

## Systemic Transition Management

Take the easy road for a change

Systemic Transition Management – *Take the easy  
road for a change*

Maike Thiecke and Bianca van Leeuwen

Translation by: Joscelyn Weychan

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# Once upon a time...

*Bianca: "Hello, Bianca van Leeuwen."*

*Maike: "Maike Thiecke."*

**T**HAT WAS how simply our partnership began in 2007 at an introduction to the course 'System Dynamics in Organisations' at the Bert Hellinger Institute in the Netherlands. We were both fascinated by changing organisations. We were both frustrated by organisations that kept repeating the same behaviour, without anything changing. We both longed for a lens through which we could understand persistent behaviour in a change.

During the course, that lens was offered to us and we immediately connected through our ambition to translate this lens into practical tools and language for managers in changing organisations. From the start of our partnership we did our best to make managers and organisations enthusiastic about our lens: both in our peer review group and later on in the workshops that we occasionally gave together. In these workshops we mainly used organisational constellations to get people interested in this lens based on Systemic Work. The standard question that our participants responded with was: "*So how can I apply this to my own work?*".

We changed the programme, used half of the time for organisational constellations and the other half for 'something different'. We made our participants engage in 'systemic bullying' by using a list of questions that we often use to offer our clients a different perspective on change. These are tricky questions and the participants loved them for their ability to provide unexpected and clear insights that quickly move the change forward. Within a year the constellations had disappeared, and we only did 'something different'. After all, our trainer Jan Jacob Stam taught us that constellations are only a means to an end. In hindsight this was crucial for the development of our own philosophy: Systemic Transition Management (STM).

In the meantime, we were both busy with our own change assignments and our own changes. Bianca decided to ‘divorce’ her employer and start her own business as a change agent. Maaïke decided to ‘divorce’ her first company and biggest dream: the cooking studio in which she had made teams boil over, get burnt and separate in order to teach them how to work together. We started working together more often when it turned out that we both needed a helping hand. And we started a business together: ‘Plan B. For a change’.

Every now and then we made a discovery. William Bridges’ book ‘Managing Transitions’ was accessible and offered a clear model. ‘Verborgen orde’ (Hidden order) by Paul Huguenin and van Gestel (2007) was also significant for us because it’s as systemic as can be, without actually mentioning the word systemic. Both books enabled us to translate the theory to changing organisations. Later on we discovered books at crucial moments that helped us form our own philosophy: Systemic Transition Management. One of these well-timed discoveries was the book ‘Switch: How to Change Things when Change is Hard’ by brothers Chip and Dan Heath (2010).

We came across some old loves. Bianca included the study of emotions in STM, Maaïke reached for the brain learning principles. Systemic Transition Management was increasingly shaping up into what it has become today. Everything we came up with was immediately tested in all those brave organisations that allowed us a peek into their transitioning system. We also started to document our ideas, not only the philosophy, but also the working methods that we were devising and fine-tuning as we worked. The Systemic Transition Management model has been registered as intellectual property and specified in an i-depot (© Plan B, 2012).

The reactions to our approach in organisations took some getting used to. They could be summarised as “*Holy cow...!*”. We often found ourselves opposite a client who seemed to be struck by lightning when we asked him or her the (by now legendary) question: “*Which disaster is going to happen if the thing that hasn’t succeeded for ten years succeeds now?*”. It took us some time to realise which impact our lens had on managers in changing organisations.

With the writing down of everything we tried and invented, the first steps were taken towards this book. Like with most books, we took plenty

of time to mull the ideas over in our minds. For over a year we kept giving each other meaningful looks whilst saying: “*This should be in a book*”. All the time we were testing, polishing and extending our vision on organisational change. We have celebrated our successes and have been at our wits’ end. The one thing that never changed was our firm belief that change in organisations could be made easier. And, that organisations can only be significant if they are flexible about change. We experienced that personally in our own company.

This book is for you, the change agent. It is highly suitable for you:

- If you are interested in a perspective on organisational change that will change your view forever;
- if you are interested in a book that describes both success and disastrous and hilarious examples in equal measure, in which you can recognise yourself or your organisation;
- if you are interested in a book that will possibly incite your senses.

This book is not suitable for you:

- If you are looking for the one and only truth about organisational change;
- if you are particularly attached to the original contents of Transition Management, brain learning principles, NLP, the study of emotions or systemic work;
- if you feel that simple, pragmatic tools to make change easier condemn the complex, laborious and emotional process of change.

The existence of this book can be attributed to those who participated in our course ‘Take the easy road for a change!’. These brave managers and advisors wanted to increase their impact on change and gave us goose bumps when they succeeded in doing just that. Then it was our turn to mumble “*holy cow...*”. These participants were generous in sharing their change victories and change dilemmas. They often asked us: “*When are you publishing that book of yours?*”.

This book’s existence can also be attributed to our clients in large and small change processes: the clients who were grateful that the change finally succeeded after ten years, the clients who hated us when the change became painful and everything was different from ‘the way things nor-

mally were’, and clients who decided not to work with us because they ‘preferred to keep things a little more on the surface’.

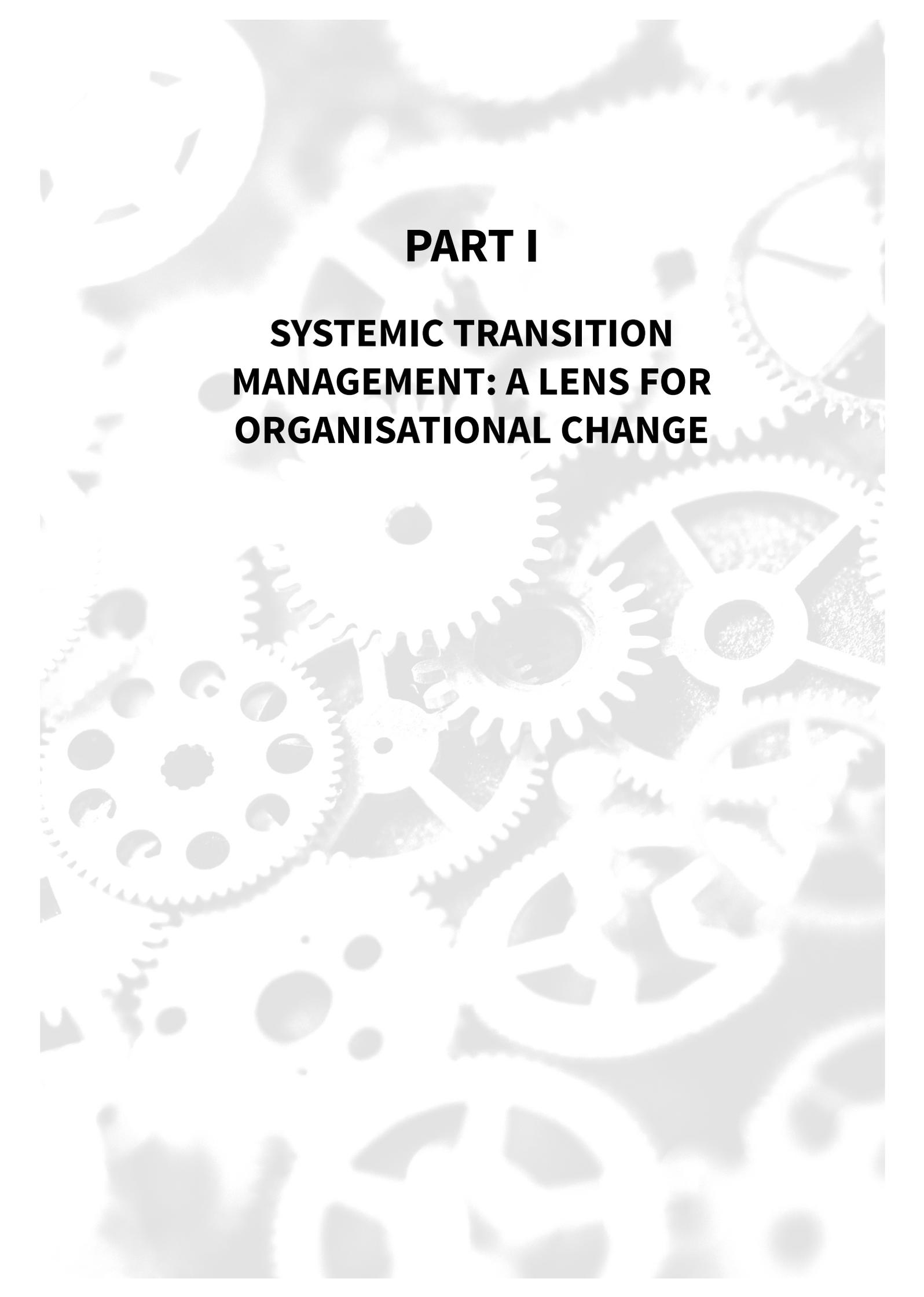
This book can be attributed to all the enthusiastic, critical, crazy, warm, and honest reactions to our newsletters. *“If you would write a book in the same style as your newsletters, I would buy it tomorrow!”*

This book can also be attributed to the assignments that we burnt our fingers on, were criticised about, made mistakes in or had to return to the clients, and to the colleagues that we got into trouble with. That was how we discovered what worked and what didn’t. That is also how we knew that people whose toes we had trodden on were sometimes a compliment for us and for our philosophy.

This book’s existence can be attributed to the insights of all the change agents before us, which we used gratefully, and to our mentors and inspirers in all shapes and sizes.

This book can also be attributed to our husbands (aka fellow entrepreneurs and fathers of our children), who occasionally allowed us, with love, to completely disrupt the balance between giving and taking and occasionally, with love, reclaimed that balance. Just like our children by the way.

Maaïke Thiecke and Bianca van Leeuwen  
April 2013



# **PART I**

## **SYSTEMIC TRANSITION MANAGEMENT: A LENS FOR ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE**

**T**HIS BOOK is about making change easier. And seeing that 70 percent of all change processes fail, this doesn't seem like a luxury. Change consumes money, time and energy. Hearing countless organisations complain about constant organisational changes makes us despondent when we see the meagre results. The question is: "*What counts as a successful organisational change?*". As far as we are concerned it is pretty simple: what is important is that behaviour within an organisation or team is different than it was before the change. Isn't that the only reason you would ever start a process that consumes so much money, time and energy? No way would a company integrate an open-plan office, only to go back to the way it used to be after a year, right? Or send the entire organisation to a feedback course, only to return to a culture of 'not addressing each other's mistakes'? No company managers in their right minds would invest millions in an efficient merger between several insurance companies or districts, only to conclude after several years that more money, instead of less, was being spent. Well then!

As said before, this book is for change agents that cannot, or do not want to, let their organisational changes fail. We are convinced that:

- change in organisations can be made easier;
- change agents can drastically increase their impact on change.

From that conviction we have developed a lens and a toolbox to enable change agents, including you, to take charge of change. With this book we offer you a lens to look through, to help you understand what on earth keeps happening in your organisation when 'they' want or have to change. Not only do we offer you a different perspective, to help you 'get it', we also provide (in the words of a participant in one of our courses) "*simple tools that work, thank God*". You can look through the lens, but also put it away again. We have chosen to permanently laser-etch the lens into our eyes, but you certainly don't have to do the same. You probably already have quite the arsenal of change instruments; we offer an extension, not a replacement. We call this lens Systemic Transition Management.

In the first part of this book we describe the lens through which we look at organisational change. This part will help you understand how and for what circumstances it is composed. We link existing theoretical frameworks together and to our experiences in organisational change. Part II fo-

cuses more on the practical use: how can you intervene in organisational change?

We start chapter 1 with several assumptions. You could say these are our assumptions about making organisational and behavioural change easier; it might also be the way we view the world. Writing this book made many of these assumptions more explicit. This chapter gives you a taste of what is to come. You could see it as a teaser.

In chapter 2 we describe the core and the roots of Systemic Transition Management. Systemic Transition Management (STM) is a mix of existing theories, our experiences and our common sense. We made grateful use of Bridges' (2005) ideas and methods regarding transition management, as well as the systems thinking of, among others, Homan (2005), Choy and et al. (2005), and Bryan et al. (2006), Hellinger's Systemic Work and probably many other theoretical foundations that we have acquired through the years. We boldly mixed everything together to form a philosophy that helps us understand what happens in changing organisations and allows us to intervene in change, making organisational changes easier. We describe how Systemic Transition Management connects to existing theories about (organisational) change and how that led to a toolbox that allows you to achieve a significant change.

In chapter 3, the final chapter of the first part, we describe how to manage emotions during organisational change. The presence of emotions is unavoidable and essential during an organisational change; using our insights on the management of emotions can increase your impact on change. It is possible that you will find several familiar theoretical frameworks in this chapter too. We will mainly be describing how these known frameworks are used within Systemic Transition Management.





# Dilemmas in organisational change

# 1

**W**HEN WARMING UP towards writing this book we read tons and tons of material on organisational change. Not a hard job, the library is full of books on the subject. In the words of a publisher who turned down our publication proposal for this book: “*The market is saturated, I am not going to publish your book*”. She couldn’t have highlighted the need for a distinctive book any better!

The distinctive character of this book starts with clarifying our views on organisational change. By now we know that we make assumptions, sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously, about organisational change that colour our philosophy of Systemic Transition Management. We realised this when communicating with clients who have completed an intensive master’s programme in Change Management. We read it on LinkedIn in quick-witted discussions about different views on organisational change. Also in our workshops and courses we often meet people who have an entirely different view on organisational change than we do. It is exactly those (heated) discussions that have provided a good insight into our basic assumptions. Let’s start by listing as many of these views on change in organisations as possible. That way you will know what you are dealing with when it comes to us and Systemic Transition Management: which things we completely agree on and those about which we definitely disagree.

## **1.1 Seven dilemmas about change in organisations**

### **Situational change or transition?**

Most change agents are good at managing the implementation of a new process, a new structure, a merger. They are good at managing the , also known as situational change according to Bridges (2005). It is an important condition for getting from A to B. At the same time, the management of the surface current is not enough to achieve a change in behaviour once you arrive at point B. This requires a change in the undercurrent: the psychological transition that people must go through in order to show different behaviour. Without a transition in the undercurrent there is the risk of change that is nothing more than a rearrangement of furniture. This seems like stating the obvious, but there appears to be a lot of trust

in those surface current interventions in the world of change. For a behavioural change in the banking world, it is not sufficient to only establish financial disciplinary actions. For more sustainable and animal-friendly behaviour it is not enough to simply banish cut-price chicken from the supermarket. If you want your employees to work more efficiently, simply implementing a SAP system isn't going to be enough. To trigger parents to raise their children more wisely, it is not enough to just open a couple of Youth and Family Centres. These are just some known examples.

Sometimes there are improvements to be made in the surface current. We spoke with a colleague who highly valued a good surface current. Because so much suffering could be avoided by, as she called it, 'more hygienic' change. She meant simply having your act together. We agree. However, we also see lots of organisations over-investing in the surface current. "*If we just sort this out, then...!*" Unfortunately, an organised surface current is no guarantee for a flawless change process. That is why we so often sit down opposite directors and managers who feel discouraged, disappointed or downright resentful about their endless investments in education, facilities, work descriptions, areas of responsibility and working spaces that don't lead to a change from A to B. It is not only managers who think in terms of the surface current. Employees are also convinced that they can only participate when things are properly sorted. If that isn't the case they can't join in, and don't have to either. So: *a good surface current is essential, but not sufficient when it comes to significant change*. Situational change is important, but it is not enough. Plus, there are plenty of chances for change agents to become as skilled at managing the undercurrent as they are at managing the surface current.

It also works the other way around: a good undercurrent is essential, but not enough. Now that an increasing number of change agents understand that 'the psychological process' is also part of the deal, it also happens that change is seen as an entirely emotional event. We receive requests for team coaching, individual coaching, conflict coaching and off-site meetings, but in many situations there is no clear change assignment: the B is not clear. The surface current is nothing without the undercurrent; the undercurrent is worthless without the surface current.

This book only briefly discusses the surface current. Even though it is essential for change, there is no added value that we can offer when it comes to the surface current. There are enough experts in the area of the

surface current and its management. We focus on the undercurrent and the way you can manage that behavioural transition because we are convinced that the undercurrent is just as controllable as the surface current. Many change agents disagree with us. Either because they believe that things will work out as long as you let the undercurrent do its job, or because they believe that there is nothing you can do about a subconscious process. In this book we will show you why we have a different opinion and how you can drastically increase your impact on a change. By the way, we think it is only a matter of time before change agents become as skilled at controlling the undercurrent as they are at controlling the surface current. Systemic Transition Management will contribute to this.

### **Incidental change or change as a general rule?**

In various management books you can read about how to manage that *single* change: a change with a head and a tail. However, an increasing number of authors state that change is an ‘ongoing’ process, which makes it far more difficult to influence. It is all about the difference between incidental change and change as a general rule. We come across the first type in lots of organisations: “*We are only just finishing up with the first change and the next one is already on its way*”. We once heard a team say to their manager: “*If we are doing this differently, we want a guarantee that it stays this way for the next five years at the least!*”. The manager thought that was a reasonable request; he reckoned there was no point in continuous change. We think otherwise.

A chain of incidents tires people, because it is a chain of things that are different, and thus not peaceful. However, we are convinced that organisations would benefit from the assumption that change is a general rule. Firstly because we reckon that organisations have to continuously rediscover themselves. An organisation can only reach its full potential when it keeps changing. Secondly, ‘change as a general rule’ is the end of the promise that peace is the standard and that change is an exception. For organisations that are good at consolidating, this is probably already a transition in itself. Plus: what is the effect on people who constantly feel that they have to do things they weren’t hired to do?

People have a right to the truth, however awful it is. Like a director said to us: “*My wife once said more or less the same thing when I complained*