

Implementing Change Without Creating Unnecessary Pain

Can you imagine a radio station that randomly alternated between a jazz number, a country and western ballad, and heavy metal, followed by opera? According to Rick Warren, no one would keep listening.

Churches and pastors can sometimes look and sound like a schizophrenic radio station, not exactly sure of either their message or their target. Aiming at everyone, they connect with no one. Church leadership must decide on their focus and then make the changes necessary to relentlessly pursue them.



Every initiative, program, organization, or individual naturally follows a bell-shaped timeline. Effective organizations foresee this predictable pattern and have learned in seasons of growth to anticipate the natural leveling off of the top of the bell curve. The goal is to transform the bell curve into an S-curve, where strengths are built upon to create new seasons of expansion.

Change and re-focusing is necessary for this growth to continue, but erratic and unpredictable change can create disequilibrium and dissatisfaction. How many congregants have remarked their frustration at having a pastor who gets a new vision and agenda each time he returns from a conference or class?

In *Letters to Malcolm*, C. S. Lewis gives an interesting commentary on the employment of novelty and innovation in the church. Apparently, the Church of England was getting pretty racy in the 1950s.

Writing from a layman's perspective, he advises that all the sheep can do is huddle together and bleat loudly when it appears the shepherds have gone too far ahead of them and disappeared over the hill.

In his defense of changes in the church happening only slowly and incrementally, he compares worship to dancing: when you have to think about the steps, you lose fluidity and quality. Familiarity in worship, he contends, lends itself to not having to focus upon the liturgy or the presenter, but rather upon the One being worshiped.

More often than not, change initially satisfies few, and compromise makes no one happy. Change, however, is absolutely necessary for any church or organization to continue to thrive and is the engine that drives toward a successful tomorrow.

The need for change is generally not the issue, nor is the qualitative nature of the change, but rather its execution.

WHEN EXECUTING CHANGE:

- 1. Choose your battles carefully.** Leaders only have a few bullets to use and unless they are replenished through successes, can get rapidly depleted. Trust is your most valuable leadership commodity.
- 2. Like dropping a pebble into a lake, let the message of change ripple naturally.** The danger you face is creating waves in a pond that some perceive as being calm. Use your church's channels of communication, starting with both supporters and those most apt to be loudly resistant.
- 3. Unless something is severely broken, try to implement change incrementally** and imperceptibly. Choose therapy over trauma.
- 4. If change is drastically needed, however, go ahead and rip off the band-aid.** Pain for a moment is better than dying over and over and over.
- 5. Provide solid reasons** and data **supporting change.** Following some leaders is like riding on a roller coaster . . . in the dark. Everyone eventually gets sick of blindly riding the peaks, especially when they do not know why. If you can't defend the change, it's probably not worth the energy.
- 6. Don't be scared to abandon proposed change.** If you hit a dead end, turn around. Only pride and fear make someone speed up when they are lost.

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