

Perspectives on Change

People who work with change in organizations generally observe certain basic principles and practices. The following outline is an adaptation of some of these principles for congregational development. -- Linda Cannell

Various dynamics appear at times of change and transition. Common dynamics are:

- Insecurity, a desire to return to “what we were when we were great.”
- Leader defensiveness and fear. Move to control or flawed enabling.
- People tend to polarize over issues that are often symptoms of deeper problems.
- Conclusions and decisions tend to be based on assumptions or presumptions and always on inadequate data.
- Times of change and tension force us to reevaluate and reinterpret.

General process concerns at times of change:

- What goals do we need to set? Where should we be? How should we get there?
- Implementation concerns: The balance between “we intend” and “we wait.”
- Evaluation

Lay the groundwork for favorable attitudes to innovation.

- Relate the change to people’s values. New ideas which contradict existing values will be resisted.
- Understand that certain problem behaviors often emerge as you work with groups and as the impetus for change builds. Develop your skills in diffusing these. As you help people become more mature in their responses (and as you become more mature in your responses) you will find this will spill over into a desire to enlarge ministry. Point out any consistency with biblical principles you all agree on. Present biblical principles consistent with the direction of change (note that some areas now in transition were once identified as orthodox).
- Lead the group to identify core issues.
- Discuss how, and if, the change will affect the ministry with people.
- Discuss how, and if, change will give more time for the things they most value.
- Acknowledge the worthwhile factors of the present, or acknowledge the heritage. Don’t undervalue or underplay the importance of the work that has been done, or that has been in place from the past (e.g., people may resist simply because you haven’t acknowledged the worth of their previous contributions). Recognize that people may interpret the desire for change as a judgment about their competence.
- Affirm what the people are doing already. Dispel the common assumption that propositions for change mean that “we have been doing something wrong.”
- As you encourage people not to despise the past, also exhort people not to destroy or discourage the dreams of those who look to the future.
- Model respect for others and their perspectives.
- Provide training, ideas and resources to give the people in existing programs/ministries some good experiences. If they don’t like what they are currently doing, change becomes difficult (volunteers in the church tend to see alterations in church programs as more of the same frustrations).

Build in /Support/caring/fellowship Dynamics.

- Develop the concept of a "spiritual center" in the congregation. This may be a Board or it may be a group of Elders. In any case, there should be some spiritual accountability somewhere in the organization.
- Develop confidence and trust . . . show them you deal with their concerns.
- Build caring and fellowship dynamics based on ministry.
- Speak openly about spiritual growth and give them a chance to speak with you about their desires for ministry.

Personal qualities in those who influence the process:

- Able to reflect on experiences and articulate values.
- Free from personal agenda--nothing to prove. Free of posturing.
- Has a good balance of the cognitive and emotional sides of character.
- Possesses a good sense of humor, doesn't take self too seriously.
- Able to fail, or be criticized without rationalizing.
- Disposition to encourage and let others succeed. Committed to the development of people--understands that people are growing.
- "Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."
- Able to face people with issues instead of dealing with them administratively or through a third party.
- Able to think in lateral directions. Not "square."
- Able to perceive connections between one thing and another.
- Is creative, flexible, daring, unflappable, absorbent, intuitive, courageous, willing to do 'donkey work.'
- Possesses an instinct for when to be directive and hands-on and when to delegate
- Aware of personal weaknesses
- Able to bring others around herself or himself who are stronger or more competent.
- Aware of the different types of responses that will occur through the process--anticipates and plans for them. Understand that the first responses are often not the most significant responses.
- Is patient, recognizes the time factor.
- Is generally well organized and able to handle detail, or to enlist someone who can.
- Is free of a naive perception of Christian organizations.
- Able to be firm and even angry without being destructive.
- Is politically wise, but not deceitful or manipulative. Is honest and straightforward
- Is reasonably intuitive and aware of the significance of body language.
- Is committed to dialogue, communication, and follow through
- Is conscious of and practices personal spirituality. Embodies and reflects faith, hope and love, gentle and quiet spirit.

Behaviors and attitudes of change agents or those that influence the process:

- Get to know the people. Get among the people of the church. You cannot learn about the perceptions, feelings, dreams, and so on, of the people without talking with them.
- Check your assumptions about the church and the people in the church. Assume that

people basically want to serve the Lord. Therefore, work with them to remove those things that hinder them from accomplishing their mission.

- Realize that it can take 2-3 years before the real life and character of a congregation can be understood.
- Model enthusiasm and love for the Lord and his work.
- Disseminate your philosophy without imposing it upon people. How is vision communicated, really?
- When working with people through change, promise support and resources.
- Demonstrate that you hear their concerns and deal with problems.
- Highlight the positive results of change in the lives of people.
- Build communication channels and use them.
- Practice the art of genuine dialogue.
- Recognize that people often see opinions as facts.
- Recognize that people tend to react emotionally to what is heard, they tend to hear only what they want to hear, they tend to jump to assumptions about what is being proposed.

Useful processes for data gathering:

- Use a personal interview approach wherever possible. Listen
- Walk around and observe, and 'feel' the organization
- Gauge the pathologies of the organization
- Identify/synthesize concerns and trends.
- Discern how much data by way of feedback that can people handle.
- Identify the influencers and listen to their stories.
- Engage in work/ministry with persons
- Discover the traditions and forces that have shaped the church

Identify feasible starting places where change can begin.

- Present new ideas clearly and in simple terms.
- Determine the most essential information to give in the beginning. Don't overload with information about the change. Remember people haven't lived with the ideas as long as you have.
- Visualize any presentations as much as possible.
- Determine the wisdom or feasibility of beginning at a stress point.
- Describe alternatives, give examples, create awareness of the need for change.
- Identify those places that seem to hold the promise of capturing the imagination of people--or that seem to be the areas that the people feel embody the life and success of the church.
- Look for the logical points of integration between programs/ministries.
- It may be better to build on the already existing strengths of the system
- It might be wiser to train and support persons in their already existing work, even if it is an area of ministry where you feel the direction has to change. Sometimes, if people don't feel satisfied with what they are currently doing, they may not be motivated to change (especially if they can't see any advantages in the change; or if the change appears to be more work than what they're currently doing. "I don't like what I'm doing now, you want

me to take on more responsibility, or do more work?"

- Determine just how frustrating or de-motivating the current situation is; people may be willing to do anything to change it.
- Watch a tendency for people to become preoccupied with the process rather than dealing with the actual situation. Evaluation of the existing situation may be threatening. The group may get sidetracked by talking about the process.

Present alternatives

- Inform the people of ministry options and alternatives without giving them the impression that you are going to change everything overnight. Present the options in as many different ways as possible. Often awareness of different ways of doing something will create a willingness for change, especially if the alternatives are not seen as 'off the wall.' Often an outside person can present the alternatives with greater effect.
- Church programs are inadequate for full people involvement. Assume that you will need to open doors and windows of ministry for all groups in the church, including the children. Also assume that some of the ministries will happen outside the church walls. Traditional program boxes tend to create a congregation where a few are participating but the greater majority are looking on; or getting involved elsewhere because the church can't use them.

Focus on desired futures

- As you meet with small groups for study and committee work, use the opportunities to share vision.
- Understand the limitations of conventional notions of long range planning for congregations. Speak about long range planning as setting in place that which will keep the way open for God to act among his people.
- Begin to suggest plans for development over the next "x" number of months
- It is probably wise to propose short term experiments; plan goals that are achievable over a 3-6 month period. Ask questions about where people would like to see this church, or ministry or . . . in 3 months, or 5 years, or . . .
- Discern how far you need to go to achieve desired results, and make only the necessary changes (use this option if the change is highly emotional or difficult)
- It would be wise to have some measure of action early in the process. People need to see something positive happening as soon as possible.
- Invest money in the development of people.

Locate the 'legitimizers'

- Talk about the change with those whose opinion is respected. Ask for their feedback on how the change could be perceived. If the legitimizers are opposed, the change is not likely to succeed.
- Legitimizers should not be confused with those who are destructively resistant but, who nevertheless seem to have standing in the congregation.

Stimulate ownership

- Don't force the change on people. Allow time for the change to be internalized.

- Be open to the possibility/probability that the group will suggest alternatives to your strategies.
- Communicate with and encourage persons as they work through the change.
- Allow meaningful, significant involvement of persons with the change

Move on to the 'big picture' issues

- It will be necessary at some point to work with all the systems of the church.
- Check the degree to which the various ministries or programs are coordinated and integrated. Do people have a sense of what other related ministries are doing?
- Think through the impact of current structures. Work toward structures that will allow responsibility in decision-making and freedom to minister. You might want to change the image people have of the organization. Sometimes even changing the way it looks on paper will help. The way an organization looks or feels will affect behavior.
- Work out equipping strategies that fit the schedules and character of your congregation. Work out ways to involve volunteers in ministry that takes their schedules, energy, and skill limitations seriously.

Set up procedures for feedback and evaluation.

- Allow disagreement.
- Resistance is not always negative. It may be telling you something. Avoid jumping to assumptions about why people are resistant.
- Recognize that people will often exaggerate the problem. People tend to use facts selectively.
- Recognize that feelings are the facts in many situations. Don't ignore feelings, deal with them.
- Choose strategies in advance for dealing with rational and irrational opposition.
- Assess reaction to the process of change in several different ways: written, interview, small group. Listen to resistance. Talk with people about the change.
- Attempt to discern points of misunderstanding in communication. Recognize that something in every communication will be misunderstood and misinterpreted.
- Allow time for the full effects of the change to surface. It is impossible to know the outcome of change in advance. Stay with the process after the decision for change has been made in order to develop, to encourage, to deal with problems, to work through the details.
- People can change the way they act without changing the way they think. If this is happening, the situation can revert to what it was before the change. The issues underlying the change may have to be dealt with again.
- Organizational realities and developments after the change may require alternative strategies.
- Evaluate the functioning of the Board(s). There cannot be meaningful growth or change in an organization where the Board sees itself as a maintainer and checker of the institution.