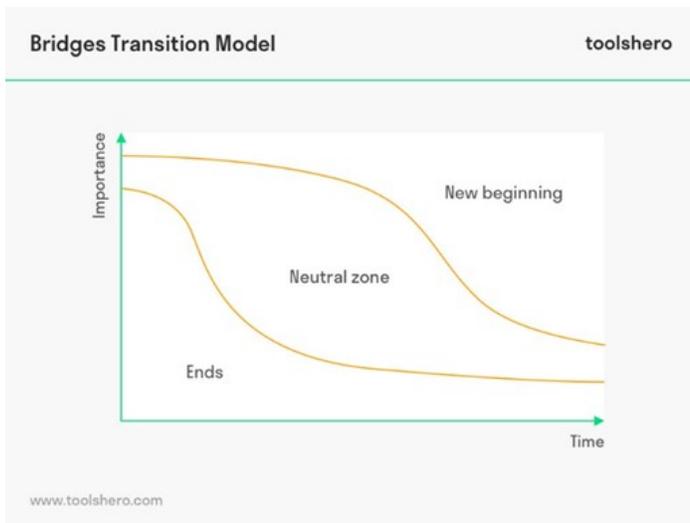




Leading through Change

Often when we talk about change and leadership, the leaders are the ones bringing about the change: implementing a new reading program, a new schedule, or a new instructional practice. Sometimes, however, the change is externally imposed and leaders are being asked to respond to a situation not of their creation. That puts them in a different situation, and requires a different body of knowledge and skills. **This resource is intended to provide you with ways of thinking about responding to change, especially sudden change, and suggestions for skills to practice in leading through change.**

The [Bridges Transition Model](#)¹ explains the phases people go through when experiencing change.



1. Transition starts with an end to the way things were before—the realization that things are going to be different.
2. The neutral zone is the label Bridges gives to the time between the end of the old and the new beginning. This is the time of most uncertainty, as it is frequently not known what the new conditions will be. It is also the time of most confusion, stress, and disorientation, with the greatest psychological burden being placed on the people who have to change the most. It is also the time of greatest opportunity, as the chance exists to shape what the future will be like.
3. In the new beginning, the changes have been accepted and people are adjusting to the new reality and realizing the possibilities that the new beginning represents.

People frequently need time to figure out that they are looking at a major shift. We all have [mental models](#) that function as representations of how the world works². These are indispensable to us, as we cannot possibly hold every detail of every situation in mind; we rely on abstractions. We struggle, however, when we perceive radical challenges to our mental models³, a process known as [sense-making](#). We have ample examples of this in the Covid-19 crisis, with people struggling to find an appropriate comparison and rejecting explanations and prescriptions that do not comport with their previous experience on which their mental models are built. There are some very useful representations of this struggle to understand in popular movies—[see this short list](#).

What leaders can do to improve their own sense-making:

1. Be aware of your own mental models, and seek out data that would test their limits.
2. Be willing to admit that your knowledge and understanding may be incomplete, and avoid making predictions and pronouncements that would be hard to abandon.
3. Develop your listening skills; make it easier for people to tell you bad news, as leaders who react poorly to unfavorable information insulate themselves from valuable evidence of change.
4. Don't make assumptions about the value of information based on who is providing it; often the people closest to the data are low on the org chart yet best placed to notice new patterns.



What leaders can do to help others cope with change:

1. Communicate as much as possible. Be aware that everyone has to go through their own process of making sense of a new reality. Leaders sometimes choose not to share information until they have greater certainty, but this deprives others of the opportunity to make sense of what is happening. Further, when people believe that they are being kept in the dark, they become less trusting.
2. Offer empathy and emotional support. Leaders frequently experience a smaller impact on their daily routines than others in the same organization faced with the same situation. For example, the work of educational leaders may not change as much during a time of school shutdown as teachers who have to change everything about the way they work. Focus on understanding this impact and responding appropriately.
3. Provide practical supports. People need practical questions answered and have real needs to make the new context work for them. Leaders sometimes interpret questions about details as resistance; instead, acknowledge them as reasonable requests for information and assistance and do your best to meet them.
4. Involve others in decision-making and solving problems. There are many reasons for this:
 - a. One of the biggest causes of stress in a time of rapid change is the feeling of powerlessness. Being involved in decisions gives people an authentic opportunity to regain some control.
 - b. All leaders have blind spots: what they don't know about their own biases, and what they don't know about the knowledge, work, and challenges of others. Further, they don't know what they don't know. Tapping into others' knowledge and experience is the best way to make better decisions.
 - c. Every threat is also an opportunity. Innovative thinking is best accomplished by a diverse group of thinkers. Involving others from many roles, inside and outside the organization, is a smart way to do that.
 - d. People feel valued when they are asked for help, and they want to help. Humble leaders know that it's smart to ask for help, and figure out how to do that.

Further reading:

[Your Strategy Should Be a Hypothesis You Constantly Adjust](#) The authors point out how some significant organizational failures could have been avoided if leaders cultivated practices that involved paying attention to those in the organization who had vital but uncomfortable information to share:

[The Elements of Good Judgment](#) is another HBR article. The author describes in detail the skills leaders need to exercise good judgment at all times, but especially in times of change:

[Educator Stress Is a Leadership Challenge. Here's What Leaders Can Do About It](#) is a short ASCD Express article intended for educational leaders to use, share, and talk about.

Reflection and discussion:

1. What is your plan to communicate with your various constituencies, internal and external, above and below you?
2. What does support look like for others, and how are you going to take care of yourself? What help do you need?
3. How can you capture your learning in turbulent times, and share that learning with others?
4. How can you use Bridges' Neutral Zone to capitalize on the opportunity that can be found in disruption?

¹Bridges, W. (1986). Managing organizational transitions. *Organizational Dynamics*.

²Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

³Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.