

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 147 · WORKSHEET

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The Leader Caught in the Middle of Change

A change gets announced above you, and before the meeting even ends, you know you will be the one who has to make it real below you. Satya Nadella carried Microsoft's move to the cloud through the middle first — and William Bridges and Quy Nguyen Huy explain why that is the whole job. This episode gives you four moves to carry a change in both directions at once: champion it upward, attend downward, and keep the work going in between.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. The Room Looks at You

A change gets announced above you, and before the meeting even ends, you know you will be the one who has to make it real below you. The room goes quiet, the slides go up, and everyone looks at you, not at the person who announced it. By lunch, your team is at your door. One person wants to know if their job is safe. Another wants to know why nobody asked them. And above you, the senior leaders who announced it have moved on.

2. Carried Through the Middle

When Satya Nadella took over Microsoft's Server and Tools division, the chief executive had given him a clear mandate: push harder into cloud computing. The company's identity and profits were built on packaged software sold in a box — the opposite of the cloud. The first version of the company's cloud service was not very good. It could not even run off-the-shelf versions of the company's own server software. Nadella put Scott Guthrie in charge of the team, and Guthrie's first move was to have the team's leaders build an application on their own platform. It did not go well. So the team rewrote the platform, focused on making it easy to use, and had to unlearn lessons from decades spent selling out-of-the-box software. A month after Nadella became chief executive, he signed off on dropping Windows from the name — Windows had been the center of that company's universe for decades. He treated it as a culture and learning problem, not a technology switch. The question was never whether the engineers could rebuild the product. It was whether people who had spent their careers selling packaged software could learn to think like people who served customers continuously. Later, on his first day as chief executive, he wrote to the whole company, and the line is the payoff, not the plan: 'Our industry does not respect tradition — it only respects innovation.' He earned the right to say it because he carried the change through the middle first.

3. Change Is Not Transition

The framework is William Bridges, and his book is called Managing Transitions. Bridges draws a line most leaders never draw. Change is situational: the event. Transition is psychological: the three-phase process people go through as they internalize the new situation. Ending, losing, letting go. Then the neutral zone, where the old way

is gone and the new way is not settled. Then the new beginning. And Bridges opens his book with a warning: 'It isn't the changes that will do you in; it's the transitions.' One honest note: Bridges is a model, not a study. No experiment, no sample, no effect size. And they call the middle the frozen middle. Or permafrost. A permanent layer that change cannot get through. That is a label. Not a finding. Nobody measured it. The middle is not frozen. The middle is loaded.

4. Two Jobs at Once
A researcher named Quy Nguyen Huy spent three years inside one large technology firm going through radical change, while the firm cut about a quarter of its workforce. The middle managers who made the change work did two jobs at once, in opposite directions. They championed the change upward, and they attended to their people's emotions downward. Both. The failure modes are the sharp edge: low commitment produced inertia — nothing moved; high commitment with no attention to emotions produced chaos — everything moved, and nobody could hold it together. One firm, so it shows how, not how often.

5. Two Levels Up
You are not the messenger of the change. You are the place where the change becomes real, or does not. The senior leaders above you decided the event. Your team below you is living the transition. And you are living one too. The two-levels-up question is not whether you agree with the change. It is whether you can carry it in both directions at once. A change carried well arrives below as something people can actually do; carried badly, it arrives as confusion that climbs straight back up. Your promotion case is not built by agreeing with the change the loudest. It is built by how the change lands on your watch. The middle is where change is decided.

The picture: The announcement lands in the morning meeting. By lunch, your team is at your door. One person wants to know if their job is safe. Another wants to know why nobody asked them. And above you, the senior leaders who announced it have moved on.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — name your own ending first.** Before you can begin something new, you have to end what used to be. That is Bridges, and it applies to you before it applies to your team. The old way worked for you too. If you have not named what you are letting go of, you cannot carry a change you have not made your own.

What I am letting go of:



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- [ ] **Step two — translate, don't transmit.** Do not forward the announcement. Give your team the 'what does this mean for me' in your own words. They do not want the business reasons from the chief executive. They want the personal impact from you, the person who knows their work. A forwarded slide deck is a memo. A translation is leadership.

What this change means for my team, in my own words:

- [ ] **Step three — attend to the emotions, not just the rollout.** Make room for the loss to be said out loud. It looks like a one-to-one conversation where someone can say what they are losing, without being corrected. When someone says this feels like the end of something that mattered, do not correct them, do not reframe it. Let it land. The team that gets to grieve the old way out loud is the team that can start the new way. The team that cannot goes quiet, and quiet is where chaos starts.

One conversation where I will let the loss be said out loud:

- [ ] **Step four — keep the work going while the new way is not working yet.** This is the neutral zone, from the leader's side. The old way is gone, the new way is clumsy, and the customers still need serving. Hold continuity and change at the same time, even while the new way is slower than the old one. That is the difference, and it is the part the level above watches most closely. Anyone can announce a change. Keeping the work moving through the gap is the rare skill.

What I will keep running while the new way is still clumsy:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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