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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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How to Manage Change Resistance

Why do church leaders so often underestimate resistance to change—even when the status quo is not working and the change promises to deliver big benefits?

Dysfunctional Church Culture

Newcomers often fail to see that a dysfunctional behavior pattern—deeply rooted in the congregation’s traditions—often locks the status quo in place. Examples:

1. *Inward Focus.* Some congregations, especially those historically prominent in their communities, suffer from undiagnosed IDD (Insight Deficit Disorder). Their many successes during past years block the core lay-leadership groups from looking outward for new ideas.

2. *Complacent Arrogance.* Other congregations gradually become disconnected from changing realities in their communities and young-adult families. Thus, they fail to see and address contemporary ministry needs.

3. *Diffuse Accountability.* In churches with large boards and powerful committee chairs, the decision-making systems often kill most of the creative ideas at conception.

Other Change-Resistance Causes

A list of other, more-specific, barriers to change would include the following:

1. Fear of making a damaging mistake
2. Fear of changing a method that has worked well
3. Fear of losing familiar habit patterns or relationships
4. Fear of discarding a cherished value
5. Fear of an uncertain future
6. Fear of trying to learn a new skill
7. Fear of losing financial support from parishioners
8. Painful past experiences with change efforts
9. Power-needy leaders who “want to do it my way”
10. Denominational norms make the change feel wrong

Change-Resistance Tips

Practical ways to reduce the stress that often accompanies change efforts:

1. Remember that people make changes when their survival anxiety becomes high enough to counterbalance the anxiety they feel when contemplating a change.
2. Many people feel that the word *change* condemns “the way we’ve always done it.” Therefore, replace that word with “fine-tune,” “update,” “refine,” and “continue in the direction we’ve been heading for several years.”

3. If possible, avoid actively killing a cherished tradition. Try to *add* to present ministries instead of deleting one of them. Let sacred cows die a natural death.

4. Avoid (a) making major changes via newsletter pronouncements and memos, (b) letting stressful situations pressure you to make instant decisions, and (c) Lone-Ranger actions instead of developing a consensus.

5. If the proposed change is substantial, such as altering worship times, adding a Saturday night worship service, or introducing an unfamiliar worship-music style, appoint a special task force to study the matter and make recommendations. Compared to a standing committee, a special task force tends to (a) view the proposal from a new perspective, (b) think more creatively, and (c) produce a better product.

6. In some instances, set up a pilot program. Testing a new method for one year “to see how well it works” runs minimum risk. Pick pilot projects that church members perceive as (a) important to maintaining one of our congregation’s historic ministries, (b) a dramatic way to attack an old challenge with a new technique, and (c) something we can test in a brief time span.



“I fear if we add another service to handle the overflow, it will effect attendance at our main worship service.”

7. In some instances, measure and report performance differently. Examples: the number of first-time worship visitors each month, the percentage of regular attendees who started attending during the last five years, or the percentage of members above age sixty-five compared to the percentage below age twenty-five.

8. Say that making the proposed change will be a challenging task but is theologically important. Preaching and teaching on issues related to the proposed change helps move parishioners' perspectives beyond "what our pastor wants us to do" to "what God wants us to do."

9. In some cases, consult with an outside expert. Creative innovation often occurs when someone helps church leaders view reality from a new perspective.

10. Begin discussing the change months before it would take effect, so people have time to revise their thinking.

11. Present change proposals openly and comprehensively. Allow time for questions and clarifications. The greater the participant involvement, the greater the likelihood of acceptance.

12. In the initial presentation of your proposed change, review the pros and cons of other options already considered and rejected. Frankly acknowledge any potential losses and pain the change could produce. This lets people know that you have thoughtfully considered the tradeoffs—and takes the steam out of detractors eager to point out "the reason that won't work in our church."

13. If prudence or organizational rules require that you take a vote, never do that during the meeting in which you initially introduce the possible change.

14. Rarely do more than 5 to 10 percent of people initially view a new idea as desirable. At the other end of the spectrum, 5 to 10 percent of people strongly resist a potential innovation the first time they hear about it. (Both groups consist of people who feel they should take immediate, aggressive action for or against a new idea as soon as they hear it.) Don't disregard these needs:

- Most of the 80 to 90 percent of initially passive people, who do not care that much one way or the other, need time to discuss and ponder the idea—so that they develop sufficient passion to unite with the 5 to 10 percent who immediately favor it.
- Most of the 5 to 10 percent who initially oppose the idea need time to rethink it so they can move from resistance to passive acceptance or enthusiasm.

15. Conflict is an essential part of every change process—and moves people toward acceptance. Provide appropriate times and places for "concerns" and objections to freely bubble up.

16. When people criticize your proposal, you may feel personally attacked. But their objections are more often an attack on your leadership role (anyone else occupying that role would receive the same criticism).

Understanding criticism for what it is—anxiety because the change affects people's lives—prevents negative reactions from undermining your emotional stability and sense of self-worth.

17. Respond coolly to what feels like a personal attack, especially when the criticism comes from people you care about. When you take change-resistance personally, you aid and abet a common way of taking leaders out of action: making yourself the issue.

18. Discuss the proposed change in all groups that the change would affect. The more significant the change, the longer you must work at coalition building.

19. During group discussions, ask people to list positives and negatives related to the proposed change.

20. Encourage people to speak honestly about potential flaws in your strategy or initiative. Without that input, your overconfidence about the idea can lead to (a) intellectual arrogance, (b) a grandiose sense of self-importance, (c) self-deception that sees only the factors that confirm your opinion, and (d) disastrous missteps.

21. Increase your communication with core leadership people. For example, during the period when the change takes effect, have coffee once a week with the staff member or layperson who (a) must lead the change or (b) is dedicated to seeing the initiative fail.

22. Tell the staff in kind but firm ways the importance of cooperating and the consequences of failure to do so.

23. Expect to give the same explanation speech—in which you outline the reasons why this change is beneficial—at least six times during several weeks or months. Some people are so busy rejecting the idea the first time you present it that they cannot hear, or remember, anything positive from that explanation.

24. Close to the implementation stage, ask people to throw in suggestions for how to accomplish this change as smoothly as possible.

25. When implementation is approximately 75 percent completed, don't be surprised when a few people—from whom you have heard no resistance until now—become quite vocal in their objections. Remember to ...

- Smile and say that you understand how they feel.
- Remind them which church group or groups decided this change is a good idea, and why.
- Resist their effort to (a) suck you into their doomsday emotion and (b) get you to rescue them from their anxiety by blocking the proposed change.

The Bottom Line

Ninety-five percent of resisters eventually say with pride how glad they are that "we made that change."

Five percent of resisters will never like the change, no matter how logically anyone explains the reasons, and they will continue to loudly denounce it in their individual conversations and in church groups.

Love them anyway.