



## Change is the only constant

**We want to progress to the next level and yet are happy to be anchored in the seeming certainty of the present**

By K Jayshankar



Obama caught the mood of America with his slogan 'Change we can believe in'. Since then, politicians around the world, ever ready to latch on to a winning message, have offered their versions of the change slogan. Trust them to recognise a winning model — it was amusing to see some politicians even positioning themselves as 'Indian Obamas'. But do we really want to embrace change in our lives? Centuries ago, Heraclitus said, 'Nothing endures but change'. Yet till now, change is the most misunderstood idea in our life. I would even say that human existence has been caught in the paradox of change:

we wish to progress to the next level (physical, spiritual, etc) and yet are happy to be anchored in the seeming certainty and the comfort zone of the present. This constant tussle between stability and progress defines us.

Why this ambivalence to change? Why do we resist it? William Bridges is an acknowledged authority on this subject. His life's work has centred on the various issues and challenges in managing change, both in organisations and personal life.

Bridges offers a crucial distinction between change and transition. According to him, change is a shift in the external environment or in a set of circumstances, which may be emergent or planned, imposed or chosen and usually occurs according to a set timeline. Transition, on the other hand, is the psychological process a person goes through in adapting to change.

Bridges writes that as we move from an earlier state (past) to a new position (future), we encounter three phases of a transition: an ending, a disorienting and confused period which he terms to be the neutral zone, and a new beginning.

Bridges considers this to be an organic process, with its own natural pace and as it happens inside people, we fail to recognise it. He stresses that managing transitions is vital if we want to succeed in creating change as it is all about the journey into the next stage. The operative issues are connected to the question of how we can get there and manage while we are en route in the journey.

The need to hold firm and maintain control over our lives is a strong and driving force in most of us. Studies indicate that it is this degree of certainty that we desire in life and in our future that gives us our sense of comfort and well-being. But along comes unexpected change that disrupts our ability to predict what's in store for us. The invariable consequence is that the hazy outlook to the future causes psychological disruption, with an increase in confusion, fear, anxiety and self-doubt.

Interestingly, while change can bring major benefits, negative perceptions tend to come first in our mind, as usually while feeling threatened, we associate change with loss. To help people manage change, it would be useful to appreciate that while we are transitioning in the change cycle, we go through a 'grieving cycle', also called the 'roller coaster of change'. Any change from an existing state initially causes shock and often we deny the reality of the loss. We may continue to fret, fume and linger here, but sooner or later (and this choice lies with us) the anger has to subside. We have to progress further along the cycle till the pain is replaced by hope as we begin to readjust to the new reality. The rebuilding process draws its strength on a new vision of the future, beckoned by a new dawn. Slowly, the pain filters away and is replaced by the nervous excitement of new opportunities that offer stimulating vistas of growth.

At a cognitive level, this roller coaster may seem easy to comprehend, but living through it is not, as we are buffeted by the rapid pace of societal change. Therefore, we are living through multiple roller coasters simultaneously, making it tougher to adjust to the various demands on us. Unable to handle it, we fall victim to stress. It would be wiser instead to remember John F Kennedy who said that 'Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future'.