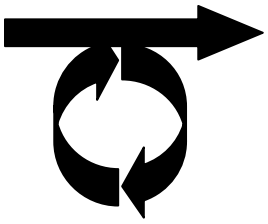
TURNING POINTS

Shift Happens: 8 Keys for Successfully Managing Life's Transitions
By Mike Ballard

In the fast-moving world of the 21st century, the only constant is change. In every facet of life, whether technology, economics, politics, climate, fashion or entertainment, by the time we recognize a new development it has already begun to change. Our ability to manage change has a direct relationship to our success and fulfillment in life. Rather than allowing ourselves to drift with wind and tide, we can learn to operate proactively - to anticipate and positively navigate change.

Change - and our response to it - is unique for every person. While it would be simpler to create a formula for change management that fits everyone, the reality is that change management is personal. We all learn, communicate, and think in unique ways, so there can be no set formula for navigating life. When you are presented with an opportunity for change, the best you can do is to open up your toolbox and deal with it.

Transition, on the other hand, is the way in which we adjust to change. In his book "Managing Transition", noted transition expert William Bridges describes transition as "…*the psychological process that the person must go through to unplug from his or her old identity and become reoriented to the new one*." In a sense, transition involves our adjustment to external change - leaving an old job for a new one, losing a spouse, or having a child. Transition requires us to reinvent ourselves to reflect a new reality.



Most of us think about change from a linear perspective; whether by choice or by circumstance, a movement from point A to point Z. Bridges believes that the process of transition is less direct and is often accompanied by a plethora of emotions. In between A and Z is a dip into chaos - fear, anxiety, excitement, depression, enthusiasm, sadness, anticipation, angst, and all types of other emotions. From there, we hopefully move into curiosity, enquiry, and research. Finally, it is often a matter of happenstance that helps us to make decisions about the future. We may or may not know where we are going, and often the answer is unexpected.

The amount of change bombarding us on a daily basis necessitates new attention to the process of transition. People who are adept at change management adjust to change more quickly – and with a sense of purpose. Managing transition is easier when you understand the context and process of the change occurring.

Key #1: Attitude Towards Change

Some changes will come from your own doing, and some will be the result of events outside of your control. Regardless, change is to be expected. View change in a positive light, as an opportunity for growth and learning. If change is inevitable, it must mean you are alive. Bottom line: if you dread new developments, your dread will color the

outcome. Conversely, if you view change as an opportunity, the chances of making a successful transition increase exponentially.

Given a positive, proactive attitude, the following represent a set of basic "life tools" to figure out what's next:

Key #2: Balance

Balance is healthy, and essential for long-term success. In the equation of work, learning, and recreation, we tend to associate learning with youth, work with adulthood, and recreation with the golden years. In his celebrated book What Color is Your Parachute?, Richard Bolles described this concept as "the 3 Boxes" of work, learning, and leisure. With people living longer, building education into their adult lives, and taking time off between educational pursuits, these three "boxes" of life are now happening concurrently rather than linearly.

When you come to believe that school is only the beginning of learning, your work contributes value, and recreation should be integrated into daily life, you can begin to live a more balanced, fulfilling, and successful life. The first step to balance is to understand the ways you have fun and what you want to learn. In turn this understanding is the essential key to finding meaning and value in our life's work.

Key #3: Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is a widely used and accepted technique for "taking stock" of who you are, what you've done, and what you're good at. There are many types of assessments. Temperament preference tools from noted Jungian psychologists such as Myers and Briggs, or Keirsey and Bates are well known and widely used.

Most assessments focus on reducing you to a set of core descriptors. An alternative is an assessment that covers various components of the self and actually expands the understanding of your options, rather than reducing them. Narrative-style assessments ask open-ended questions that give you the opportunity to put answers in your own words, rather than try to fit your answers into a generic box. They provide a "guided journal" approach that can be used to produce key transition-management tools like resumes, personal mission statements and your elevator pitch.

Key #4: Paint Pictures

There are many ways to look at a situation. Everyone has different learning styles for understanding themselves and others. Rather than relying on one method alone, use both left and right brain methods to chart your future. Build a collage of your next career or the life you really want. Use bright, vivid colors to reinforce your vision, along with descriptive words or phrases. A collage is a great reminder that can be posted in your bathroom on your refrigerator. Flow charts and other visual tools can help to develop ideas. Mind maps provide visual outlines of complex ideas, and are great organizing and memorization tools. The key is to use different techniques to provide alternate views.

Key #5: Meaning & Purpose

Figure out the things in life that are most important to you, and give you the most joy. Find work relating to what you're interested in, and find a way to do what you love. Meaning and purpose are often expressed through a personal mission statement. Once you figure out your purpose, developing a personal mission statement can provide the keys to finding focus.

Key #6: Preneurship

Know what you have to offer the world and market yourself accordingly. Create and practice a personal elevator pitch so that you are always prepared to talk with other people about who you are, what you want, and what you can contribute. Whether you are employed are not, competing in the marketplace of life requires us to think like entrepreneurs. Personal branding is a concept that makes us all entrepreneurs - positioning our selves and our services to meet the needs of the marketplace.

Key #7: Make a Plan

Set goals. Create strategies and lists of action items. Refer to your goals and your mission statement daily. Once you are out in the world moving in a direction, unexpected opportunities will present themselves and your plans will change. Having a starting point will help keep you from feeling lost and directionless.

Key #8: Think Like a Free Agent

Know that you are solely responsible for your happiness. No one else can be expected to define it – or do it – for you. Whether you are employed or not, your situation can change in a heartbeat, so be ready.

While there are no guarantees in life, our willingness to anticipate, plan and embrace change will give us better odds of a successful outcome. We can't predict the future, but we do have the power and the tools to have an impact. Just like everything else, we can also improve with practice. In the age of the New Impermanence, we'll have plenty of opportunities to navigate change.

Mike Ballard is a Senior Outplacement Consultant with Impact Group and CEO of Turning Points, an education company based in Denver, Colorado. Turning Points specializes in multi-disciplinary life and career transition management products utilizing books, on-line assessments and classroom curricula. http://TPNavigator.com