



July 27, 2017

**From:** Relationship Centered Health Care

**Subject:** Avoiding the most common (and fatal) pitfalls of organizational change. Part 3: Hold the tension of change

Dear friends and colleagues,

Welcome to the third installment in our series on avoiding common pitfalls in organizational change. This blog describes what is arguably the most underrecognized yet absolutely essential function of a change leader - holding the tension of change.

There is no change of any consequence that does not involve anxiety and conflict. Tension is intrinsic to change; it's normal, you can count on it. But it's also something that must be attended to. How you and everybody else deals with that tension has a huge impact on the outcome.

### **Sources of tension**

Let's first look at the sources of tension and then at ways to handle it. We've already seen some sources of tension in the two previous blogs in this series. In the last one, we examined the loss and accompanying grief that constitute the first stage of Malcolm Bridges' Transitions model which describes how people experience change. (1) Efforts to forestall or avoid the losses further increase the tension.

The second stage of Bridges' model, called the Neutral Zone, involves a different kind of tension. In this stage, the old ways of doing things are gone but the new ones are not yet well established. It's an in between place characterized by the tension of not knowing exactly how things are going to work - there's lots of uncertainty and ambiguity. We considered this very same tension in the [first blog](#) when we looked at the machine metaphor for organizations and its unrealistic expectations that we as leaders should be in control and have all the answers.

There are other important sources of tension, as well. As Ron Heifetz has described, leaders sometimes need to turn up the heat to get their people engaged in the work of change - to expose them to "the pinch of reality" when they would rather have their leaders protect them and preserve the status quo. (2) Thus tension can arise between you and the people you're leading as you disappoint their expectations that you will provide order, predictability and control. Then, as you engage everyone in designing and experimenting with new solutions, the tension of difference can arise as diverse perspectives are brought together. Tension also arises as some experiments necessarily fail.

So pitfall #3 is to not hold the tension of change in an effective way, either to not recognize and manage it or to try to resolve it by yourself to keep everybody else comfortable and happy - to underfunction or overfunction, respectively.

### **Holding your own tension**

Effectively holding the tension of change takes place at two levels: your own tension and that of other people. Managing your own tension begins with realistic expectations of your role, as we explored in the [first blog](#): letting go of unrealistic expectations of control and your ability to have all the answers, and instead being okay with not knowing, turning to your people to co-create with you and allowing answers to emerge.

Holding your own tension also requires a discipline of reflective practice, allowing you to be aware of the tensions you are experiencing and to be thoughtful and intentional (rather than reactive) in how you respond. It's very hard to think these things through clearly in the echo chamber of your own thinking; it's important to have a safe space to think out loud with peers or a professional coach and to know you're not in it alone. And good self-care is essential, of course: adequate sleep, exercise, time with family and friends, meditation or some other regular source of grounding and perspective, and avoiding self-medication.

### **Helping others hold their tension**

Helping others hold their tension involves a paradoxical combination of challenge and support. The challenge involves respecting them and trusting their capacity enough to tell them truth about the circumstances necessitating the change, engaging them as partners and giving them meaningful responsibility for figuring out the new solutions. The support takes the form of listening carefully to understand what they are experiencing, offering empathy (showing you understand what they're feeling) and legitimation (reassuring them that it's understandable that they would feel that way), communicating your commitment to help them successfully navigate the change and expressing your confidence in their ability to do so. You can reframe the not-knowing as a great opportunity for innovation and creativity. And you can use good communication and facilitation skills to manage the tension of difference, mobilizing the group's diversity as a resource rather than allowing it to be a stumbling block.(3)

Holding the tension means helping people (and yourself) tolerate and live with it. You can't make it go away and you don't want to let it escalate into panic and reactivity. Instead, the goal is for you and your people to face into the tension, experience it, know that it's normal and feel confident in your ability to work it through. This is one of the most powerful interventions you can make as a leader of change.

The skills, knowledge and authentic, courageous presence necessary for holding the tension of change are a major focus of Leading Organizations to Health, our institute on leading organizational change in healthcare. The next cohort starts in November. You can find more information about this program at [www.lohweb.com](http://www.lohweb.com) or give me a call.

As always, I wish you success and joy in your work and I hope you're enjoying summer!

Warm regards,  
Tony

*Acknowledgement:* Thanks to Sue Piotrowski for her thoughtful review of this blog.

### **References**

- (1) Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions*. Cambridge, MA: DeCapo Press, 2003
- (2) Heifetz RA, Laurie DL. The work of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*. December 2001 (reprint R0111K)
- (3) Williamson P. A 4-step model of relationship-centered communication. In Suchman AL, Sluyter DJ, Williamson PR. *Leading Change in healthcare*. London: Radcliffe Publishing, 2011.

**Here are links to parts 1 and 2 in the series.**

[Avoiding most common/fatal pitfalls of org chge Part 1](#)

[Avoiding most common/fatal pitfalls of org chge Part 2](#)



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