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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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THIS CONVERSATION—AGAIN? IMPROVING CHURCH COMMUNICATION

As congregations face change and new challenges, conflict is part of the process. Too often, under stress, church leaders and members fall into bad communication habits that prevent the airing of concerns and objections. Healthy conversations help people manage conflict and move them toward acceptance of new initiatives. Productive communication speeds up the process from planning to action and keeps members on track to accurately assess new realities.

Communication Fashions to Avoid

Appropriate and effective actions by church leaders rest on good thinking. Do you recognize some of these communication and thinking mistakes?

1. *All or Nothing Thinking.* Painting reality as black and white is easy. Recognizing some shades of gray in any situation takes more time and thought. New ideas can be quickly judged as “terrible” or the “greatest ever.” Most new ideas fit in neither category. Nearly all ideas possess some merit and leaders can hone them into a better strategy. And even the best and greatest ideas need further development.¹

Beware of any proposal that only offers two alternatives. For example, “we must cut our staff salaries immediately or stop paying our utility bills.” There is always a third way, or fourth avenue, or fifth alternative.

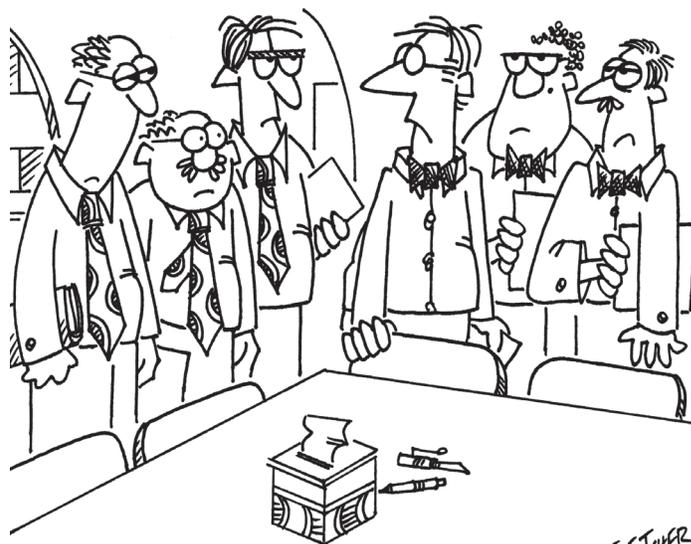
Polarized thinking can be used to describe members too (such as “we have good members and bad members”). Congregational efforts can be falsely judged as “successful” or “a complete failure.” Instead of putting all of reality into two baskets, creative people explore the positive and negative aspects of complex situations.

2. *Overgeneralizing.* After an unpleasant pastoral tenure with a recent seminary graduate, the congregation’s leaders vowed to never call another pastor without decades of pastoral experience. Unfortunately, those vows limit the number of gifted pastors

who could effectively serve with the church. And that view limits what the congregation could learn from the experience.

Taking one bad (or good) experience and using its specific outcome to make a general rule about how the universe works is more than a leap of faith. A specific situation is just that—unique to a particular event, time, and place. A healthy conversation recognizes the multitude of factors that produce any given outcome.

3. *Filtering Out the Positive.* After seventeen years of service, the pastor of First Church retired. He possessed many ministry strengths but some members expressed dissatisfaction with his administrative skills. As the search committee screened candidates, they made administrative experience a top priority. As a result, their next pastor was a phenomenal administrator with few other ministry gifts. His tenure was brief as the members realized they had focused too narrowly on the previous pastor’s weakness without appreciating all the leadership positives of their long-time pastor.



BY THE FIFTH COMMITTEE MEETING, IT WAS OBVIOUS
IT WOULD ALWAYS BE “US” VERSUS “THEM.”

A narrow focus on just the negatives or just the positives prohibits leaders from forming a realistic and balanced outlook. Identifying the positives and negatives of a situation is part of healthy communication.

4. *Assigning Motive.* We observe behavior and make guesses about why people are acting in ways that we deem irrational or counterproductive. Our inferences can be completely wrong because we can never be certain what someone else is thinking. Because we are not mind readers, healthy conversations include questions about what people believe, what they value, and why they wish to pursue one strategy vs. another. It is okay to ask: Why is this approach important to you?

5. *Catastrophizing.* Imminent disaster is rarely just around the corner and usually events do not explode into a crisis. Nostalgia about the past fuels some members to be doom-and-gloom prophets. Because their worldview is really a long-standing belief that all things are in decline, they see every event as the last shoe to drop. Healthy church conversations include discussions of many plausible outcomes, including positive ones.

6. *Emotional Reasoning.* Fear can inhibit effective discussions and prevent new ideas from being implemented. Leaders prone to elaborate explanations for why actions cannot be taken are often masking their fear of change. People often change their attitudes and feelings after they try something new, not before they do something new.

7. *Labeling.* Naming people or experiences puts them into hard categories based on an isolated incident. Hard categories block the reception of new information and make healthy communication much more difficult. Labeling tends to highlight the negative rather than illuminate the whole situation or person.

8. *Fortune-Telling.* Most people like to try their hand at predicting the future or like speculating about the future. However, none of us knows what will happen tomorrow. None of us knows what God has in store for the congregation and its mission. Negative predictions ignore all the possible outcomes and can be self-fulfilling congregational prophecies.

9. *Personalization.* When the pastor or lay leaders support a different strategy than some members, the focus can quickly shift away from the facts of a specific situation to a polarizing of people. The “us” vs. “them” type of thinking does not help people see the facts clearly because the focus shifts away from *what* to *who*.

10. *Looking for the Perfect Plan.* Churches can operate with the unrecognized conviction that discussing a problem equals solving the problem. They are convinced that lengthy discussion will eventually lead them to the perfect course of action, even if those discussions take many months or years. In general, only implementing a new idea reveals the required modifications to a strategy for use in a specific context. Successful new strategies more often occur when leaders use a “do-it-and-fix-it” method than when they wait for the perfect plan.

Clues to Improving Communication

Recognizing that our views are not always based on realistic thinking is hard to swallow. Sometimes our thinking is irrational or inaccurate. Acting on our faulty thinking leads to unnecessary conflict in a church setting. What steps can we take to improve our communication?

Let go of the past. Too much of the present conversation is actually attempts to rewrite history. Help yourself and others to make peace with the past.

Exercise forgiveness and patience. Everyone has made one or more thinking errors on the list. And the more important the decision, the more likely it is that our first response is not 100 percent rational. Managing our thoughts, taming our emotions, and behaving well is not easy.

Value the practical experiences of leaders and other congregations. Listen carefully to the observations of those who have tried and failed as well as those who tried and met success.

Uncover the theology, philosophy, and heart-felt passions that lead to change. When people marry their strategies with their deepest convictions, long-lasting change is more likely.

Remain hopeful about the future. A congregation’s script should be positive and energize members for what lies ahead in ministry.

1. Material drawn from Amy Morin, *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don’t Do* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2014).