

“Letting go of what was, honestly embracing what is, and bravely stepping into an unknown future is an intense dynamic that organizations, leaders, and human beings navigate daily.”

Embracing the Reality and Possibility of Transitions

By Kelly Lewis

Transitions are beautifully hard. They can be initiated by a situation not of our choosing or inspired by a possibility of our liking. Some are long and drawn out while others are short and swift. Often, they feel chaotic and messy and we try our hardest to make them neat and tidy. For most of us, they are easier to think about than to experience. For all of us, transitions are an invitation to wholeheartedly embrace reality and unequivocally step into possibility.

Early this spring, I was invited into a long, messy, beautifully hard transition by a situation not of my choosing. I am grateful that I said “yes” to this invitation even though it is easier to grasp intellectually than to experience emotionally. Through this article, I would like to invite you into my transition and my learnings to date; I hope it supports and perhaps challenges you (and your clients) to navigate the transitions you are experiencing.

This particular transition knocked on my door one Tuesday afternoon in late April. I was in the midst of doing work I love—co-facilitating a two-day intensive on Relationships and Leadership with a group of incredibly caring and competent leaders. We had just finished a delightful lunch in the blooming gardens of our nurturing venue when I checked my phone. There

was a text from my older sister, Lisa, telling me to call her ASAP. My sister had accompanied my mom to a doctor’s appointment earlier that day. The sinking feeling in my stomach told me that appointment had everything to do with her text. I gave Lisa a call before our afternoon session. Her voice was shaky, which made the sinking feeling I had grown even stronger. Lisa went on to tell me that mom had been diagnosed with Bulbar ALS, a debilitating and unpredictable disease that has no cure. I remember sitting down, speechless, with a knowing that everything had just changed. My first reaction was to hide. To hide in the comfort of work I love with clients I had fallen in love with. Yet somewhere even deeper down in my gut I knew I needed to go be with my mom and sisters.

Despite my impulse, I chose being uncomfortable that afternoon. I entrusted our clients to the capable hands of my talented partner and drove to my mom’s. We sat with silence, the unknown, and some hard questions, none of which we had answers to. I sat with the tension (within myself and within my family) between the desire to stay hopeful and the need to be honest. A beautiful thing happened that afternoon. We took our first step toward embracing this new reality with openness

and courage and a new intimacy, closeness, and connection emerged.

As the weeks went on and the shock wore off, I could see the tension I was experiencing was a polarity to be leveraged. I was aware that I was being whisked away from my happy place of being energized by possibilities and was at risk of denying what was real. I feared that gloom and doom would set in. I was concerned we would have to make decisions before we got to explore all the different options. I got really stuck. Thankfully, I had enough awareness to ask for support. I invited a small group of loved ones and trusted colleagues into my process. To this day, each of them continues to support and encourage me as I navigate the tension between embracing what is and embracing what could be. I am listening deeply to the questions being asked and the offers being made. I am noticing the way people are walking alongside me and I am walking alongside my mom—without a need to know or to fix or to take the pain away.

Out of necessity, I developed a set of coaching questions to help me more honestly and wholeheartedly include both the reality and possibility into my experience. These questions were designed with two purposes in mind:

1. To gain the value of focusing on reality—the good, bad, true, and beautiful AND to gain the value of focusing on possibility—the good, bad, true, and beautiful.

2. To become aware of the intrinsic fears that show up when we over-focus on one to the neglect of the other.

As we all know, my family and I are not alone. Letting go of what was, honestly embracing what is, and bravely stepping into an unknown future is an intense dynamic that organizations, leaders, and human beings navigate daily. I have been experimenting with this framework to support both individual and organizational clients for the last six months. The transitions my clients are navigating range from changing roles to changing administrations. Across the board a particular learning has been consistent—when we see this as a polarity to be leveraged, we gift each other and ourselves with the space, perspective, and choices needed to honor and navigate the inherent tension in all transitions.

Some additional learning to date include:

- » The value of telling the truth (without judgment) about the present is awareness, acceptance, freedom, and humility.
- » The value of imagining what is possible yields an energy and enthusiasm about what could be.
- » The need to face fears of being uninspired or without control, or to acknowledge the overwhelming chaos of unlimited possibilities.
- » The need to embrace reality wholeheartedly, especially when

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there is a strong preference for the possibility of the future. Alternatively, the need to wholeheartedly embrace the possibilities when there is an affinity towards the practicality of reality and how things are currently done. Reality without possibility feels like gloom and doom. Possibility without reality feels like Pollyanna.

- » The value of supplementing either-or thinking with great big both/and thinking, which allows movement toward more inclusive viewpoints, a deeper understanding of others, and a more honest sense of reality.
- » The value of experiencing the gift of presence, of being accompanied in the joys and sorrows of leadership, life, and transitions. Leaders, too, must extend grace to themselves and to others in order to move forward.

As students and teachers of transitions, we need to work with both what is real and what is possible. The inclusive embrace of both offers us the opportunity to not only survive the transition but to thrive in and through the transition and perhaps even because of the transition.

Table 1. *Coaching Questions to Support the Reality and Possibility of Transitions*

Embracing Reality:	Embracing Possibility:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is true now? • What is also true? • What is most important? • What am I grateful for? • What am I scared of? • What is there to learn? • What am I avoiding? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is possible now? • What is also possible? • What do I want? • What am I hopeful about? • What am I concerned about? • What am I ready to let go of? • What do I need to move forward?