

ENDINGS IN ORGANISATIONS



What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning
The end is where we start from

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

-T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

PREFACE: OUR ENQUIRY AND COVID19 UPDATE

As colleagues, friends and thinking partners we have had many conversations about our own relationship to endings, our practice as coaches in ending with our clients well, and about helping organisations be better at acknowledging endings. As a result, we have frequently found ourselves working with our clients on current and neglected endings, whether they consciously bring an ending to our conversations, or whether we gently enquire and orientate them towards an incomplete ending and the energy that is bound up in it. We help leaders name the emotions, and acknowledge what they need to do, in order to lead better.

We were prompted by our clients to write an article for them to refer back to. The current context we all find ourselves in, one of many layers of often distressing endings, has led us to re-visit and update this article, and we share it with you in the hope that it may be of support to you as leaders navigating your way through this time.

ENDINGS IN ORGANISATIONS:

CREATING A STRONGER TOMORROW BY ACKNOWLEDGING ENDINGS TODAY

ENDINGS ARE EVERYWHERE AND OFTEN MESSY AFFAIRS

There is a myriad of endings every day in organisations. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an ending as “The final part of something”. Some readily spring to mind – redundancies and office closures for example. Some endings are more obviously finite and traumatic, for example the emotion and difficulty faced in the death of a colleague. More every day is the end of a project, or currently in the middle of the pandemic, projects that have had to be abandoned for budget or logistical reasons. Then, there is the withdrawal of a product or service and the endings that occur in multiple ways during mergers and acquisitions and for all change initiatives. Redundancies and business closures are endings that we are currently seeing a significant rise in. All need to be acknowledged for the change to be accepted and the organisation to move forward.

An ending is a process at the end of which is a goodbye. There is finality in this truth. Endings, and our relationship to them go deep. It is about belonging, a basic human need, and loss. For example, loss of relationship, identity, opportunity or choices. Loss is subjective, utterly individual and sometimes collective. Our own personal sense of belonging, fulfilment, and our history of goodbyes will affect how we as leaders acknowledge and attend to them or move on rather too swiftly. So, in any ending are the facts and emotions surrounding this ending, and all your history of endings, beginnings, loss and belongings. No wonder endings in human systems are entangled and messy. Add in to this the context of an organisational system that in the main is driven by the bottom line and believes that once a person is exited, they no longer have impact and we are even more entangled. This will not only affect ourselves, but impact on the system we lead.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF NOT ATTENDING TO ENDINGS?

Take a moment to consider what, as an organisation you spend on beginnings. What do you invest in terms of money and time as well as energy and emotion on new starts? The investment in how someone begins ensures they are ready to make a positive contribution, and that investment is visible in everything from interviews to onboarding processes. Other examples include roadshows to socialise and share visions and new goals, new products having a forecasted revenue attached and the ‘launch’ of a team, project or product.

Investment in endings, and the impact of that investment is less clear. And herein lies the rub. It is a more hidden, subtle, and pernicious cost. Incomplete and unacknowledged endings bind discretionary energy in them, which impacts the contribution and motivation of the remaining system and may be carried into the next team, the next project and the organisational system as a whole. This is really hard to see, let alone quantify, so no wonder endings get a fraction of the literature and management models that beginnings do.

William Bridges in *Managing Transitions* is one of the few management authors who addresses the need to attend to endings. He teaches us that all successful change programmes do not start with the outcome, “but the ending that you have to make to leave the old situation behind.” He rightly points out it is not the change people resist; it is the letting go.

SYSTEMIC RIPPLES

It may start with a reluctance to attend to your own feelings, guilt for example in making someone redundant, or avoiding the depth of our sadness after a loss. It may be that there are legal complexities and compromise agreements. But the systemic consequences ripple out into the culture and are held as baggage elsewhere in the organisation. It may show up as gossip, mistrust, lethargy or resistance. Any number of compromise agreements doesn't stop the wider system feeling and absorbing the affects.

The ghosts of unacknowledged endings appear in all sorts of ways. The leader who got rid of a person who had been underperforming, asks why is he still coming up in conversation? And why is the person we put into his role getting sucked into the same conversations and problems? Why, says the person that left, am I not settling into my new job – do they not value me either?



Systems don't tolerate 'moving on', 'forgetting', or otherwise excluding... yet organisations around the world still give people more [money] to leave than they did to join, believing that this will help them leave the organisational memory. It has exactly the opposite effect.

-John Whittington in *Systemic Coaching and Constellations*

LEADERS CAPACITY TO HOLD EMOTION AND VULNERABILITY

One of our hypotheses is that endings are less well acknowledged because to do so requires an emotional response, and ability to hold, listen to and express the full range of human emotions, including sadness, loss, grief and anger. But let's take care not to assume this is one thing or another. Humans are complex. We can be relieved, sad and excited simultaneously. By discounting the need to acknowledge an ending, we miss the opportunity to both name how we are feeling, and celebrate what was contributed and appreciated. When all emotions are welcome, more becomes possible.

It takes emotional self-regulation and maturity to sit with the discomfort of loss, knowing that in an ending there will be disappointment, guilt, unfulfilled possibilities. In the world of endings emotions run high, and we have observed them running even higher as a direct consequence of leaders ignoring them; conversations may then happen behind closed doors, leaving people feeling unheard or without an opportunity to be honest about how they feel. This may lead to an increased emotional response. A leader who understands that an ending is a part of the future makes what comes next more likely to succeed.

Another impact of 'hurrying up' and 'hushing up' is that there is then little, or no place for grief. Grief is defined as 'the normal process of reacting to a loss'. To what extent as a leader are you creating the conditions for grief? In her TEDx talk "How grief can help us win when we lose" Sophie Sabbage defines grief as "the courageous expression of sorrow", powerfully and passionately inviting us to make space for grief. She gives voice to the impact of not doing so:



Perhaps the only agony that surpasses grief is that of staying stuck in a numbed out, enraged, soul destroying inability to release what we've lost... Sorrow passes through the gateway of acceptance of 'yes, this is really happening, however deeply I wish it wasn't.

-Sophie Sabbage

The reality is that pain and loss will feature in your life and in the life of your organisation. The question is, what are you doing to prepare yourself to be able to 'show up' in those moments?

HIDDEN LOYALTY TO THE OLD TRIBE

According to collated research and a recent Harvard Business Review report, the failure rate for mergers and acquisitions sits between 70-90%. Mergers that looked great on paper; with the alignment of goals, products, customer base and synergies in centralising services all point towards two companies becoming one more efficient, flourishing organisation. This reality often doesn't materialise.

Investment is made at a human level in terms of division of roles, merging of teams, who stays, who goes and HR process. And yet, that human investment somehow fails to ensure that two tribes become one. We worked with an organisation post-merger which exhibited these underlying tensions. When we started working with the new team, let's call them 'oranges', we observed that they were still at heart, thoughts and actions, their original 'reds' and 'yellows'. Loyalty and belonging to their original tribe had not been acknowledged, so they didn't truly move on and see themselves as an 'orange'. Survival guilt, and unacknowledged emotions, enforced that unconscious wish to remain part of the original tribe, and increased suspicion of those who weren't in their tribe. Unspoken mistrust impacted on relationships, productivity, energy and focus on the present and future.

We encouraged them to acknowledge their original loyalty and belonging and to mourn those who had left. By pausing and orientating them towards their neglected endings, we helped them move forward towards the new corporate identity with renewed energy and sense of trust. With more closures, mergers and acquisitions inevitable as a consequence of Covid-19, this is work that leaders would be wise to pause and pay attention to.

“ ” **Leaving systems... requires us to respectfully soften ones set of loyalties and establish belonging in another system...to be free to move you first have to acknowledge your belonging and what you have gained from it.**

-John Whittington in *Systemic Coaching and Constellations*

BELONGING AND THREAT RESPONSE

David Rock's SCARF model* is a useful resource to understand why endings can be so emotionally hijacking. Endings are prime territory for threat responses. As he says in his article

“ ” **the brain experiences the workplace first and foremost as a social system... people who feel betrayed or unrecognised at work, experience it as a neural impulse, as powerful and painful as a blow to the head.**

-David Rock

When we expect people to minimise the impact of socially painful circumstances, when we ignore them and expect others to ignore them, not only do we quite literally inflict pain, it is actually counter-productive as it leaves people hurting and resisting more.

We often refer to SCARF as buttons that can be pushed; ones that trigger a conscious or unconscious threat response. An ending, particularly one that is unwelcome or painful, is bound to impact on our Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. We would highly recommend this article as a starting point for discussion on endings. If you are responsible for initiating an ending for someone else, then accepting that you are pushing these buttons will help you support from a place of anticipation of the ensuing threat responses.

* In his 2009 HBR article "Managing With The Brain in Mind" Rock identifies five domains of experience that typically activate strong threat and reward responses: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness. We can share further resources relating to this on request.

Rock talks in terms of going away and towards. Threat responses are to move away. We are more likely to go towards a reward. The work we can do here is to recognise the reward in going towards what on the surface appears to be the discomfort (or threat) of an ending. Both of us, as practitioners, are committed to doing our own work first. We have experienced the release and subsequent calm and noticed the accompanying rise in our emotional and intellectual capacity to be available to others, that has come from having the courage to do more to accept and acknowledge endings in our own personal and professional lives. The reward from going towards the discomfort of endings, is greater capacity to look creatively, strategically and calmly towards the future.

ORGANISATIONAL FAST PACE AND PROCESSES GET IN THE WAY

Leaders are under ever increasing pressure to perform. Nothing stays still or constant. There is churn, beginnings and endings occurring all the time. This is the reality and context within which leaders operate and it is never more the case than now.

The role of organisational processes, designed to protect the integrity of the organisation sadly often has unforeseen consequences. Details of settlements, and reasons for leaving may need to be legally kept secret, sometimes born out of fear of rapprochement or even litigation. Compromise agreements are commonplace and often necessary. However, compromise agreements are not systemic, by definition they silence and create secrets.

Another consequence of moving at speed is the lack of succession planning and preparation both to leave and to begin. Rabbi Joseph Dweck speaking at a debate on leadership explained the importance of this in his transition from his previous role in New York to that of a Senior Rabbi position in the UK;



It comes with the responsibility of leadership to succession plan, and think about who comes next, and how you leave the environment they will inhabit. When I got my new job in London I asked for a year, so that I could work on how I left the place I was leaving, in order to truly begin where I was going.

-Rabbi Joseph Dweck

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

We use four pillars with our clients to help them acknowledge an ending. We suggest working through a current or neglected ending to understand the content of these four pillars. With that specific ending in mind, note down what you have experienced, observed and/or felt under each pillar. By doing the work, on your own, with your senior leadership team, or with a confidential thinking partner, you will have more clarity on what needs attending to. The Reality tends to be easier to articulate when it comes to the facts and the things that can be publicly spoken. Often, the tricky and messy stuff and the Emotions are where we get stuck, and are the things that mean we will sabotage ourselves in not fully doing the work. It may take courage and it is important work to do. The insights from these pillars will support the actions you can then take.



FOUR PILLARS FOR BETTER ENDINGS

Appendix 1 is a series of questions designed to support and challenge you to begin this work, that we have adapted and updated in light of the pandemic. From that place of enquiry and acceptance, we can then pay attention to the four pillars that we use with our clients to help them acknowledge an ending.

- 1. Reality** (naming it – including the tricky and messy stuff)
- 2. Emotions** (allowing for these)
- 3. Accomplishment** (seeing what can be celebrated – there is always something)
- 4. Ritual** (the work of acknowledgement of loss and preparation for the future that stems from the first four pillars)

An ending is a process at the end of which is a goodbye. Everything we have said up to this point is about making your goodbye, as good as it can be. And we recognise that this pandemic has meant that many goodbyes have not been able to take place. In some cases this may have been distressing and difficult and we encourage you to honour these rituals when and how you can. It is never too late to acknowledge an ending and in doing so to have a positive impact on the future that has been affected by that ending.

A ritual is a formalised, collective and sometimes institutionalised ceremony, a series of actions in a prescribed order. It can be seen as a performance, and act which is lived through emotion and not thought. The most ancient ritual we know, across all faiths and cultures, is the ritual of the ultimate goodbye, in the death of a loved one. These rituals have been created to give us a sense of safety and structure around how we do that and support us in moving into a future without that person.

In organisations there are examples of rituals that provide a safe container for the ending and all that it entails, allowing the messy entanglements not to be talked through. The accomplishments, facts and emotions to be given their rightful place. Schools do it well; offering their young people yearbooks, graduation or prize giving ceremonies, proms, T-shirts with all the class names. The military also have their way of acknowledging loss through ritual.

Rituals can be used in organisations to acknowledge feelings, acknowledge loss, give an unspoken place for difficult emotions such as guilt. That celebrate what has been and equally offer a place to celebrate an acknowledgement of what will be next. One pre-pandemic example from a client was a mug that was produced for everyone post merger who went on into the new organisation, it said, “we survived the cull”. In that collective gift and brief phrase an emotion was captured and acknowledged with wry humour.

A gentler example. A leader who was retiring and loved hiking was given a beautiful acknowledgement by his department who planned a walk along Hadrian’s Wall with him. He started the walk with his boss, and his colleagues surprised him by popping up and joining him for different parts of the day’s journey along the way.

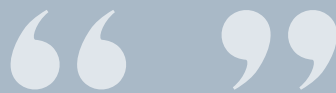
Your understanding of the four pillars will inform the rituals that the system, and the teams and individuals within it, most need.

PAUSING FOR ENDINGS

We are having multiple individual and collective experiences of this pandemic. It has created opportunities and losses. In facilitating conversations with our clients, we encourage them to pause. In revisiting our work on endings, we are inviting you to include giving space to endings in these pauses. Talking and listening have never been so important. As you move through this time of being surrounded by multiple endings and new beginnings, your teams will have a variety of experiences, and you will also be managing your own senses of loss, potentially personally as well as professionally.

The leaders we have worked with in cross organisation facilitated conversations are finding the opportunity to speak confidentially to each other about these challenges an invaluable resource in this long haul. Having acknowledged and understood more about endings, and separated out and disentangled the elements, they have created space and gone towards the conversations that needed to happen.

We end as we began this article, acknowledging the myriad of endings that carry within them an opportunity to ensure that there is an appropriate goodbye to facilitate another's hello. In giving yourself the opportunity to process and prepare, having acknowledged and grounded your own feelings, you will be more able to be available to and open to others, and more resilient and resourced to face the next steps that need to be taken to lead through this pandemic.



And in the end
The love you take
Is equal to the love you make

-Lennon and McCartney, *Abbey Road*

POST SCRIPT:

We have been delighted by the response from people that read this article when we first shared it. Our intention to start a conversation has become a reality. In response to requests for some practical applications for the four pillars we now have a website that houses further resources (including a podcast) as well as guides to working with the four pillars. You can also get in touch with us there, endingsforbeginnings.co.uk.

APPENDIX 1 - WHAT ARE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH ENDINGS?

Here are some questions to reflect on, to gather insight into your relationship with endings.

- What is the reality of endings in your organisation as a result of the pandemic and ensuing lockdown?
- What have you been able to do, and not been able to do, to acknowledge those endings?
- What are you avoiding?
- Typically, how are you with goodbyes?
- How did you previously invest time, energy, or money in acknowledgements of endings – for example crafting a speech, or choosing a gift? What feels appropriate now?
- To what extent do you usually take time to mourn or talk through your feelings? And how has this been recently?
- What do you allow to come to the surface and what do you keep hidden?
- What has the role of celebration been in endings for you?
- Typically, how quickly do you move on, or not, from an ending? What, if anything, has changed about that?
- What does your organisation/team need more of?
- What role could you play in that?
- And what do you need?

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Managing Transitions by William Bridges

Systemic Coaching and constellations 2nd edition by John Whittington

Managing With the Brain in Mind by David Rock

A Grief Observed by C S Lewis

Little Gidding by T S Elliot

How Grief Can Help Us Win When We Lose - TEDx talk by Sophie Sabbage

Daring Greatly by Brené Brown

What Do You Say About Saying Goodbye - Ending Psychotherapy by Keith Tudor

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alison Lucas (Randolph Partnership) and Lizzie Bentley Bowers (The Causeway Coaching) are professionally accredited coaches and facilitators, working predominantly at board level and across all three sectors, who love to enrich their practise by working and learning together. They are passionate about staying continually curious and paying attention to their clients individual and commercial needs and outcomes. Collaboration, shared experience and shared learning is a hallmark of their practise and they enjoy and benefit from the support and challenge they offer each other. Holding the pursuit of the best outcomes for their clients at the heart of their collaborations, they are often to be heard saying "I wish we had recorded this conversation!"

Learn more about them at randolphpartnership.co.uk and thecausewaycoaching.com.

