when you’ve decided that the hardest part of managing transition is getting people to let go of the old ways, you enter a state of affairs in which neither the old ways nor the new ways work satisfactorily. People are
caught between the demands of conflicting systems and end up like immobilized Hamlets trying to decide whether “to be or not to be.” Or all systems break down and it is (to use a client’s memorable phrase) a time of “radio silence.”

If this phase lasted only a short time, you could just wait for it to pass. But when the change is deep and far-reaching, this time between the old identity and the new can stretch out for months, even years. This, as Marilyn Ferguson says, is a time when you’ve let go of one trapeze with the faith that the new trapeze is on its way. In the meantime, there’s nothing to hold onto.

“Normalize” the Neutral Zone
One of the most difficult aspects of the neutral zone for most people is that they don’t understand it. They expect to be able to move straight from the old to the new. But this isn’t a trip from one side of the street to the other. It’s a journey from one identity to the other, and that takes time.

The neutral zone is like the wilderness through which Moses led his people. That took 40 years, not because they were lost but because the generation that had known Egypt had to die off before they entered the Promised Land. If you take that literally, it is pretty discouraging: things won’t really change until a whole generation of workers dies. On a less literal level, the point of Moses’ long journey through the wilderness is entirely applicable to the organization: the outlook, attitudes, values, self-images, ways of thinking that had been functional in the past have to “die” before people are ready for life in the present. Moses made the ending when he led his people out of Egypt, but it was the 40 years in the neutral zone wilderness that got Egypt out of his people. It won’t take 40 years, but you aren’t going to be able to do it quickly, either.

The neutral zone isn’t just meaningless waiting and confusion. It is a time when a necessary reorientation and redefinition is taking place, and people need to understand that. It is the winter during which the spring’s new growth is taking shape under the earth.

People need to recognize that it is natural to feel somewhat frightened and confused in this no-man’s-land. As the old patterns die in their minds and the new ones begin to take shape, people in the neutral zone are assailed by self-doubt and misgivings about their leaders. Ambiguity increases, and so does the longing for answers. That is why people in the neutral zone are so prone to follow anyone who seems to know where he or
she is going - which, unfortunately, includes troublemakers and people who are heading toward the exits. No wonder the neutral zone is a time when turnover increases. (Moses even had that problem himself, although in his day it was called worshipping strange gods).

**Strengthen Intra-group Connections**
The neutral zone is a lonely place where people feel isolated, especially if they don’t understand what is happening to them. Old problems are likely to surface and old resentments are likely to come to life again. For these reasons it is especially important to try to rebuild a sense of identification with the group, and of connectedness with one another.

**Using the Neutral Zone Creatively**
While it is essential to build into the neutral zone temporary systems for getting people through the wilderness intact, you need to do more. You need to capitalize on the opportunity that the neutral zone provides to do things differently and better.

In the neutral zone restraints on innovation are the weakest. Every organizational system has its own natural “immune system” whose task it is to resist novelty. That is not bad, per se. If the organization didn’t have such an immune system, every “germ” of change would take root, and the organization would not have enough stability to get anything done or enough continuity to give people that identity they need. But such necessities carry a price tag.

The cost of an immune system is that even good germs get filtered out or killed off. The old immune system choked off creativity in its own manner, and no matter how loose and free the new way of doing things is, its immune system will assume a form that makes creativity difficulty in some different way. It is during the gap between the old and the new that the organization’s systems of immunity are weak enough to let truly creative solutions emerge unhampered. Only when the old way of seeing things disappears are habit patterns broken, and a new way will emerge.

Whatever the details of the situation you face, the question to ask yourself is, “How can I make this interim between the old and the new not only a bearable time, but a time during which the organization and everyone’s place in it is enhanced? How can we come out of this waiting time better that we were before the transition began?”
A Final Note on the Neutral Zone

Behind all this advice is an idea that can be validated with dozens of examples from both organizations and individual lives. During that apparently uneventful journey through the wilderness, a significant change takes place within people - or if it doesn't, the change isn't likely to produce the results it is intended to. That change represents a kind of inner “sorting” process in which old and no-longer-appropriate habits are discarded, and newly-appropriate patterns of thought and action are developed.

In his book, *Muddling Through*, Roger Golde tells a story that might stand as a fable about how this sorting goes on in the neutral zone if the circumstances permit it. The story concerns a French Army unit that was isolated in the Sahara desert during World War II. Re-supplying them was terribly difficult, and they were running out of everything. Their clothes were in particularly awful shape. Somehow a Red Cross clothing shipment reached them, but most of the clothes were used, with size labels illegible or missing, and everyone wondered how they could be assigned to the people they would most nearly fit.

The commander, obviously and expert on neutral zone strategies, simply lined the troops up and issued each man one shirt, one pair of pants, and two shoes with no attempt to fit for size or even to match pairs. Then he shouted, "*Debrouillez-vous!*" which means roughly, "Sort them out." There was an enormous thrashing and rumbling while the men switched and swapped until they had clothes that would more or less fit them. The result was a very adequate solution to an impossible problem - except for one unlucky soldier who ended up with two left shoes.

This is merely to illustrate that people can work out much of the necessary business of the neutral zone as you protect them, encourage them, and give them the structure and opportunities they need to do it.

Let's call that the neutral zone password - *Debrouillez-vous!*

*Question:* What other ways can our staff manage the neutral zone as we transition to CCSS?

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*STOP:* 6 minutes to share reflections. Use ordered sharing.
Chapter 5 – Launching a New Beginning

Beginnings are psychological phenomena, not simply practical ones, in practical terms, things change quickly. When the old computers were carted away and the new system was installed, everyone started to get along without them. When the budget was cut, people started immediately to work under new financial constraints. When they put the new organization chart on the wall, individuals knew what their new roles were, who their new bosses were, and with whom they worked. In terms of the situational change, a new start had been made.

But those were only starts. The transition was still underway, and people were still in the neutral zone feeling lost, confused, and uncertain. The beginning took place only after they had come through the wilderness and were ready to make emotional commitment to do things a new way and see themselves as new people. Starts involve new situations. Beginnings involve new understandings, new values, new attitudes, and most of all, new identities.

Starts can and should be carefully designed, like an object. Beginnings can and should be nurtured, like a plant. Starts take place on a schedule as a result of decisions. They are signaled by announcements: "On March 25, the twenty-four district branches will be consolidated into six regional offices." Beginnings, on the other hand, are the final phase of the organic process that I call "transition," and their timing is not measured in the dates written on an implementation schedule. Beginnings follow the timing of the mind and heart.

Ambivalence Toward Beginnings

Beginnings are strange things. People want them to happen but fear them at the same time. After the long and seemingly pointless wanderings through the neutral zone, most people are greatly relieved to arrive at whatever Promised Land they’ve been seeking. Yet beginnings are also scary, for they are the time to make a new commitment and actually be the new person that the new situation demands. Beginnings feel frightening to most of us for a number of reasons.

First, beginnings reactivate some of the old anxieties that were originally triggered by the ending. Beginnings, after all, established once and for all that an ending was real. I may, for example, have decided to leave my
old career, but until I begin working at a new career, there is something provisional about the decision. The new beginning ratifies the ending. (That finality is paradoxically also the source of excitement, for it signals that you've made a clean break and have the chance to begin again from scratch.)

Second, the new way of doing things represents a gamble: there is always the possibility it won't work. The very ideas of doing something the new way may be crazy, or it may be unrealistic to think that a particular organization can carry it off. Even if it does work, there is the possibility that the individual in question won't be good enough at it to succeed, or even that he or she will make a shameful mess of the effort.

Third, the way in which the prospect of a risky new beginning resonates with the past may not be positive. On a personal level, it may trigger old memories of failure that destroyed the individual's self esteem. Organizationally, it may resonate with a history in which failures have been punished, or with a particular incident in which a new beginning was aborted in some traumatic fashion.

Finally, for some people new beginnings destroy what was a pleasant experience in the neutral zone. Most people don't like the wilderness, but a few find ambiguity and the slower pace of work rather pleasant. The confusion gives them a cover under which to conceal their own lack of interest in the task at hand, and the absence of a clear agenda gives them an excuse for the inactivity. For such people, the new beginning is an end to a pleasant holiday from accountability and pressure.

**Question:** What are some important things for our staff to keep in mind about our "beginnings" in the transition to CCSS?

**STOP:** 6 minutes to share reflections. Use ordered sharing.

**PART V - 3 minutes to read**

*Chapter 6 - How to Deal with Nonstop Change*

It has become a truism that the only constant is change. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus commented on it 2,500 years ago. Yet we all feel that change is different today. There's more of it. Our department is re-organized, and that's hardly finished when the new director arrives and
decides to reorganize it again. Or just as everyone is recovering from the introduction of the new electronic mail system, they announce that the sales force will start carrying laptop computers and enter orders automatically from the field. We talk not of a change but of change as an ongoing phenomenon. It is a collage, not a single image. One change overlaps with another, and it’s all change from margin to margin.

That being so, what I’ve been saying about transition may seem a little artificial, like a pure substance isolated in the laboratory which is never found in nature. In a sense, that’s true. The image of transition I’ve been drawing is an ideal one, like textbook diagrams that are clearer than anything you ever encounter in the real world.

But that clarity has an advantage. Ironically, one of the reasons we’ve paid so little attention to transition is that we’re overwhelmed with it. Transition is all around us - so close that we can’t see it clearly. Not until we isolate it in its simplest form can we see its outlines. The purest and simplest transition I have been discussing enables people to understand the dynamics of transition more easily than would otherwise be the case. Fortunately, real transitions (like real daisies, real amoebas, and real bullfinches) look enough like their diagrammed counterpart to be recognizable. That said, we now have to adapt the image of isolated transition to the facts of a constantly changing environment.

**The Three Phase Overlap**

In transition there is an ending, then a neutral zone, and only then a new beginning. But those phases are not separate stages with clear boundaries. The three phases of transition are more like curving, slanting strata in any situation. Or we might see them as overlapping in the manner suggested in Figure 1, which follows.

In either case, you are in more than one of these phases at the same time, and the movement through transition is marked by a change in the dominance of one phase as it gives way to the next.

This way of portraying transition was suggested to me by Donald Skilling, an organizational consultant in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
Question: How can we support each other as a staff during the three-phase overlap of our transition to CCSS?

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FINAL DISCUSSION:
1. Ordered sharing, 1 minute each, to share whatever you wish. OK to pass.
2. Open discussion