



DE SCHOOL
VOOR
TRANSITIE

DÉ EXPERT IN
TRANSITION BASED LEIDERSCHAP

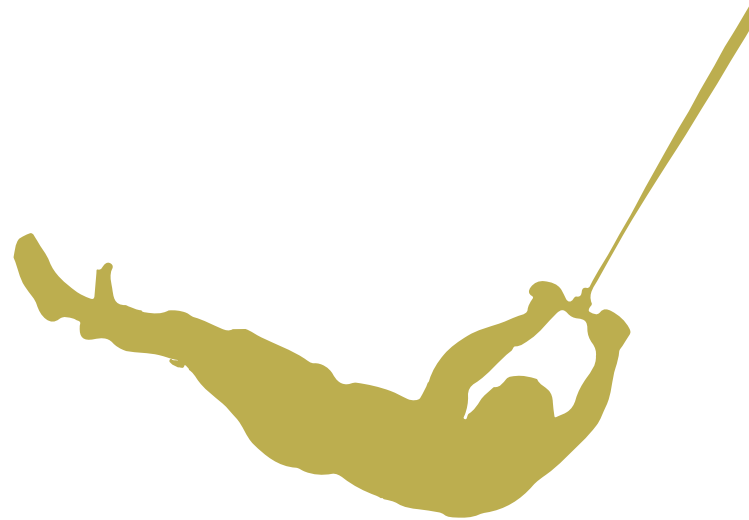
Organizations, change and loss

Transition based leadership and shaping transition

Transition based leadership and shaping transition

Leadership in context

- + *Martin, owner-director of a large family-run business, summons his employees. He informs them that orders are lacking for an element of production. A large competitor overseas has won the contract from their most important client for the next few years. He needs to close down part of the business. Three weeks later, Martin finishes discussions with the employees he needs to lay off. He feels the anger as he does his rounds through the organization. One of the team leaders with whom he speaks daily tells him sickness absence is increasing. Martin can feel that the organization is in a state of confusion.*
- + *George, director of a large production company, is shocked when one of his production employees decides to end his life. He was offered help – including by George personally – and his direct colleagues tried to persuade him to seek help. To no avail, unfortunately. He attends the funeral with a group of colleagues. There, they speak to one another at length. However, it emerges that the real challenge only starts afterwards, back at the company where all employees appear to be processing this tragic loss in their own way. His closest colleagues feel guilty, appear to be retreating, and the organization is battling with grief, commemorating and carrying on.*
- + *Sylvia, manager of a group of restaurants and hotels, is confronted with restrictive measures due to the outbreak of a pandemic. Restaurants have been closed to the public for an indefinite period on government orders. Sylvia is obliged to send temporary employees' home. These temporary employees include people she knows well and who are a great asset to the company. Permanent employees are losing their familiar tasks and daily structure of work overnight. She is visiting the various locations to discuss alternative tasks with employees. She encounters many emotions amongst employees.*



Why a whitepaper on change and loss in organizations?

Leadership without (un)planned change and the associated loss does not exist. Everyone has their own examples in addition to Martin, George and Sylvia's challenges described above.

As managers in organizations, we are confronted by different kinds of loss: organizational losses such as reorganization, mergers, acquisitions and bankruptcies; professional losses such as demotion, dismissal or redundancy; and personal losses such as the death of loved ones or colleagues, divorce, or relocation; these are all catalysts for transition.

Loss always evokes employees' previous experiences of loss and grief. Loss in an organizational context is therefore inseparable from personal loss. It is a challenge for leaders to find the right balance between their reaction as humans and their reaction based on their role in the organization. Leaders are responsible for continuity of the organization and they also need to reflect on their own emotions and those of their employees.

Loss in an organization increases the need for leadership, direction and focus. As we will see further on, this requires the leader to be able to relate to oscillation: past and future, loss and reward.

At the same time, loss also requires recognition of what has been lost and the time to let that go. Without the opportunity to part with the old, employees cannot bind themselves to the new that is being offered by the organization. That can manifest in different ways: via stagnation of work processes, behavior that leaders often label as resistance, demotivation, employees who isolate themselves increasingly or even resign, or an increased level of sickness or absenteeism. >

We refer to the process of (emotional) acceptance and integration of loss while looking to the future as transition. In the first instance, leadership in times of transition revolves around focusing on people.

This whitepaper continues to build on the basis we established in the whitepaper entitled *The power of Transition Based Leadership. Getting organizations, teams and employees to excel*. It is intended for all leaders in organizations, regardless of their positions or the sector within which the organization operates.

The leader acts as a secure base as we described in the aforementioned whitepaper. He is *caring* and *daring*, which means that he challenges and encourages his employees to take risks based on connection and safety. The transition based leader focuses his mind's eye on the positive and allows his people to excel.

The transition based leader put to the test

Pitfall #1: Thinking you cannot prepare yourself for loss in the organization or that, as a leader, you play no role in the loss suffered by your employees.

As a leader, change takes you into uncharted territory. The familiar situation disappears, the 'old' solutions no longer work, old answers no longer suffice. This invites and challenges leaders to navigate a path through this uncharted territory, to take the lead and to guide their organization and employees through the transition.

Leadership is put to the test during transition. That is the true strength of the transition >

based leader. A leader who is prepared to do what is necessary to keep employees engaged, or where necessary, to bond with his employees and who is capable of addressing the pain caused by change. The leader is able to inspire and facilitate movement towards the future on that basis. Movement in which he facilitates learning and development and strives to enable employees to come into their own optimally.

The leader's willingness to see transition as the crux of his role is highly determinative for the organization's future success and viability.

Transition based leadership is an approach that has the management of transition at its core. The leader has the confidence to ask questions of himself and others, for example:

- + How much time do I devote to loss?
- + What pain (from the past) exists in my team and organization and how does this influence results?
- + What does loss suffered by others evoke in me?
- + How do we move towards the future together? >

- + How do I want to inspire employees in times of change and how inspiring do my employees find me?
- + What ritual supports successful transition?

The leader does not wait during times of loss and transition. He recognizes opportunities to take a step forward and instigates dialogue. He does that with the knowledge that he himself and all the employees in his organization are part of the continual journey that is inherent to shaping transition.

What is a secure base?

A secure base is a source that makes us feel welcome and inspires and encourages us to face the challenges that life throws at us together.

Learning to understand and lead transition better

Pitfall #2: Trying to manage transition by convincing employees of the advantages of the new situation without actually having addressed the pain of change first.

Change can lead to transition. That applies both to organizations undergoing unplanned change, such as when they are hit by a crisis, as well as organizations undergoing self-chosen change. Whereas change often concerns visible or demonstrable situations, in employees, transition is often invisible and takes place in the subconscious. >

We saw earlier that transition is the process of (emotional) acceptance as well as integration of loss. That process has emotional, physical, cognitive and spiritual aspects. The unruliness of transition means it does not adhere to external planning. And yet, phases are identifiable.

Every change begins with an end and ends with a new beginning.

With every change, you leave something you know behind and a new and as yet unknown reality is created. This parting brings uncertainty and loss of the feeling of control. There is an interim phase in which the new reality starts taking shape. The 'desert' is perhaps a powerful metaphor for this phase. A phase of drought and thirst in which employees seek security and sometimes anxiously try to hold on to the old. >

The transition based leader recognizes this phase of transition and knows this is part of the process. He is therefore able to maintain calm, be present, offer security, and challenge others to do what the situation demands. He knows that (painful) emotions are also a part of this phase. The leader constantly seeks dialogue with his employees. He inspires and gives hope in the right sequence: first the pain, then the reward.

Change and different forms of loss

- + Loss of attachment (where or with whom do I feel safe?)
- + Loss of intimacy (with whom or what do I feel a bond?)
- + Loss of ground (where do I belong?)
- + Loss of structure (what is my role?)
- + Loss of identity (who am I?)
- + Loss of future (where am I going?)
- + Loss of meaning (what is the point of this?)
- + Loss of control (I feel overwhelmed)

Loss leads to a process of grief; the natural reaction to loss when you actually part. During that grief, you are tossed back and forth between two polarities. >

On one hand, there is the loss of the old situation, the loss orientation which feels familiar and which you need to let go. On the other hand, there are the opportunities and challenges of the new situation, the restoration orientation that is still unknown and which challenges you.

Shaping transition: everyday life

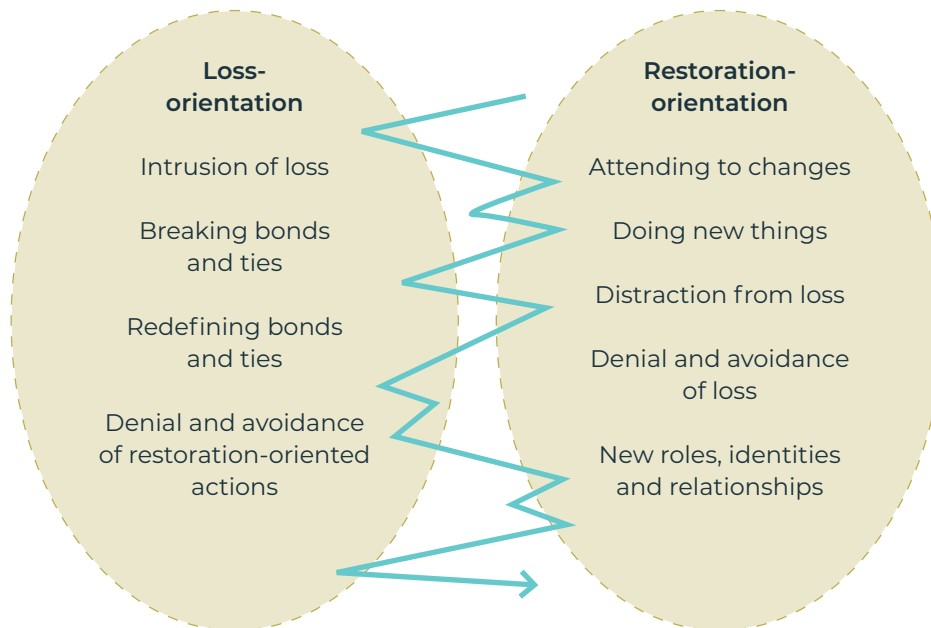


Figure 1: Dual Process Model (De School voor Transitie, Henk Schut, Margareth Stroebe, Jakob van Wielink and Leo Wilhelm)

Reflection questions

- + What do you focus on primarily when change occurs?
- + What do you think your environment needs from you? How would your employees answer this question?

We can regard grieving as an unwanted and unplanned development process in which we are confronted with the polarities of the themes in the Transition Cycle, which all have a downside or darker side.

The transition based leader does not escape having to personally explore what the loss >

with which he is confronted in the organization elicits in him, in other words: what movement he himself undergoes between these polarities. Once he has clarified his own tendency, he can choose a (new) perspective and give focus and direction to his employees and organization.

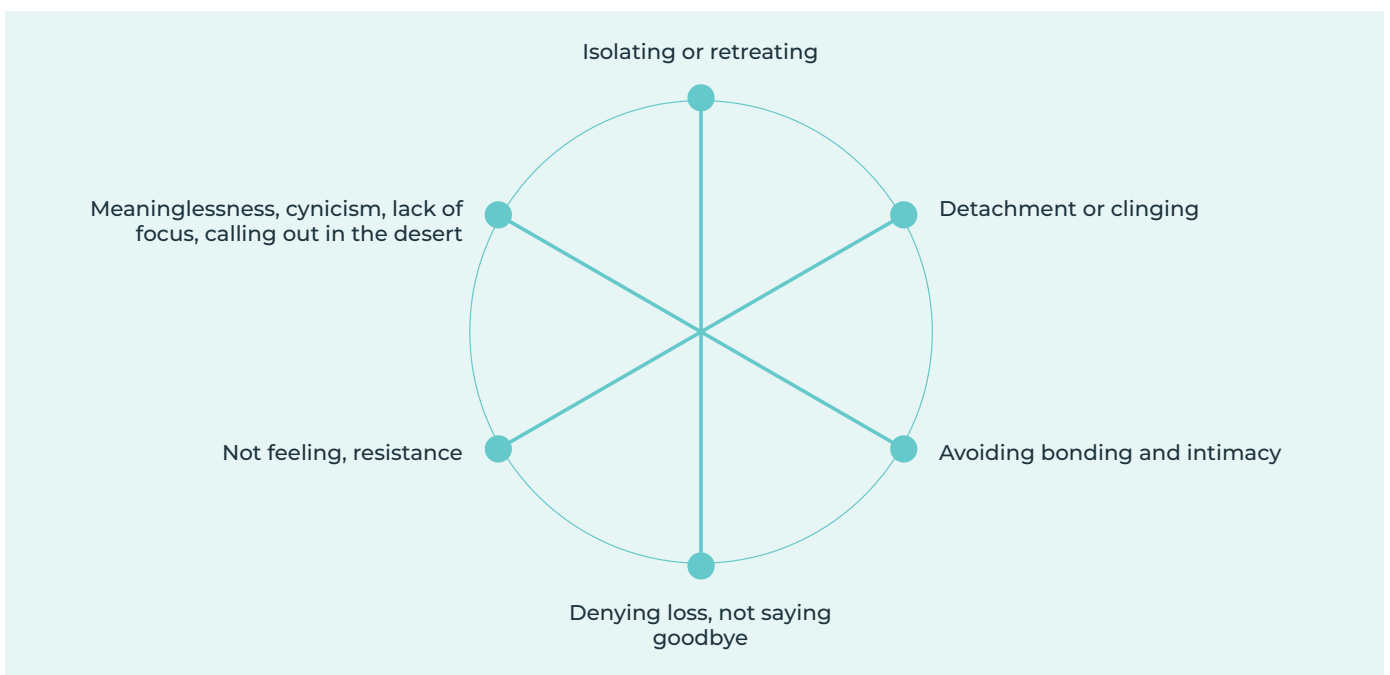


Figure 2a (above): The Transition Cycle and figure 2b (below): The Stagnant Transition Cycle. (Jakob van Wielink, Leo Wilhelm et al)

The transition based leader is aware of his own primary impulses and tendencies in relation to the themes in the Transition Cycle.

He is at a critical crossroads in terms of the theme of loss and separation. He can feel the tendency to deny or ignore loss.

To “cut corners’ as it were and thus avoid the themes of grief and integration and meaning and calling. Transition stagnates if we cut this corner and we end up at the rear of the transition cycle. By actually reflecting on loss and separation and taking the opportunity to grieve, he gives himself and his employees the opportunity to progress to the next step in the Transition Cycle. The step towards meaning and a new perspective.

Loss in the here and now can evoke strong memories of past loss with all the associated emotions and responses. It can elicit (deep) fear that throws us back into old habits and old behaviors. Our natural tendency is to avoid pain. After all, our brains hate pain. A leader does not deny or downplay the pain of loss. He bonds with his employees by being empathetic and acknowledging the painful emotions that exist, both in himself and >

his employees. When employees see their leader taking the lead in this and exposing his vulnerabilities, they are more likely to feel they can do the same.

In addition to focusing on individual employees, the leader devotes attention to the dynamics within the team. As a leader, it is important to encourage employees to reveal themselves to one another. He creates psychological security by doing so.

A prerequisite for this is that team members are able to reveal their desires, pain and uncertainty that accompany the loss and transition.

The leader safeguards and ensures that everyone – introvert and extravert – is given the opportunity and takes it. This forms the basis for trust in one another and the team. He recognizes when a team undergoing change is avoiding conflict and risk, showing little engagement and/or avoiding responsibilities based on survival instinct. This joint exploration of vulnerability is a vital part of what is known as a learning organization.

Reflection questions

- + What old pattern, what old behavior is triggered in you in times of loss, crisis and transition?
- + How are you able to address this loss together with others?
- + How do you support others and how do you allow others to support you in situations in which you as a leader are put under pressure?
- + How do you foster mutual trust in your team(s)? How would your employees answer this question?

First bond, then lead. First the pain, then the benefit.

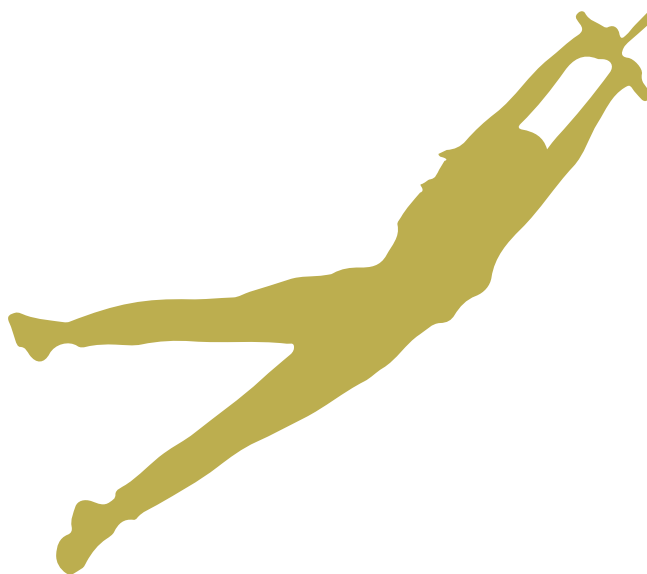
The transition based leader addresses the question 'who am I and what do I want to set in motion in the world' (calling) and is aware of how he expresses this in his role as a leader. He knows that organizations also have a unique calling that is put to the test during transition.

A successful organization derives meaning from its dedication and results for clients and other stakeholders. Crises and other types of loss can change that. >

This requires the willingness to accept the pain of change, to depart from that which no longer serves the employees and the organization, and to explore what this change means for the organization. Particularly during transition, an organization's purpose can gain ground. This requires employees to commit to the organization's new focus, thus unlocking the capacity for growth after loss.

Reflection questions

- + How do you address recognition of loss in the organization?
- + What did a change in your organization mean to you?
- + What significance for your own leadership can you derive from this?
- + How do you express your calling in your role as a leader?



Transition and stress go hand in hand

Pitfall #3: Wanting to unburden others in challenging times. Thinking you are being caring by rescuing the other person when you are actually denying them the autonomy necessary to learn.

The way employees manage loss or change is largely determined by the resilience they have developed throughout their lives. This determines the way in which they handle stress to a large degree. In times of loss and transition, the transition based leader takes the way in which his employees do this into consideration.

Moderate, predictable, manageable stress that is perceived as positive often leads to greater resilience. Dramatic, unpredictable, long-term stress that is perceived as negative unnecessarily overburdens employees' resilience and can lead to absenteeism.

On one hand, the role of the leader is to offer security and caring so employees feel safe and have a comfort zone. On the other hand, the leader challenges his employees to step out of that comfort zone and increase the stress-strain. There is more stress in this zone, but the level of stress is tolerable. By being daring, the leader challenges his employees >

to experiment in this growth zone and to take risks. Learning from these experiences and experiments takes place back in the comfort zone, together with the leader.

This exploratory movement increases employees' resilience further. The more resilient the employee, the greater their stress tolerance and the better they are able to adopt a challenge-response rather than a threat-response.

It is particularly in the growth zone that the leader connects with employees' abilities. A transition based leader knows when he can demand that little extra and at the same time, he is not overly demanding. He observes – like the belayer in mountaineering – when there is sufficient daring and he gives employees the freedom to step back into the comfort zone for restoration and reflection if necessary. That way, he prevents employees becoming demotivated or even dropping out.

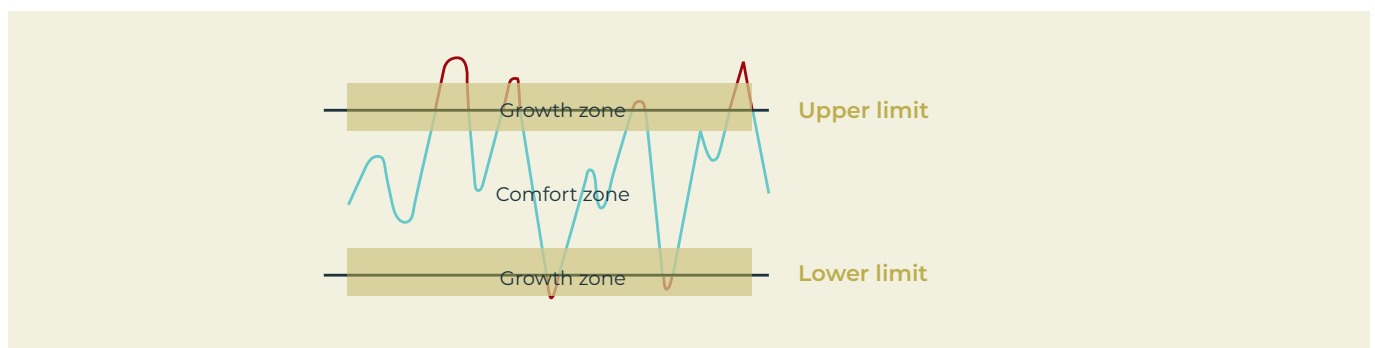


Figure 3a: Window of stress tolerance: stress-strain. (Riet Fiddelaers-Jaspers based on Siegel, Minton and Ogden.)

There is a risk of fear and panic in times of loss and transition, including when employees experience a crisis situation on a personal level. When stress levels remain stuck on ON or OFF and there is no longer a healthy balance between stress and relaxation, it has considerable consequences for health and thus the deployability of employees (in the long term). >

The transition based leader instigates dialogue to find a balance and allow his employees to function optimally within the window of stress tolerance. In doing so, he also facilitates his team's ability to learn by challenging them to explore the growth zone as a group.

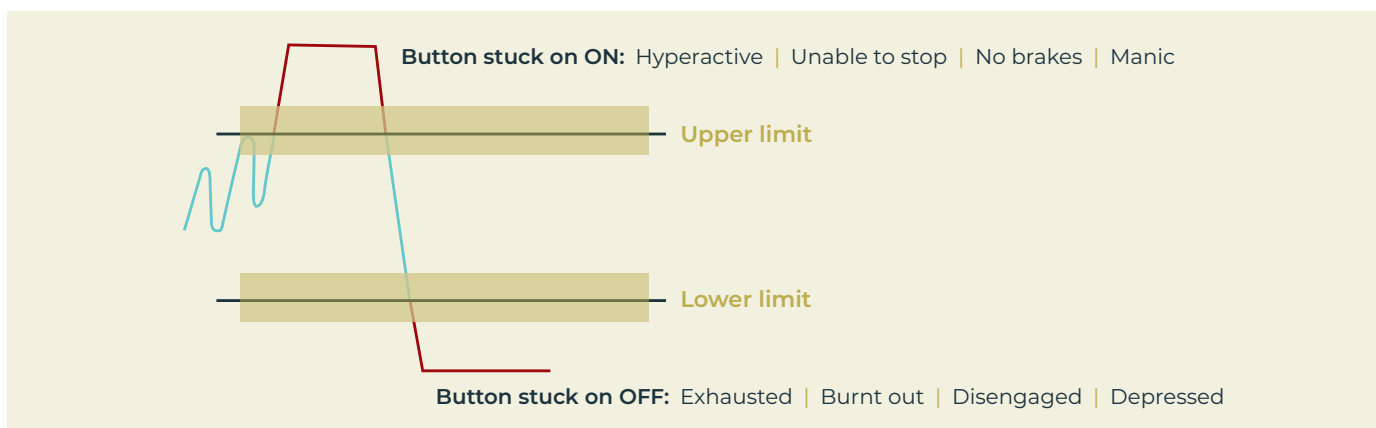


Figure 3b: Window of stress tolerance: unhealthy stress. (Riet Fiddelaers-Jaspers based on Siegel, Minton and Ogden.)

Reflection Questions

- + As a leader, how do you recognize the window and how do you utilize the growth zone in your leadership?
- + How can you support your employees in utilizing the window to increase their resilience?

Just like individuals, organizations as whole can revert to behavior that is geared only to survival due to dramatic events. An organization is just as inclined to want to avoid pain. By devoting no or too little attention to emotions within the organization, there is no outlet for stress. >

Chronic stress can lead to all kinds of symptoms in organizations, such as a lack of cooperation, internalized conflicts and even sabotage. Ultimately, (structurally) ignoring or downplaying loss in the event of change creates what are known as neglected or orphaned organizations.

Reflection Questions

- + What patterns does your organization revert to in the event of uncertainty or dramatic events?
- + What effect does this have on the energy, effectiveness, creativity and potential of the organization and its employees?

Working on bonding and dialogue

Pitfall #4: thinking that when you say your door is always open, employees will cross the proverbial threshold themselves.

Employees, teams and organizations are capable of emerging from a period of change with renewed energy, a new perspective. They can truly transform as a result. This is only possible if we address all aspects of transition. A new perspective is often about a redefined perceived calling. This applies to an individual's calling, as well as that of the team and the organization.

Bonds are put to the test and can be broken in the event of dramatic change. Leaders have an important role to play in repairing these bonds. During transition, the transition based leader is someone who:

- + is calm, has both feet on the ground and calms his employees; >

- + listens, is curious, engages in dialogue and thus creates a sense of safety that facilitates learning and development;
- + chooses his words and gestures carefully and thus makes a real impact;
- + focuses on the positive and encourages others to do the same;
- + encourages risk-taking and provides opportunities to step outside the comfort zone, which benefits potential;
- + provides a comfort zone in which dialogue about what has been learned can take place;
- + exposes his vulnerability, inspires through intrinsic motivation (what do you want to learn, what aspect of yourself do you want to develop?);
- + radiates an air of accessibility and is available for his employees.

Dialogue is when two or more people search for a deeper truth than that which they know. It is characterized by curiosity, acceptance and empathy.

Nothing is more important to transition – and at the same time, under pressure during times of loss and change – than dialogue. Dialogue demands the leader's ability to listen, curiosity about his interlocutor, regarding the bond as more important than his own truth.

It requires empathy, the willingness and expertise to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Behavior is more important than intention. Change is a time in which new >

bonds and ideas can develop in the period in which the old has not yet disappeared completely and the new is not yet completely anchored. Because the old is no longer sufficient, there is scope for new perspectives. One of the most powerful questions the leader always has at his disposal is: what is most painful – most disappointing – to you in this situation? He then paraphrases and checks what he is hearing and offers a choice: is there more that needs to be said about this or is there scope for talking about the future?

Reflection Questions

- + How capable are you of empathizing with someone else's pain? How do you know that?
- + What is the most powerful question you have ever been asked during change?
- + In retrospect, what question would you have wanted to ask more often, or have asked of you?

The power and necessity of rituals

Pitfall #5: thinking that grief and transition follow a fixed pattern (blueprint) and anxiously trying to manage this so that employees do not become 'stuck in the past.'

Rituals are as old as humanity itself and they form an important part of an organization's culture (sometimes unnoticed). Often, the feeling of control is largely derailed due to loss. A feeling of control over the situation increases again by upholding existing rituals and initiating new ones. The transition based leader knows he must take the lead in this. Rituals have traditionally supported the integration of grief during transition and they mark the transition from the old to the new. That way, you literally create a space and offer the scope to (re)attribute meaning, an essential step in creating new bonds.

By consciously implementing rituals, the leader creates scope for everything that change evokes so that a new perspective is created. This can give back a sense of control and show that there is a future despite loss.

Rituals

- 1 Mark an ending and offer an opportunity to bring something to a close together.
- 2 Help uphold a number of fixed values in times of uncertainty and change
- 3 Help with learning to manage loss and change by supporting the grieving process. They contribute to the organization and employees' important quest for identity and meaning. >

- 4 Mark a new beginning, highlight the celebration of success and give the sense of taking on a new challenge together.

Many types of rituals are possible. For example, checking in and checking out at meetings and events, celebrating employees' birthdays and the organization's anniversaries, periodic 'away days', staff parties on heydays and preceding holidays, et cetera. As well as making a concerted effort to welcome new employees and bidding a dignified farewell to departing employees. As stated, rituals can play an important role in times of loss, grief and dramatic change.

The leader makes rituals a standard part of operational management and leads in executing and maintaining them. Knowing that people have a natural need for rituals, he does not allow himself to be distracted by the unease that sometimes accompanies rituals. Rituals bind, they offer comfort and support and invite one to be a participant rather than an observer.

Reflection Questions

- + What rituals have been implemented or have fallen into disuse in your organization?
- + Do you actively utilize the ritual of checking in and checking out?
- + What ritual helped you manage a dramatic change in your life?
- + What ritual could be helpful to your organization in managing loss and transition?

Leading transition is the key to success

We started this whitepaper with the question: 'Why a whitepaper on change and loss in organizations?' As a leader, we hope you have discovered or received confirmation of how crucial your role is in making sense of your employees' perceptions of loss.

Consciously reflecting on the losses experienced – organizationally, professionally and personally – provides new perspectives that are necessary for growth and development. >

Without going through these steps, transition will stagnate and performance will come under pressure. If we provide and take the opportunity to reflect on losses suffered, we place employees and organizations in a position to get the best out of themselves, produce results, and achieve successes that exceed expectations.

Thinking we can be confronted with suffering and loss without being affected by it is just as unrealistic as thinking we can walk through water without getting wet. This kind of denial is very significant. The way in which we manage loss shapes our ability to cope with life more than anything else does. – Rachel Naomi Remen



Referenties

- + Wielink, J. van, Fiddelaers-Jaspers, R., & Wilhelm, L. (2020). *Taal van Transitie. Je roeping als leider in een wereld van verandering*. Heeze: Circle Publishing.
- + Bowlby, J. (1988). *A Secure Base. Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*. Tavistock professional book. London: Routledge.
- + Kohlrieser, G. (2006). *Hostage at the Table. How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance*. New York: John Wiley.
- + Kohlrieser, G., Goldsworthy, S., & Coombe, D. (2012). *Care to Dare. Unleashing Astonishing Potential Through Secure Base Leadership*. New York: John Wiley.

De School voor Transitie | The expert in Transition Based Leadership

De School voor Transitie is a secure base for people and organizations wishing to shape genuine change. We do this in the form of in-company programs and open enrolment courses, as well as individual coaching.

Our in-company programs are customized and depending on requirements, consist of single or multi-day programs in which we work on the themes of (personal) leadership and transition with leaders and their organizations.

These programs are supplemented with inspiration and InterVision sessions and coaching in integrating the secure base vision into the organization's processes and systems.

That way, we help organizations become better at creating bonds, engaging in dialogue and exposing vulnerability, and on that basis, assist them in utilizing the available potential of individuals, teams and the organization optimally. >

The open enrolment courses are geared towards developing the craft of transition based leadership in both individuals and teams. For example, they offer the opportunity for a select group of employees to develop themselves further in coaching your organization to become a secure base.

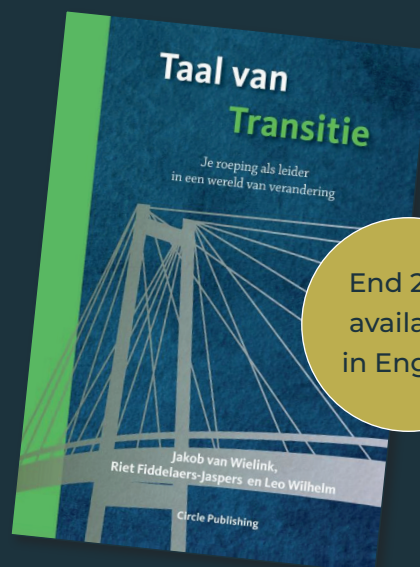
Individual coaching can be used to support employees in their personal development, either separately or in addition to one of our programs.

Would you like to know more about how this school of thought can contribute to yourself, your employees and your organization excelling? Have a look at our website: www.deschoolvoortransitie.nl or contact us directly via info@deschoolvoortransitie.nl or +31 (0)26 302 00 00.

De School voor Transitie frequently publishes books and articles on the themes of transition and leadership. In addition, we are actively involved in making translations of international leadership publications and the work of transition thinkers available to the Dutch market.

This whitepaper was produced with the help of contributions from Michiel Soeters, Anne Verbokkem-Oerlemans, Leo Wilhelm, Riet Fiddelaers-Jaspers (Expertisecentrum Omgaan met Verlies) and Leanne Steeghs.

Leoniek de Hoop was responsible for the layout.
© All rights reserved: De School voor Transitie 2020



End 2021
available
in English