Leading Change in Congregations

In essence, change is what leadership is all about. Leaders are change-makers, they are masters of change. By helping followers achieve goals, they lead people to where they've never been before. Leaders blaze new trails. They plow new ground. They sail uncharted waters. Leaders are out in front.[1]

The study of leadership is the study of how men and women guide people through uncertainty, hardship, disruption, transformation, transition, recovery, new beginnings, and other significant challenges. It's also the study of how men and women, in times of constancy and complacency, actively seek to disturb the status quo, awaken new possibilities, and pursue opportunities. . . Just take a look around today's neighborhoods, homes, and workplaces, and you'll see lots of things that aren't going as well as they could. There are no shortages of opportunities to change the way things are.[2]

On this they nearly all seem to agree: The future belongs to those willing to let go, to stop trying to minimize the change we face, but rather to maximize the discontinuity.[3]

Leadership is a perilous business because most people will resist change – and sometimes they will take their opposition to the most extreme ends. Initially, when a new idea is proposed, many members of an organization will respond by saying things like "Leave things the way they are"; "Hey, we don't want you stirring things up"; "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"; or the old standby, "We've been doing it this way for thirty years and I don't see any need to change now.". . . Those who do not want to change will fight those who do – for no rational reason whatsoever. . .[4]

The new church never expects to "get it right." It doesn't expect to finally find the magic pattern or resurrect the lost, last detail that will suddenly spell supernatural success for the body of Christ. It assumes that as long as the church grows, it will have to adapt and change and learn. As long as there are people, there will be problems; as long as there is history, there will be struggle; as long as the church exists in this troubled world, it will compete neck and neck against the gates of hell to see who will prevail against whom.

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[1] Donald T. Phillips, <u>Martin Luther King, Jr. on Leadership: Inspiration & Wisdom for Challenging Times</u> (New York: Warner Business Books, 2000), 263.

[2] Barry Z. Posner and James M. Kouzes, <u>The Truth about Leadership: The No-fads, Heart-of-the-Matter Facts You Need to Know</u> (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 93.

[3] Brian McLaren, <u>The Church on the Other Side </u>(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 24-25.

[4] Donald T. Phillips, <u>Martin Luther King, Jr. on Leadership: Inspiration & Wisdom for Challenging Times</u> (New York: Warner Business Books, 2000), 261, 263.

As long as we keep having children, those offspring will eventually rise up and call us outdated.[5]

Discussion

What struck you from the above quotes?

What kinds of changes are we facing in the church today?

Looking at question 3 of *Leading Change in Church Communities: 10 Important Questions* (below), why is there resistance to change? Why do we need leadership to bring about transformation?

Looking at the kinds of changes, we are facing in the church today, do we need incremental or systemic changes?

If change is needed, how do we respond to resistance to change?

How do you bring people in to change initiatives?

Where are you facing transformation in your church right now?

Great fables to help prepare leaders

John P. Kotter and Holger Rathgeber, <u>Our Iceberg Is Melting: Changing and Succeeding Under Any Conditions</u> (St. Martin's Press, 2006).

Spencer Johnson, <u>Who Moved My Cheese: An A-Mazing Way to Deal With Change in Your Work and Life</u> (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1998).

Other Key Resources

Heifetz, Ronald A. <u>Leadership without easy answers</u>. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994.

Kotter, John P. <u>Leading change</u>. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1996.

Scott, Susan. <u>Fierce conversations: achieving success at work & in life, one conversation at a time</u>. New York, N.Y.: Berkley, 2004.

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[5] Brian McLaren, <u>The Church on the Other Side </u>(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 28.

Leading Change in Church Communities: 10 Important Questions[6]

1. Do we need a change process?

- What is the adaptive situation we are facing?
- Are we responding to symptoms or purpose?
- How will this change help us to respond to God's call/live more fully into God's Kingdom?
- How are we making things better?

2. How much do we need to change, and how quickly?

- *Incremental change*: Most people assume success comes one step at a time and are more comfortable changing one habit at a time.
- *Systemic change*: We may need to reach the next level faster by learning or doing several new things at once. Consider whether we are taking all of the actions we need to truly bring about the changes we desire.

3. Are we prepared for resistance?

- Different people have different approaches to change: only 3 percent will be innovators, 13 percent early adopters, 34 percent middle adopters, 34 percent late adopters, and 16 percent laggards.[7]
- Different people have different stress tolerances, and different people face different levels of stress.
- Since stress is cumulative, be aware of all stressors:
    - events in the church community, such as new leaders and leadership styles, new projects, perceived changes to worship style, or the arrival of new members
    - events outside the community on a macro level, such as war, natural disasters, or economic distress
    - events on a personal level, such as illness, concerns about children, loss of a job, divorce, or life transitions
- We need to monitor resistance and build critical mass with pastoral and behavioral responses.

4. What is our level of trust?

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[6] From James J. Gettel, *Where Jesus Leads: Helping Christian Communities to Follow* (Deep River Books, 2017).

[7] Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: Free Press, 1962), 150.

- Most resistance to change is rooted in fear and/or need for control.
- People will follow those they trust: God/Jesus/Spirit, leaders (clergy and lay), ministry teams, themselves.
- It's important to develop a trusted leadership group that is
  - non-anxious;
  - God-differentiated (not self-differentiated);
  - confident;
  - purposeful; and
  - concerted.
- Leaders need to the pace and tone: enthusiasm and commitment is contagious.

5. *Do we have a vision?*

- Begin with a clear, shared, and compelling vision.
- Draw and inspire people with a significant mission (purpose) to be accomplished together in a supportive community (belonging).

6. *Do we have a guiding coalition? This coalition should*

- be trusted (above);
- create urgency (momentum below);
- inspire and set an example for later adopters;
- set goals;
- create expectations that goals can be met; and
- carry as much forward as possible in a ministry team (versus the whole congregation).

7. *Are we fully involving others?*

- The mission of the church is the work of all of us (1 Corinthians 12).
- Teams achieve more than individuals (due to the variance of gifts, skills, and resources).
- Involvement in planning and execution provides understanding and eliminates fear.
- Teamwork increases energy and enthusiasm.

8. *Are we over-communicating?*

- Make sure communication is open and honest to
  - build trust;
  - raise awareness;
  - reassure members that the changes are necessary and will pay off in the long run; and
  - give other people credit for making it all happen.

- Good communication includes
  - sharing stories and personal experiences;
  - talking comfortably and often about the significant role Jesus (not us!) is playing; and
  - listening!
- Be sure people know they are heard—but also be sure people understand that being heard does not mean they must have their own way.

9. Are we building momentum?

- Is there a growing sense of urgency that changes need to occur?
- Is there a growing confidence that changes will occur?
- Are resistance levels decreasing? Remember to
  - maintain the right amount of energy, as in the pressure cooker analogy (cook but don't blow the top off);
  - help concerned members avoid becoming overstressed; and
  - prevent dependent or recalcitrant members from undercutting the community's vision and strategies.
- How are we encouraging healthy reactions to stress?
  - Reduce people's stress by listening carefully to their concerns.
  - Honestly discuss the changes people are experiencing, especially their personal feelings about them.
  - Point out which stress is external to the system or that changes within the system are relatively small, purposeful, and reasonable.
- How are we reacting to unproductive conflict? Remember to
  - slow or stop the changes (though this can be like giving in to a child's tantrum and may not be possible if real stressors are beyond the community);
  - allow the stressed person to find a different setting where (s)he feels more safe; and
  - apply authority and place boundaries to define how individuals must act— even when they are stressed—as members of a loving community.

10. Are we learning?

- Productive confrontations help leaders take time for conversation, prayer, reflection and discernment, and they reveal broader or deeper perspectives.
- Leaders need to encourage, facilitate, and mediate confrontations that may help the community make better, positive decisions about questions that do not have clear answers and solutions.[8]

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[8]See Ronald A. Heifitz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994). Steps to successful adaptive confrontations are (1) identify the adaptive challenge; (2) keep the distress within a tolerable range; (3) focus attention on ripening issues and

- Avoiding loving confrontations undermines change by harming relationships, preventing reconciliation and closing off the productive learning that differences in perspective may spur.[9]
- There are real benefits to working through disagreements over values, goals, or methods if they are relevant to the mission of the community or the challenges the community is adapting to.

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not on stress-reducing distractions, (4) give the work back to people, but at a rate they can stand, and (5) protect voices of leadership without authority.

[9] We need to encourage confrontation to have the community question its attitudes, actions, behavior, or beliefs. At the same time, we need to manage people's passionate differences in a way that diminishes their destructive potential and constructively harnesses their energy. First, create a secure place where the conflicts can freely bubble up. Second, control the temperature to ensure that the conflict doesn't boil over—and burn you in the process. Third, make sure that the leader does not come up with an answer or solution on the leader's own, but encourages the confrontation. Beware that identifying or raising issues that everyone else is avoiding puts the leader in the position of having anger and resentment surrounding the issue directed towards him or her.