
Emotionally sustainable change: two frameworks to assist with transition

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Abstract: Earlier research (Leybourne, 2007; Robinson and Griffiths, 2005; Stensaker et al., 2002) has identified that assisting employees to cope with change can be beneficial in ensuring that change initiatives are more effective. This paper considers two frameworks from outside the 'traditional' change literature that can assist in coping with change and that have been recognised for many years, but which are arguably under-utilised in assisting employees through the behavioural, and particularly the emotional journey through organisational change. Bridges' (1991) transition framework and the Kubler-Ross (1969) Grief Cycle are examined in turn, and each is critically appraised to identify the benefits, or otherwise, of what they offer to assist employees to cope with change, and managers to manage that coping element of change management. The outcomes suggest that both frameworks are beneficial to change practitioners, and can assist in supporting employees through the transition from one organisational state to another.

Keywords: change management; transition; organisational change; coping.

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1 Introduction

Managing and coping with change is one of the principal challenges facing organisations today. Natural resistance to change has been identified since the 1940s (Coch and French, 1948). In the 21st century, organisations are attempting to cope with increasingly turbulent and uncertain environments (Hitt, 2000), and those organisations that resolve such challenges more effectively are perceived to be more sustainable, in that they may have an improved chance of survival, and ultimate success. It follows therefore that equipping employees who are affected by such change to understand, engage with, and cope with change scenarios can benefit organisations undergoing evolution and adjustment (Leybourne, 2002, 2006).

This paper addresses change from the perspective of sustaining the survival of organisations, focusing on those areas that impact on employee engagement and employee values (Ashforth, 2000), and on the wider ability of organisations to sustain and manage the emotional elements of equipping and assisting employees through the transition from one scenario to another within the change process, leading to a more effective 'embedding' of change (Oreg et al., 2011).

There are a significant number of tools and frameworks that are alleged to assist in supporting employees and other stakeholders through organisational change. Some are essentially managerial in nature, and some have been adapted or adopted from other disciplines. Two relatively under-utilised frameworks are the Kubler-Ross (1969) Grief Cycle, and Bridges' (1991) work on managing Transition. There is a view that assisting employees to cope with the transition from one state to another within change can significantly improve that transition (Leybourne, 2007; Stensaker et al., 2002), and that the emotional support inherent within this approach produces significant benefits for changing organisations (Cunningham, 2006; Soulsby and Clark, 2013). Evidence suggests that the work of both Kubler-Ross and Bridges contribute useful and effective mechanisms to assist employees in coping with the behavioural, and particularly the emotional aspects (Clarke et al., 2007) of the journey through organisational change.

This 'coping' element is important because change is a constant in organisations, and such activity almost always involves the re-deployment of employees who in the majority of cases are arguably valued and committed (if we accept the ethos of the shift to the HR paradigm), and who carry the investment of managerial and experiential knowledge, either tacitly or explicitly. Although such employees are deemed valuable, historically little attention has been paid to their emotional and behavioural abilities to cope in rapidly changing and turbulent organisational environments (Woodman, 2014).

This paper will address some of these issues, following a traditional structure where initially the growing literature on coping with change will be reviewed, and an analysis of the outcomes will be offered. Following on from this review, the application of the Kubler-Ross and the Bridges frameworks will be considered. A wider discussion of the benefits (or otherwise) of the two chosen approaches to coping with change will then be documented, and the paper will conclude with a summarised narrative of the analysis, together with a consideration of areas for further research.

It is intended that the outcomes will inform current and emerging thought on the effect of change on individuals and groups, and particularly in respect of how the impact of change can be moderated and lessened by an understanding of the transition process.

This is important as organisations are seeking to manage change in the turbulent organisational environments that prevail (Jaakkola, 2014).

2 A literature review on transition and change

Transition relates to the way individuals move through personal phases and events (Bridges, 2001). The concept is widely recognised and has academically robust credentials within the health domain (Meleis et al., 2000), and has been embraced within organisational theory (Beer et al., 1990). When change is considered at the individual level, transition becomes a significant issue.

One important element that has been offered to assist organisations to more effectively implement change involves equipping employees to cope with change. Often, this ‘coping’ characteristic is linked to the ability to cope with the stress that accrues or is attached to being involved in complex change initiatives (Riley and Park, 2014). In this context, coping can be defined as:

“constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands (of transactions) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” (Folkman, 1984, p.141)

This definition was later refined and amended to:

“the persons cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage (reduce, minimise or tolerate) the internal and external demands of the person-environment transaction that is appraised as taxing or exceeding the person’s resources.” (Folkman et al., 1986, p.572)

Successful coping is seen to be instrumental in maintaining well being and achieving high performance in stressful situations (O’Driscoll and Cooper, 1994). Involvement in transformational or other high-impact change is seen as such a situation (Stensaker et al., 2002). This is however complicated by the uncertainty and unpredictability of personal change actions (Bussolari and Goodall, 2009).

Some early literature tended to use transition as a concept for coping with job changes (Nicholson and West, 1988), and the psychology of personal change (Fisher and Cooper, 1990). An emerging, more recent, and growing literature deals with the issue of ‘change-based’ transition at both organisational (Robinson and Griffiths, 2005; Stensaker et al., 2002) and individual (Judge et al., 1999; Kumar and Kamalanabhan, 2005; Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; Richmond and Skitmore, 2006; Stensaker et al., 2002) levels. This activity suggests that there is an enhanced awareness, at least amongst academics, that equipping employees to cope with change can reap dividends for changing organisations. However, whether this awareness extends to practitioners and managers is less obvious.

At the organisational level, Stensaker et al. consider the problems of ‘excessive change,’ defined as either: “(1) the organisation pursu[ing] several seemingly unrelated and sometimes conflicting changes simultaneously, or (2) the organisation introduc[ing] new changes before the previous change is completed and evaluated” (Stensaker et al., 2002, p.302). They suggest that the consequences are primarily structural and performance-related. Specific occurrences include the shifting or elimination of managers during the change process, the opportunity for poor managers to ‘hide’ their lack of performance within poorly executed change initiatives, the need to compensate for or

take over manager responsibilities, and lack of continuity and structure within the change process. These consequences are described in terms of chaos and high degrees of turbulence, and are also the cause of significant stress amongst some organisational actors (Riley and Park, 2014). Robinson and Griffiths (2005) also consider coping with change at the organisational level, and identified five sources of change stress: increased workload, uncertainty/ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, perceived unfairness, and perceived loss. At the individual level, 15 coping responses were utilised, categorised into four types: task-centred coping, emotion-focused coping, cognitive coping, and social support coping. The emotion-focused coping identified here aligns closely with elements of the Kubler-Ross (1969) Grief Cycle, which, although it was developed to assist with coping in a different and altogether more distressing area, can assist in coping with organisational change. The application of this tool or model will be discussed in the next section.

Also at the individual level, Rafferty and Griffin (2006) find that employees are significantly affected by the frequency, impact, and planning of change, and these change characteristics influence the abilities of individual employees to appraise the uncertainty associated with change (Butterfield et al., 2010; Oreg et al., 2013). Butterfield et al. (2010) concur, considering this from an employee counselling perspective. Indeed, resistance to change has been identified as a problem since the 1940s (Coch and French, 1948). This '*psychological uncertainty*' (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006, p.1155) has a concomitant effect on job satisfaction, quality of working life, and ultimately on employee turnover (Choi, 2011; Cunningham, 2006). Structural equation modelling is used to construct a model of these characteristics. Stensaker et al. (2002) also consider the effect of excessive change at the individual level, and construct a matrix plotting how active or passive individuals were in responding to change against the likelihood that any changes would actually be implemented. This matrix (Stensaker et al., 2002, p.304) identifies a number of individual coping mechanisms, including, at the passive level; waiting for the change to 'blow over', loyalty (reflected in a willingness to absorb more work), and paralysis (expressed as an inability to cope, resulting in 'non-functioning'). At the active level, coping mechanisms include: sabotage (i.e., non-participation in change), exit, and taking self-control (to negate inactivity by managers). The emerging structural frameworks of power and legitimacy are also relevant here (Soulsby and Clark, 2013).

Judge et al. (1999) considered managerial coping with organisational change, and examined seven dispositional traits, that were ultimately reduced to two significant factors; positive self-concept, and risk tolerance. It is suggested (p.115) that positive self-concept reflects an individual's evaluation of their abilities against four dispositional variables; locus of control, generalised self-efficacy, self-esteem, and positive affectivity. Risk tolerance is centred on the ability to deal with uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk. The two factors are seen as important in gauging the ability to cope with organisational change. Results also indicated that coping with such change was related to intrinsic and extrinsic career outcomes.

Riley and Park (2014) consider the stress of coping with change, and interestingly, Richmond and Skitmore (2006) deal with stress and coping strategies amongst project managers, who are almost always the people in control of the implementation of change. They follow a 'critical incident' approach, and identify 15 stressors and 15 coping strategies. The most popular coping strategies are social support and communication, although avoidance tactics also featured. The results from this research do however

reinforce the outcomes from other studies, in that organisational culture needs to encourage activities that can be used to negate stress, and therefore assist employees to cope with change, whether 'excessive' or not.

Both Carnell (2003, pp.242–247) and Williams et al. (2002, pp.330, 331) describe and document a five stage 'coping cycle'. The first stage is 'denial' of the need for change, followed by 'defence' of the existing mechanisms and structures. The third stage is 'discarding', which acknowledges that some change is necessary, and which involves changing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. The fourth stage is 'adaptation', which is a process of mutual agreement of a way forward arrived at by experimenting, testing, and 'trial and error' learning. The final stage is 'internalisation', involving the embedding of new relationships and shared understandings. The latter three stages in this cycle have significant parallels with Bridges' transition framework, and it is also entirely reasonable to draw parallels with the Kubler-Ross cycle.

Learning and knowledge management is also a factor, especially at the implementation level, where project management is a common framework to manage both change at the organisational level (Leybourne and Kennedy, 2015; Smolarczyk and Hauer, 2014), and transition at the personal and behavioural level (Shepherd and Kuratko, 2009). Horner Reich et al. (2012) conceptualise knowledge management as a: "three dimensional concept comprising knowledge stock, enabling environment, and knowledge practices" (p.663). Transition will be easier if the actor has knowledge of what is happening, is transitioning in a cultural environment that is sympathetic and supportive of transition, and applies knowledge practices that have been generated, tested, and shared within the relevant domain. Such principles are also relevant to large scale transformation projects (Söderlund, 2010).

Indeed, learning is a change process. When something challenges our existing knowledge base (i.e., our understood way that something works), we learn as a result of having to change our understanding to incorporate evidence of events that do not meet our preconceived notion. This is referred to as 'double loop learning' (Argyris and Schön, 1978) as we have to extend our learning process to incorporate the new data, and indeed, we often have to 'unlearn' existing knowledge as a part of this process.

Having considered some of the issues that impinge on how employees cope with change, there is an assumption that leadership style may also be a mediating factor. Holbeche (2006) suggests that: "*a key challenge for leaders is in building an organization capable of ongoing change. This means working with people and helping them to survive and thrive in times of change*" (p.304). Moran and Brightman (2001) offer an essentially practitioner-based view, which embraces many elements of the literature on transformational leadership. Their perception is that leaders who facilitate effective change interact with others, frame change in terms of individual and organisational goals, establish compelling and legitimate reasons for change, and foster an atmosphere to allow experimentation with implementation styles and methods. They also lead by example, demonstrating involvement and commitment, and focus on results. They communicate effectively, and use symbolic and substantive actions to reinforce direction and behaviours (Holbeche, 2006; Moran and Brightman, 2001). These actions confirm and expand those offered in Brown and Eisenhardt (1997).

It is evident from this brief excursion into the literature relating to coping with change, that stress, and the coping mechanisms that are employed to deal with it, have the potential to significantly affect the way in which organisational change is implemented,

both positively and negatively. It is now therefore appropriate to consider in more detail the two frameworks that are the principal focus of this paper.

3 Two suggested frameworks for coping with change

As has already been suggested, coping with change is seen as an important component in the management of organisational change initiatives (Leybourne, 2007; Robinson and Griffiths, 2005; Stensaker et al., 2002). In this section of the paper, two arguably under-utilised frameworks that are intended to assist in this area are offered.

3.1 Bridges' (1991) transition model

Coping with change at the individual level involves engaging with and moving through 'transition' (Adams et al., 1976). Hopson and Adams (1976, p.7) define transition as: "*a perceived discontinuity in a person's life space*", and suggest that there are seven transition phases, during which a person's self-esteem varies. They continue by positing that: "*identifying the seven phases along such a self-esteem curve often gives one a better understanding of the nature of the transition cycle*" (Hopson and Adams, 1976, p.12).

Bridges (1991) makes a distinction between change and transition, in that change is 'situational'; i.e., something happens or an action is taken, whereas transition is 'psychological', in that it involves the personalised and internalised amendment of emotions and actions. Nortier (1995, p.33), using a documented case study approach, deduces that: "*transition... is a process internal to the individual, slow and progressive, not demarcated in time and directly related to what the individual is living through*". This transition at the individual level is however significantly intertwined with organisational issues, requiring that the complexity of the interactions and linkages be rationalised and unravelling emotionally (Clarke et al., 2007). It is also apparent that transitions can be an opportunity for either psychological growth, or psychological deterioration (Moos, 1976), and that therefore the outcome of a transition may have both positive and negative implications for the same person (Marks, 2007). Marks also expands on the need for adaptation to a 'transition' way of thinking, drawing parallels with Weick's (1995) work on sensemaking, and suggesting that:

"at the intellectual level, adaptation [to coping with transition] is facilitated by the process of 'organizational sensemaking', through which organization members interpret their environment through interactions with others and construct accounts that allow them to comprehend the world and act collectively." (Marks, 2007, p.725)

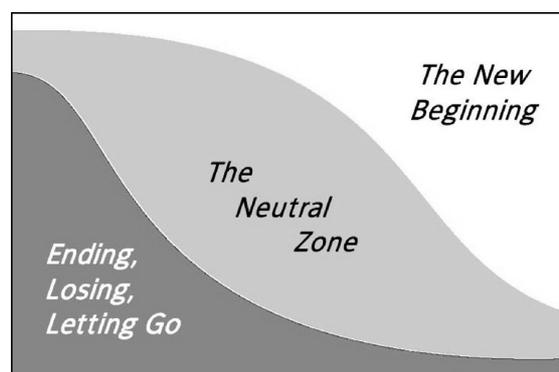
Returning to Bridges (1991), he talks of transition in terms of something that involves many simultaneous and interactive changes, and in terms of adjusting to new ways of thinking, organising, and conducting organisational actions.

Given this, it is entirely appropriate that one of the frameworks to be discussed here is Bridges' (1991) three phase transition framework. The somewhat paradoxical approach taken by Bridges suggests that transition is a process that starts with an ending, and ends with a beginning. This linguistic contradiction is based on the descriptors of the three phases of the Bridges transition framework, as displayed in Figure 1.

Essentially, this framework documents and attempts to rationalise Bridge's three identified phases of transition as follows.

Phase 1 is labelled ‘Ending, Losing, Letting Go’, and is rationalised in terms of employees being attached to old or historic routines and mechanisms. This first phase of transition can therefore be recognised in terms of the negative aspects of employee feelings, emotions, and behaviours. Organisational transitions could involve a broad range of emotions (Huy, 2002). Anger, sadness, anxiety, depression, and confusion could manifest themselves, as employees deal on a personal level with the end of understood routines and ways of achieving tasks and activities, and the reduction in comfort levels based on the removal of familiar and tacitly or experientially acquired patterns and actions. Employees may exhibit bargaining behaviours as part of an attempt to cope with this phase of transition. It is also evident that negative emotions increase with the volume and intensity of organisational change (Kiefer, 2005). Bridges (1991) argues that letting go of familiar and comfortable ways of working is emotionally challenging and deeply uncomfortable for many employees. He suggests that ‘endings’ can be managed in a number of ways, including treating the past with respect, and by helping to compensate for the imagined and emotional intangible losses caused by the transition. He also identifies communication as important, and indicates that it is important to identify and acknowledge ‘endings’, in order to define the closure of certain aspects of the previous ways of doing, and in order to let go of the past. The latter element of this phase essentially mirrors the fourth phase of Hopson and Adam’s (1976) seven stage cycle, where they talk in terms of acceptance of reality, and ‘letting go’.

Figure 1 Bridges’ (1991) transition model



Phase 2 involves entering ‘The Neutral Zone’. This is arguably where transition takes place, in that it falls between what Bridges describes as ‘what was’ and ‘what will be’. It is suggested that because of the amount of change that can potentially take place in this phase, it is a place of both risk and opportunity (Bridges, 1991, p.44). Hopson and Adams talk in terms of a testing stage, which involves: “*trying out new behaviours; new life styles; and new ways of coping with the transition*” (1976, p.12). King (2005, p.179) describes this as: “*a kind of emotional wilderness, an ambiguous space that is neither the old reality nor yet fully the new*”. Bridges (1991, p.5) suggests this neutral zone to be: “*the very core of the transition process*”, and advocates that without transition, change will not happen.

If it accepted that phase 2 of the transition process, or the ‘neutral zone’, is the individual’s and the organisation’s best opportunity for renewal and development (Burke, 2002), then it follows that it is arguably the most important stage of the transition

process. Certainly, Bridges offers a number of suggestions for managing activity within this phase of transition, including a number of temporary support systems and ways of reframing and redefining activities to make them more accessible and understandable to those undergoing transition.

Among those suggestions are a number documented by Burke (2002, p.17), including: “normalise people’s feelings and reactions, reframe the neutral zone in more positive terms, provide structure and support, build teamwork, gather data on how the transition is unfolding, and strive to build new and better ways of working.” This is where Weick’s (1995) and earlier ‘sensemaking’ output offers ways of rationalising and coming to terms with differences and opportunities in order to move through transition, either by understanding the need for change, or at the more advanced level, by taking advantage of opportunities to learn and move forward during the transition process. Ideally, people travelling through the ‘neutral zone’ are also able to take advantage of its position as a zone of creative opportunity, where change can be identified and realised. To revisit the early work of Lewin (1947), which inspired and informed a number of other three stage change frameworks, at this point participants have an opportunity to ‘unfreeze’ from old ways of achieving, but have not reached the position where they have had to ‘refreeze’ back into new systems.

This ‘neutral zone’ can therefore be a temporal and opportunistic space to engage in experimentation, and the creative application of new improvised ways of achieving, which can result in emerging best practice (Chelariu et al., 2002; Kamoche and Cunha, 2005; Leybourne, 2006). The likelihood of this form of activity occurring is however closely aligned with the organisational culture of the workplace, and the individual characteristics of the workforce. Evidence suggests that there is therefore a need within the change management processes of organisations to enable and support this kind of activity (Leybourne, 2002).

Phase 3 involves moving to what Bridges refers to as ‘the new beginning’, which is significantly distinguished from the understanding of a new ‘start’. It is suggested within Bridges (1991) that a start occurs when people ‘start doing new things’ as a result of the requirements of change initiatives, i.e., the enactment of new processes. As Bridges (1991, p.50) states: “*starts take place on a schedule as a result of decisions. They are signalled by announcements*”. A ‘beginning’ arguably only occurs (according to Bridges) when personal psychological and behavioural change takes place, enabling people to adopt new behaviours and identities. They: “*follow the timing of the mind and the heart*” (Bridges, 1991, p.50). Although these ideas are stated in less than academic language, they are allegedly based on solid empirical data and have been embraced by academics and by practitioners, including Nortier (1995) and Marks (2007). Nortier talks of: “*a move to another logic, the acquisition of new forms of behaviour, new skills, a new way of thinking, of establishing contact with new people, etc., in order to get familiar with the new policy, the new procedures and the new organization accompanying the change*” (1995, p.35). Marks looks specifically at ‘adaptation’ to the transition model, offering a framework to manage that adaptation that will be discussed later in the paper.

It is also entirely possible that the adaptation to embracing the concepts of transition will encompass a shift towards developing or nurturing specific cultural and individual characteristics that allow the creative application of new ways of achieving that emerge within the ‘neutral zone’.

3.2 *The Kubler-Ross (1969) Grief Cycle*

Many elements of the management literature have originated within other academic disciplines, and much of the behavioural material that informs managerial activity at the individual and group level fits with this premise. The work of Kubler-Ross originated in psychology, and was developed to assist in equipping people to understand the difficulties of and deal with the challenges of coping with terminal illness. This research manifested itself in the findings documented in Kubler-Ross (1969), which includes a cycle of emotional states that represent a progression of emotions experienced by individuals when confronted with evidence of this impending or present terminal illness, or by others dealing with bereavement.

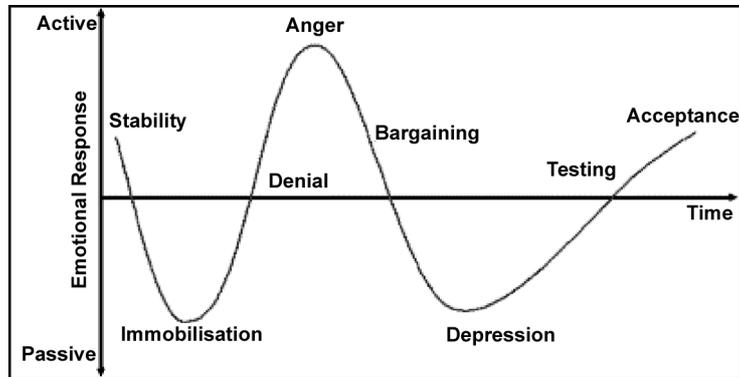
More recently, it has been determined that this cycle, which is often colloquially referred to as the grief cycle, is also applicable to others experiencing different types of grief or denial, including loss of employment, and being negatively affected by change (Perlman and Takacs, 1990), both personally and organisationally (Grant, 1996). It is interesting that Bridges, in his 2001 text on personal transition, makes the distinction between grief and mourning, suggesting that:

“Grieving comes from an ancient root-word meaning ‘heavy’ and refers to the feeling that accompanies a loss. Mourning, on the other hand, comes from a root-word referring to ‘remembering’. The latter therefore deals more with the way that the mind works on the broken connection, while the former deals more with the sadness and depression that is the result of the break.” (Bridges, 2001, p.224)

There is an important element in the relevance of the Kubler-Ross cycle, which identifies the stages connected with ‘grieving’, when it is applied to coping with organisational change. This is not that any change is necessarily positive or negative, but that it is perceived as a negative incident by the person experiencing it, and that they therefore have a tendency experience the documented stages in the cycle. Indeed, Beer et al. (1990) incorporated Kubler-Ross’s work as the basis for their ‘change transition process’, which also suggests that people experience significant variation in mood that can affect their ability to cope during periods of significant organisational change.

Figure 2 presents the cycle, which has evolved slightly since Kubler-Ross (1969) identified her five key stages, which were: denial and isolation; anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. The stages in this cycle have a marked similarity to a later five stage model of the coping cycle developed by Carnell (1999), which draws on previous work in the area by de Vries and Miller (1984) and Adams et al. (1976). This model, although considering effects that impinge principally on self-esteem rather than on emotions, identifies a similar set of five stages, labelled as: denial; defence; discarding; adaptation; and internalisation.

The original assumption in the Kubler-Ross cycle is that an individual will start from a position of at least relative ‘stability’ or relative equilibrium. This cannot however be assumed, regardless of whether the cycle is applied to personal change in the original context of the cycle, or whether we are applying it in the context of coping with organisational change, notwithstanding the fact that at most times individuals are dealing with some element of uncertainty in their personal or work environments. Indeed, excessive change is a common problem in organisations, and it could therefore be argued that stability is an unusual state in such environments.

Figure 2 The Kubler-Ross (1969) Grief Cycle

Notwithstanding the turbulence of modern personal and organisational environments, the commencement of the Kubler-Ross cycle is invoked by this (possibly) relative stability being shattered by the acknowledgement of a significant announcement that upsets the equilibrium state in a dramatic sense; either because of the nature of the information, or the perceived effect it is anticipated to have. Often, this event manifests itself in a state of ‘immobilisation’, where the enormity of the event is sufficiently great as to paralyse thought or immobilise the logic of traditional cognitive processes. Although arguably this is not a phase in Kubler-Ross’s original cycle, it has been more recently accepted that it is present (Adams et al., 1976), although it varies in temporal scale from a matter of seconds in some circumstances, to a more extended period in other cases.

Turning now to the five documented stages, Kubler-Ross talks firstly in terms of ‘denial’, suggesting that it: “functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allow[ing] the patient [or recipient] to collect himself and, with time, mobilise other, less radical defences” (1969, p.35). Applying this to organisational change, employees will often find value in their present routines, circumstances, and situations (Carnell, 1999, p.211), and can therefore deny the need for change, citing previous successes and embedded organisational understandings and precedents as reasons to retain or continue present ways of operating. This may happen regardless of previous dissatisfaction with such routines, mechanisms, and procedures, and the paradoxical nature of this reaction is driven by contradictory emotions, mobilised according to the perceived immediate circumstances.

The second stage is ‘anger’, and Kubler-Ross sees this as a frustrated outpouring of emotions, including those possibly accumulated through the denial phase. Often: “*this anger is displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random*” (Kubler-Ross, 1969, p.44). Applying this phase to an organisational change scenario, workers will pick fault and find grievances that can be applied to or blamed on the impending changes, regardless of whether this is reasonable or logical. Rational thought is often suspended in favour of emotional reaction, and complex arguments are constructed in support of what are often irrational stances. Carnell (1999) suggests that one way of mitigating the effects of this phase is to minimise the immediate impact of the change, allowing affected employees time to face up to a new reality.

The third stage or phase involves ‘bargaining’, which is: “*an attempt to postpone*” (Kubler-Ross, 1969, p.73), or perhaps, to be more poetic, seeking in vain for a way out of the situation that terminal illness or impending change places them in. This phase

involves seeking or offering an alternative that is beneficial to the patient (in a medical context) or the employee (in an organisational change context) that may dilute the intensity or immediacy of the change. The second, or 'defensive' stage of Carnell's coping cycle overlaps with this 'bargaining' phase, with Carnell talking of: "*defensive behaviour [that] seems to have the effect of creating time and 'space' to allow people to come to terms with the changes*" (1999, p.212). Imara (1975) indicates that the bargaining that occurs during this stage is instrumental in moving participants towards a gradual realisation of the real consequences of the event or the change being experienced.

The fourth stage in the Kubler-Ross grief cycle is 'depression', where there is a final realisation of the inescapable and inexorable shift towards the new scenario, and an acceptance that the various 'bargaining' postures have been in vain, or have not had the desired effect. With terminal patients: "*stoicism... will be replaced with a sense of great loss*" (Kubler-Ross, 1969, p.75). In organisational change, this 'depression' is displayed more as a sense of bowing to the inevitable. This phase may be quite temporally limited in many employees, as more sophisticated employees attempt 'bargaining' and 'testing' alongside or simultaneously with the 'depression' stage. Carnell identifies a 'discarding' stage, which mirrors the first 'letting go' stage of the Bridges (1991) transition model, and which indicates a shift from looking back into the past, and towards looking forward and into the future (Carnell, 1999, pp.212, 213). This transition comes with the realisation that change is inevitable, and maybe with a growing sense that it is also necessary. The 'bargaining' and 'depression' stages, together with the 'testing' stage to follow, are essentially concerned with the employee coming to terms with and resolving the tensions inherent in the shift to a new set of norms and routines. Much time has probably been spent in examining options, and running alternative mental scenarios. Cognitively, this is a significant challenge for many employees, and may involve cyclic loops that repeat previous emotions and actions, for example by moving back from 'depression' to more 'bargaining', and maybe back to another cycle of 'anger' before moving forward again.

The penultimate stage is 'testing'. This stage is not present in Kubler-Ross's original 1969 work, but is arguably accepted as a part of the cycle as it applies to organisational change issues. It has strong parallels with Carnell's (1999) 'adaptation' stage, in that it is a process of mutual adaptation, where: "*individuals begin to test the new situation and themselves, trying out new behaviours, working to different standards, working out ways of coping with the changes*" (Carnell, 1999, p.213). To a great extent the activity here is positive, and Imara (1975) identifies a growing self-awareness of the need to resolve issues and move forward to a personal understanding of what is required to survive and thrive in the new circumstances that prevail. Some of the activity is based on 'trial and error', and frustration can accrue as a consequence of trying to make a new system work (Carnell, 1999). Training and support are particularly important at this stage in organisational change.

The final stage is 'acceptance'. Kubler-Ross indicates that when applying this model to terminal illness: "*acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage*" (1969, p.100). This is not however the case when applying the cycle to organisational change, where 'acceptance' is more positive, and suggests a situation where many of the personal tensions have been resolved, and there is an identified and acceptable way forward. There are parallels here with the third 'New Beginnings' phase of the Bridges (1991) transition model, in that personal behavioural and psychological change will have taken place and the employee will be committed to the new scenario. Carnell talks in terms of 'internalisation', described as: "*a cognitive process through which people make sense of*

what has happened? (1999, p.214). This brings us full circle back to key elements in the sensemaking process articulated in the work of Karl Weick, and in particular, the cognitive elements of making sense of organisational events that are documented in Weick (1995).

It should be noted at this point, that these cycles demonstrate a completed journey through change. It is however important to note that not all participants or actors complete this journey, and those that do may not progress neatly from one stage to the next in sequential fashion. Temporal and cognitive factors come into play, and some employees may not progress beyond, say, the 'denial' stage (Carnell, 1999, p.214). This can manifest itself in a persistence in operating a set of practices that are consistently shown to fail, or in a refusal to understand the effect that change will have on their own construct systems (www.businessballs.com/personalchangeprocess.htm). Also, the possibility of some employees 'cycling' between stages has already been discussed, and theoretically and practically, it is possible for employees to become 'trapped' in any one of the stages. This notion will be explored more fully in the 'discussion'.

4 Discussion

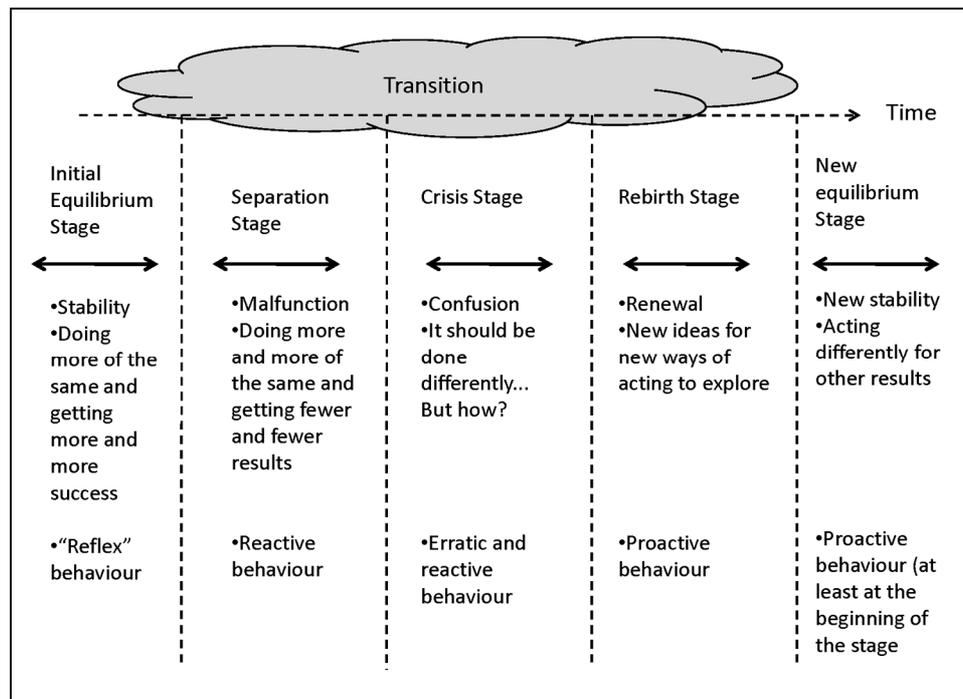
It can be seen from the previous section that both the Bridges (1991) transition model and the Kubler-Ross (1969) grief cycle can be applied to assist in the management of the emotional and behavioural aspects of change. This discussion will expand on the practical application of what are useful and beneficial tools to assist in coping with organisational change, and offer empirical evidence to support the use of both frameworks within the management of organisational change. There have also been a number of models or documented cycles that mimic or expand on Kubler-Ross's work, and which are more explicitly applicable to change (see Elrod II and Tippett, 2002, for an explanation of a number of these models). It is however suggested that there does have to be a serious managerial intent to assist employees through change, and a culture that supports assistance in coping with organisational change, in order for the maximum benefit to accrue.

This serious managerial intent can be problematical, as many managers identify and articulate change in a processual sense, by presenting the benefits, designing new policies and procedures, setting budgets, and planning change activities in a prescriptive way (Nortier, 1995; Leybourne, 2002). This is a common approach to change (see Dawson, 2003), and one that offers an underlying assumption that there is a 'process' that can be followed to implement many types of organisational change successfully. It could however be argued that change expressed as a series of gains and processual advantages (Nortier, 1995), but ignoring the behavioural implications of coping, feeling loss, and other aspects of 'transition', under-estimates the importance of the 'human' element within change, and may therefore be doomed to failure, or at least compromised to an extent by a slavish concentration on actions rather than emotions.

This would seem to indicate that traditional processual models of leadership are failing to support the behavioural aspects of leading employees through change. Leadership and change models appear not to connect the requirements and drivers of change at the organisational level with the transition phases that individuals need to traverse in order to emotionally navigate the challenges of that change at the individual level. This is something that the competent leader and change manager needs to address.

Nortier (1995) offers a transition model that draws on the work of Bridges, and on considerable experience of managing and consulting with companies through periods of major transition. This model is demonstrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Nortier's (1995) five phases of transition



Nortier's model suggests that there are five phases of transition, as follows. The first phase is labelled 'initial equilibrium', and engages with the previously discussed notion that transition starts from a period of relative stability, although it can be argued that the turbulent economic and political environments that prevail currently have negated a shift from this view. There is a view that the more stable this period of relative equilibrium is, the less amenable employees are to change, and the more they question the need for change (Nortier, 1995, p.38). The second phase is about 'separation', in that necessary change, often triggered by a significant event (e.g., the arrival of a new leader; a change in strategy; the need to comply with new legislation), is ignored or minimised in importance. This phase encompasses 'denial', which is an important element of the Kubler-Ross cycle. The third phase is one of 'crisis' and confusion, and in this phase Nortier's view differs significantly from that of Bridges, who has suggested that the three phases of his transition model can coexist simultaneously, and with varying degrees of intensity. Nortier (1995, p.40) suggests that the crisis stage can appear swiftly, causing an awareness that the equilibrium phase has been consigned to the past. This realisation triggers erratic and reactive behaviour, and Nortier suggests that this confusion is essential to trigger the actions needed to learn new behaviours (Greiner, 1972).

As confidence starts to rebuild, there is a transition to the fourth phase of 'rebirth', where new ways of moving forward are proactively explored. It is suggested that this:

“is a fragile phase, in which doubt persists and shows itself recurrently” (Nortier, 1995, p.44). The rebirth phase has important links with learning, in that individuals will be hesitant, anxious, and experimental in seeking to resolve issues and move forward. To a large extent, individuals are rebuilding their own versions of reality at this stage, recreating order out of the relative chaos of the ‘crisis’ stage, and building new beliefs and support structures. It would appear that this stage is the one where a real difference can be made, and embracing socially constructed ‘new’ reality models, informed and underpinned by contemporary views of ‘improvised’ action and agility (Leybourne, 2009) would allow employees affected by change to navigate change more sympathetically.

The fifth stage is one of a ‘new equilibrium’, where employees start to feel more comfortable in their modified environment. At this point employees tend to minimise or resolve the challenges of the ‘crisis’ phase in favour of more stable emotional and organisational situations, and look back on the transition as a significant achievement. As Nortier concludes: *“after transition, only the change obtained remains. Yet, it is the transition, now forgotten, which has enabled this change to come about”* (1995, p.45).

There are of course complications if groups of employees are living through transition together, or apparently simultaneously. As we are dealing with individuals, who may be components of teams or groups, it is reasonable to assume that each team or group member will not be travelling through the various stages at the same speed. This is likely to be true whichever ‘transition’ model is applied. This can result in what Nortier (1995, p.44) calls a ‘contamination effect’, where individuals can regress or be ‘pulled back’ into a stage where other group or team members are still resolving issues. It would appear that this situation could also resolve itself in a situation where ‘lagging’ team or group members could be ‘accelerated’ through the transition by those progressing through transition more rapidly, but the literature is not explicit about this. It is however likely that those participants who are subject to ‘accelerated’ transition will not fully resolve the tensions and contradictions that are important to them, resulting in less ‘robust’ change. This aspect of change would warrant further investigation.

There are other practically applied tools for assisting individuals through organisational and personal transition, including Fisher’s Transition Curve, which was developed from work presented in Fisher (1999). These tools essentially offer similar remedies to the difficulties of guiding and assisting individuals through change. They tend to take elements of the Kubler-Ross cycle, and Bridges’ transition work, and expand or subdivide them, using principles of emotion work (Nortier, 1995) or personal construct psychology (Fisher, 1999). The essence of all these models and techniques is however that there are stages to be navigated by individuals undergoing change, and there are different perceptions of these stages that engage, influence, and affect the speed of transition of those individuals. These perceptions are underpinned by our understanding of the differing social constructions of reality experienced and generated by employees experiencing organisational and individual change, and change managers need to be aware of these differing perceptions in order that they can assist individuals in resolving them.

Although no differentiation has been made so far, much of the literature deals with change in ‘for profit’ organisations. Change in public sector organisations has however also come under scrutiny, and arguably, such organisations have not historically been adept at structural or behavioural change. The adoption of contemporary styles of management have led some public sector organisations to appreciate the benefits

of assisting employees to cope with change (Noblet et al., 2006), and the widespread and continuing adoption of managerialism requires such actions (Noblet et al., 2006). Robinson and Griffiths (2005) considered coping with organisational change within a UK government department, identifying 15 coping responses and four coping 'types', and developing a testable model for coping with organisational change-based stress.

Experience of public sector organisations in the UK has demonstrated that change to deliver efficiencies and to reduce operational costs is generating significant stress and difficulty in coping at the individual, at the group or team, and at the organisational level. The UK government as principal stakeholder in the UK public sector is driving radical and demanding change, notably by capping expenditure whilst challenging public sector managers to deliver increased and measurable outputs to meet ideological and politically expedient outcomes. The stress and coping difficulties inherent in such an approach, especially in organisations that historically have not been particularly adept at managing and supporting individuals through change, can result in managerial and organisational challenges that these organisations have historically not been equipped to resolve.

Employee turnover is also linked to commitment to change and coping with change (Cunningham, 2006), in that stressed employees who are unable to cope with extreme change may feel that leaving is a preferable option. Cunningham (2006) adopted a people-oriented focus to organisational change, concentrating on individual employee behaviours, attitudes, and cognitions. He developed empirically sound relationships that indicated that employee turnover was directly linked to commitment to change, and mediated by coping with change, in that those employees who felt better able to cope with organisational change were more likely to stay with the organisation during and after the change process. This outcome aligns with and reinforces the findings of Rafferty and Griffin (2006).

5 Lessons for practitioners

There are a number of issues that have been developed within this paper relating to the importance of assisting employees to cope with change. Firstly, a number of models for assisting employees through transition have been considered, notably the Kubler-Ross grief cycle, and William Bridge's transition model. Additional sources have validated the benefit of applying either these models or variants of them to help to understand the stages that employees travel through in their transition journey. There are tools such as Beer et al.'s (1990) 'Change Transition Process' which have incorporated Kubler-Ross's work as the basis for their operationalisation. Managers who are implementing change would therefore benefit from knowledge of these models and the theoretical underpinnings that ensure their effectiveness, especially in the light of the outcomes of the research in Cunningham (2006), which indicates implications for employee turnover.

Secondly, it is evident that reactions to change are both context-specific, and specific to individuals undergoing and coping with that change. It is therefore logical that the temporal aspects of transition vary, and some individuals cycle through and regress within and through the various phases, resulting in difficulties in managing the transition process. Notably, different individuals will perceive the change process in different ways, and vary in the timetable they apply to resolving the issues surrounding change to their own satisfaction. Change Managers who are adept at managing the behavioural aspects of

the ways in which their employees navigate through transition should find their change initiatives to be more successful. Weick's (1995) and earlier 'sensemaking' work is particularly relevant here, together with an understanding of the concept of individual social constructions of reality.

Thirdly, there are certain domains or sectors that have historically found the management of change, and the management of behaviours within the change cycle, to be problematical. The public sector has been acknowledged as a 'laggard' in effectively managing complex and extreme change, and the adoption of contemporary styles of management have led some public sector organisations to appreciate the benefits of assisting employees to cope with change (Noblet et al., 2006). Notably, the shift away from 'process', and towards an understanding of the behavioural underpinnings that influence the way that public sector employees interact with and within change, is allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of change in these areas. Change managers within public sector organisations may therefore need an increased exposure to the principles of emotion-based work and management in order to reap the benefits inherent in such an approach.

Fourthly, and more generally, there is a growing awareness of the complexity of change, and of the difficulties of managing multiple simultaneous changes within organisations. The effects of change are wide reaching, both at the process level and at the behavioural level, and managers who are adept at managing and resolving the ambiguities and complexities of issues surrounding change are increasingly seeing their value to the organisation more appreciated. There are also cultural issues that impinge upon and significantly affect transition and change. Notably, cultural issues surrounding changes in leadership style, organisational focus, changing work styles, and the use (and abuse) of technology all affect the way organisations are managed, and the way change, and the transition through change, occur (Deetz et al., 2000). Inevitably, organisations differ in their embracing and their understanding of such issues, but the increased awareness suggests that the shift that is apparent is in the right direction. Change practitioners should be attempting to embrace this shift, and use it to their advantage.

6 Conclusions

Organisations are undergoing, embracing, and coping with change more than ever before. The turbulent organisational environments of the 21st century are challenging organisations to be more efficient, more effective, and more creative, and to manage all three scenarios simultaneously. This is resulting in conflicting priorities, and generating stress which is adversely affecting the abilities of organisations to react to required triggers and also adversely affecting the ability of some employees to function effectively.

Those organisations that recognise the conflicting tensions inherent in managing change, and in particular, the difficulties of managing the transition through change scenarios, may have an advantage. This is particularly so where activity is directed at assisting employees to cope with the behavioural difficulties of transition through change (Leybourne, 2002; Stensaker et al., 2002).

Frameworks for coping with transition that are based on the work of Kubler-Ross and Bridges are seen to assist with the difficulties experienced by some employees

undergoing transition through organisational change, and at the very least, provide a starting point that helps managers to understand and support the emotional needs of those employees. A number of transition tools have evolved from the original work of Adams et al. (1976) and Kubler-Ross (1969), including Beer et al.'s (1990) 'change transition process', the William Bridges Transition Model which is featured significantly here, the various transition curves reported in Elrod II and Tippett (2002), and those developed around the turn of the millennium by John Fisher.

It is however clear that employees can struggle with change, and frameworks that allow us to understand the effect of change on individuals and groups, and particularly in respect of how the impact of change can be moderated and lessened by an understanding of the transition process, are important. As academics, we interrogate these issues, and synthesise and present them. However, the vital issue is how practitioners engage with our output, and embrace and implement the principles that we unearth.

This paper seeks to make the connection between the Kubler-Ross (1969) and Bridges (1991) transition models and the personal navigation of change more explicit. The transition models and frameworks discussed in this paper are a useful starting point on the journey towards understanding and implementing change within organisations. Specifically, they assist employees through the personal transition journeys that they have to make whilst those organisations are adjusting to the turbulent environments that need to be navigated in order to survive and thrive.

These tools and frameworks have been known for many years – almost 50 in the case of the Kubler-Ross (1969) output. However, although it sometimes seems that transition has been overlooked within the change literature, evidence that such tools assist in understanding and assisting employees through transition is becoming more apparent. Further empirical study in this area is therefore urgently required, given our emerging appreciation of the importance of the emotional effects of the transition through organisational change.

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