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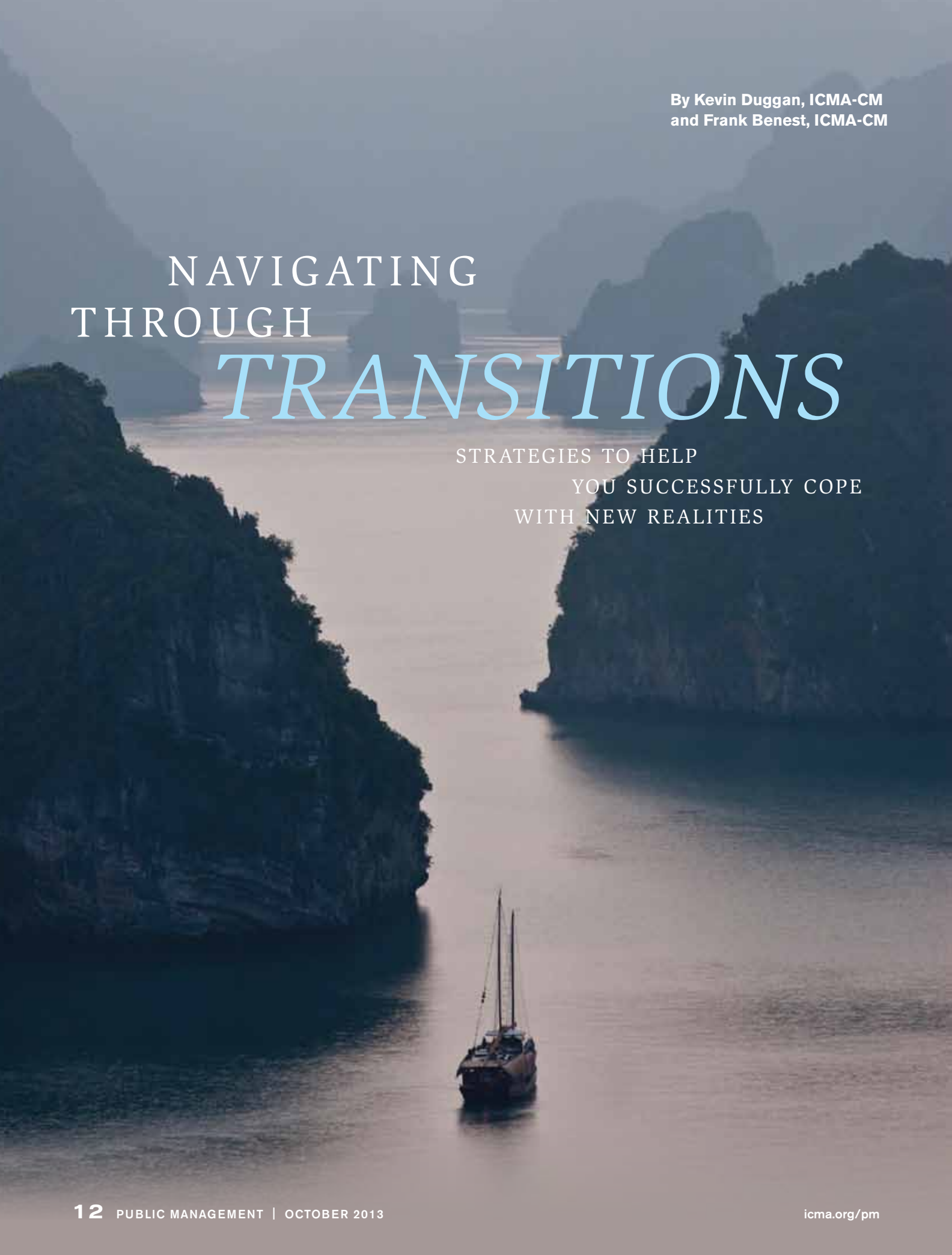
NAVIGATING THROUGH *TRANSITIONS*

STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU SUCCESSFULLY COPE WITH NEW REALITIES



When managers think of transitions, they might recall their first manager job, when they moved to a new organization, or perhaps even an involuntary departure from a position.

In the first two cases, managers are generally excited about the opportunity even though they recognize that there will be challenges in establishing themselves. In these situations, managers are open to new challenges, experiences, relationships, learning, and growth.

In the case of an involuntary transition, while not usually feeling positive about the circumstances, managers clearly face a challenge in both adjusting to changed circumstances and developing a new direction.

TAKEAWAYS

› Understand how the range of transitions can impact a manager's professional success.

› Recognize when a transition is taking place in order to adapt.

› Learn to develop strategies to navigate the neutral zone between old and new realities.

Many Types of Transitions

Local government managers may not recognize that they also periodically experience other kinds of transitions in addition to job changes. These transitions can significantly affect them, both personally and professionally. Recognizing when these transitions occur and then developing and implementing effective strategies to navigate through them can be critical. Such transitions might occur when managers are experiencing some of these changes:

- A new governing body member (or members) whose election may have changed the dynamics of the board.
- A new department head.
- New political demands by a vocal neighborhood, business, or ethnic group.
- A natural or human disaster or a significant incident that totally disrupts the organization or the community.
- Increased media scrutiny and criticism.
- Changing financial condition for the organization.

All of these disruptive situations require a mindset that allows managers to recognize that they are in the midst of a transition and must find ways to adapt to the new political or organizational circumstances. Not fully appreciating the impact of a transition can undercut a person's ability to lead or at worst, places a person at odds with new realities, thus putting the manager at risk—personally and professionally. The risk derives from being in a circumstance where you need to respond effectively to changing conditions, but a failure to fully appreciate and understand that a change has occurred results in an ineffective or delayed response.

While it is fundamental to our professional responsibilities that we adapt to changing circumstances, including a new policy direction, there can be a natural tendency to rationalize that continuing along the same path is the reasonable path to take.

Change vs. Transition

William Bridges, in the book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life Changes*, differentiates between change and transition. Change is situational—a new job, role, team, or community demand. Transition is the psychological process we go through in order to come to terms with the new situation. Change is *external*; transition is *internal*.

Change happens; so do transitions—with or without our consent. To effectively deal with transitions and adapt, we must first recognize the nature of the transition process.

One of the greatest potential barriers in effectively dealing with change is failing to fully appreciate when change is indeed occurring and its true impacts. In terms of processing change, denial can be the most challenging impediment to effectively

dealing with change and the necessary transition that must follow.

Transitions often include a sense of loss. In fact, Bridges notes that transitions start with an ending.[1] When we leave an organization for a new one, we have lost our team.

When a new governing board majority identifies a different policy agenda, there is a sense of loss when we are required to adapt to a new direction. New political demands require an ending to an old way of doing business.

Simply put, the first step in managing transition is letting go.

The second step, according to Bridges, is navigating the "neutral zone": the limbo between the old reality and the new. It is the feeling that the old way of doing things or relating is gone and the new way is uncomfortable. It is an emotionally difficult place to be.

In response to finding ourselves in this psychological neutral zone, we can try to ignore it, rush through it, or escape from it. These reactions will mean that we will have difficulty making the change work for us and our team. If we recognize that we are struggling with a transition, we can use the neutral zone to find creative solutions to new demands and learn and grow.

Strategies to Manage Transitions

Once cognizant that there are many kinds of transitions (some of our own choosing and some forced on us), managers can more consciously use a set of strategies to successfully navigate them. These approaches include the following:

1. Vent a little. If we are feeling put upon and forced to change, it is acceptable to blow off some steam *as long as it is with a trusted family member, friend, or colleague in a safe environment*.

2. Reflect. Local government managers tend to be an action-oriented lot. Typically, we do not spend much time reflecting. To sense that we are experiencing a transition, we need to reflect and ask:

- What is changing and what is the impact?
- If I am feeling negative and put upon, why is that so?
- What is causing me to be reactive and defensive?
- How am I behaving with others?
- Am I effectively responding to this change, or simply denying or resisting?

Some colleagues have used various methods to promote self-reflection. One wrote in a journal when he was recovering from cancer treatment. Others have turned to spouses or counselors to reflect as they experience the neutral zone.

Many of us simply schedule quiet time to reflect about feeling unsettled. Simply getting away from the work environment—to walk, jog, ride your bike, take a vacation, or attend a retreat or other professional development opportunity can get a person away from the immediate environment and provide time for reflection on what is happening.

3. Use a new manager mindset. The reason most managers succeed in a new job is because they are more or less prepared and approach it with a new manager mindset. As new managers, we typically:

- Are open to the new experience.
- Are curious.
- Collect data.
- Consider different perspectives and do not rush to judgment.
- Want to learn.
- Build relationships and rapport.
- Engage people at all levels, internally and externally.
- Develop a plan/strategy.
- Implement our plan/strategy with energy and enthusiasm.
- Assess, after a period of time, how the plan implementation is proceeding.

This kind of mindset will help managers deal with other transitions as well.

4. Approach transitions as opportunities for a fresh start. As an established executive, managers may bemoan a possibly disruptive new councilmember or a new advocacy group demanding political change. We may hope that the established political agenda or ways of doing business will not undergo a dramatic shift, making it difficult for us or our team.

If the transition is approached as an opportunity for a fresh start, however, managers can focus on building positive relationships and rapport. While a transition may be difficult and may not always be positive, it can be a reinvigorating challenge that can become a source of professional and personal growth.

5. Engage in conversation. As the poet David Whyte suggested at a presentation to the 2000 annual conference of the City Managers Department, League of California Cities, leadership is the art of conversation. In the midst of

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transitions, managers need to engage people internally and externally in open-ended conversations, welcome different perspectives and interests, and question long-held assumptions as they adapt to change.

You might, for instance, be a police chief in a community that has quickly undergone demographic change. With the arrival of a number of Spanish-speaking immigrants, the community is experiencing a day-worker challenge in the downtown area. Established residents and merchants are demanding action to rid the downtown of the day workers.

Some councilmembers are beginning to consider a new ordinance to ban the solicitation of work from street corners. As police chief, the manager turns the problem over to you.

While your first reaction is to target special enforcement, you wonder if that is the right approach. After some soul-searching, you engage merchants, neighborhood and church leaders, and new immigrant group members in a series of conversations to explore possible responses. These efforts eventually lead to a pilot day-worker center operated by a local church.

6. Avoid isolation. During uncomfortable transitions, we may isolate ourselves. Social support is one of the keys to dealing with the emotions of transition.

We need to find the opportunity to share with trusted colleagues, informal coaches, friends, and family members the challenges of our situation, concerns and doubts, some possible solutions, and then get feedback.

7. Focus on learning. If we reconceptualize the challenge as an opportunity for learning, the transition can be a time of creativity and growth. Learning activities might include:

- Conducting a review of the literature.
- Talking to colleagues.
- Interviewing experts.
- Engaging non-subject matter experts from different disciplines in brainstorming different approaches.
- Trying out a pilot response, which we fine-tune based on initial experiences.

Given your busy life, you may not have the time to do all of the above; however, one or more of these learning strategies may help you gain perspective and insight.

As we go through the transition, we must continually debrief: What is going well? What is not going well? How do we feel? What are we learning?

8. Share the burden. Even if we understand that we are going through a transition, we do not have to do all the relationship building, creative problem solving, and learning ourselves. As we engage internal staff and outside stakeholders, we can share the learning and leadership work.

Helping Others Cope

As managers experience transition and try to personally cope with it, they as leaders need to help others cope with transition, too. Since colleagues may be struggling with the new realities of layoffs, organizational restructuring, different reporting relationships, or outside political demands, they will certainly need emotional and other kinds of support.

As leaders, managers can help colleagues by encouraging conversations that over time:

- Provide a safe environment to vent.
- Acknowledge feelings of loss and any sense of unfairness or resentment.
- Encourage, ultimately, a search for opportunity, experimentation, and learning in response to change.

Shaping the Change

If we recognize transitions in their many forms, acknowledge the loss involved, and work through the emotional neutral zone between the old and new reality, then we have the chance to help shape the change.

We will likely be able to effectively cope with the transitions that inevitably occur in our professional lives if we:

- Understand the various types of transitions that can impact us professionally and personally.
- Are alert to when they occur.
- Learn to accept the new reality.
- Develop and implement strategies with energy and enthusiasm.
- Periodically review and adjust strategies based on the results we are experiencing.

Properly handled, transitions give managers the opportunity to confront challenges and adversity, re-engage, learn, and renew themselves and their team. PM

ENDNOTES

1 *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, William Bridges, Corporate & Professional Publishing Group, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, MA (p. 4, 1993).

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