

How to Deal with Leaders Who Question Change

Most people don't like change. Most leaders want to challenge the status quo. Leadership is, in part, the process of helping people see the need for change, embrace the vision for change, and then implement the change.

Getting mad at people who question change does not help the process of change. Those who are truly malicious are typically small in number. When people have questions about change, it does not necessarily mean that they are questioning your leadership. It's likely they just have questions. In fact, the only leaders who go unquestioned are despots.

Particularly in the church, there is built-in institutional resistance to change. Almost every church has this inherent resistance, especially established churches. The body may spend decades building something—a program, a worship space, or a culture. Shifting direction on a decade's work is jarring, even if it's the right thing. The church is often the place people cling to the familiar. The world is changing rapidly, after all. At least the church offers some solace from what feels like a whirlwind of change.

When a church leader introduces bold change, a strong reaction should be expected. Some will complain it's too much too soon. Others will complain it's too little too late. Others won't care. And a few will champion the change.

Bold change almost always raises questions from people. Getting mad at people who raise the questions does nothing to help move them through the process of change. Yet a leader's visceral reaction to these questions is often anger. I'll admit I'm guilty! And it's wrong, a leadership flaw, arguably sinful in many cases.

So what can you do in the moment when questions fly your way? How can a church leader quell the knee-jerk anger to questions about change?

- **Listen.** Seriously, just listen. Don't talk. Don't say anything. Don't explain yourself. Don't get defensive. Let people speak to you about the change. Many times people just need the opportunity to hear themselves speak and to know you heard them.
- **Learn.** Your posture and your tone can speak more loudly than your actual words. When introducing bold change, take the posture of a learner. Let's assume you'll make a big announcement from the podium about a large change initiative. Make a resolution to be a learner the moment you walk off the stage. And the way you'll learn is by listening to questions about the change.
- **Smile.** Remember school pictures? I never liked them. I often didn't smile, and the low quality of the pictures reflected the intensity of my scowl. The quality of your change initiative will be directly correlated to the amount of encouragement you give people. If you think more explanations, more spreadsheets, or more structure will get people moving, then think again. Forcing people through change without encouragement signals that the change is for your benefit, not their benefit. You've got to love the people who are affected by the change through the change. When questions come . . .

smile. Encourage. Love.

You'll never please everyone. How many times have I heard that? How many times have I said that to others? You know upfront that change initiatives can be tough, that people will resist change. Getting mad at followers ensures only one thing: failure. I've never heard a leader mention how unjustified anger inspired people to embrace a change initiative. So listen. Learn. Smile. And perhaps the change initiative might just go a little more smoothly.

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