

4 Steps Toward Change All Leaders Take

I seldom address a gathering of pastors without "the" question being asked, in one form or another:

"How do you change a church?"

Whether moving from a traditional model to one that is more contemporary, a complex structure to one that is simpler, or an outdated outreach strategy to one more relevant and effective, knowing the target on the wall isn't the problem.

It's how to actually lead the change to hit it.

Here are the four steps to leading change in your church (I am going to assume you already know to pray.):

1. Establish a Sense of Urgency

The first step is to establish a sense of urgency. People will not even consider change unless they are impacted on an emotional level. If change is not considered necessary, leadership expert John Kotter of Harvard writes, they "will find a thousand ingenious ways to withhold cooperation."

There must be a perceived problem, or need, that is generating a certain amount of emotional energy. For the change agent, or agents, one of the keys to this is passion: if you do not seem to care, they will not bother to care.

Note that this is more than simply articulating the logic of a particular set of actions. People must be communicated with on an emotional level. There must be a sense of urgency. The Bible reminds us that we are transformed through the renewing of our mind (Romans 12:2). So whatever the change may be, be sure to convey what the stakes are, and why the change is so important.

For example, why should anyone contemplate evaluating a weekend service in light of its effectiveness at communicating the truth of Christ to a lost person? If they do not perceive that lost people matter or that they are being reached quite well through current approaches, then any change that might be suggested will die at the starting gate.

Leaders who want change must communicate the importance of those who are apart from Christ and the exact state of the church's current effectiveness in reaching them. It is up to the leader to say: "We will stand before God one day and give an account for our lives. And this generation of Christians is responsible for this generation of non-Christians. And God will ask, 'Did you do all that you could? Did you match the intensity and fervor I brought to the cross?'"

People must be brought to the point where they view the lack of change as a tragedy; where

they don't simply embrace change but cry out for it.

2. Develop and Cast a Compelling Vision

The second step has to do with developing and casting a compelling vision. Where is this change going to take us? What will it mean for us? What difference will it make? Paint the picture for people of what the change will actually *do*.

Vision is nothing less than the language of leadership. It points the way, it motivates people to take the steps needed to get there, and it coordinates the actions of all involved. At its best, it paints a simple but compelling picture of a better tomorrow in ways that appeal to everyone's interests. This has to be more than a single motivational talk. In reality, not only does vision "leak," but it gets lost in the competing noise for attention.

Consider a business example. I once read that the total amount of communication going to the typical employee in an American company in a three-month period is 2,300,000 words or numbers. The typical communication of a change vision over the same period has been calculated at 13,400 words or numbers (the equivalent of a single 30-minute speech, coupled with a one-hour long meeting, a 600-word article in the firm's newspaper, and a 2,000-word memo). Thus the change vision only captures .58 percent of the communication competing for the average employee's attention.

This is akin to a gallon of information dumped into a river of dialogue.

Vision must be repeated over and over again. When you are sick of hearing it, and the core change agents with you, then you might be approaching some degree of connecting with the group at large. The point is that one message, or even one cluster of messages, simply isn't enough. People's grasp of the vision fades fast, and it must be continually cast. And not simply to one group, but to all groups. And in all settings: to committees, boards, ministries; during weekend services; over lunches and breakfasts; through articles, stories, facts, statistics; and one-on-one sessions. Simple, to the point, tied to the values behind the change – but over and over again.

You cannot over-communicate.

3. Implement the Change

The third step, after the vision casting eventually pays off in consensus and approval with the various groups in the church, is to begin implementing the change.

4. Give Updates on the Change

The final step is to make sure you let everyone know how the change is going. Be sure to give progress reports. The war is not won simply with implementation. The question then becomes whether or not the change should be maintained. Rick Warren has written from many years of experience that, "Vision and purpose must be restated every 26 days to keep the church

moving in the right direction."

Whether monthly is too much or too little, it must certainly be ongoing. So let people know what is happening. Talk about successes and breakthroughs. Let people see, and feel, the benefits that are flowing from the change.

As you work through these four steps, keep in mind one of the most important principles related to change a leader can learn: change takes time. There's a saying that when it comes to change, don't overestimate what you can do in a year, but don't underestimate what you can do in ten.

You may have heard the old analogy about turning a ship around in a harbor. The bigger it is, the further you have to go out to sea to bring it around in a different direction. This is important, because a lack of patience has caused many church leaders to get into trouble that was all too easy to avoid. As change agents, they get in a hurry and begin implementing changes that people simply weren't signed on to, much less emotionally prepared to experience. This leads to resistance.

But if you carefully – and patiently – work the four steps, a remarkable thing will take place.

Change.

> [Read more from James.](#)