

Church Change

FOR

NON-DUMMIES

How to introduce dynamic change without blowing everything up

by ALAN NELSON

All of our churches need to change. Nothing new about that. A few need to change because of the significant growth they're experiencing. But most churches (probably about 85 percent) need to change to experience health and avoid ecclesiastical death. Unfortunately, few pastors are equipped to facilitate that change.

What we need is a *Church Change for Dummies* book. One problem with these types of books is they're too long. A few years ago Gene Appel (until recently the lead pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, then senior pastor of Central Christian Church in Henderson, Nevada) and I co-authored a semi-thick book titled, *How to Change Your Church (Without Killing It)*. The volume was a distillation of nearly two dozen organizational change books along with Gene's story of Central's renaissance and other case studies. Looking back, I think it was too long (and is now out of print).

Since then, after numerous seminars, consultations, and interactions with pastors, I've continued to update my knowledge. The reason most church change is less than pleasant isn't due to a lack of commitment or good intentions. Most changes fall short because few of us pastors are trained in change. Organizational transitioning is a unique process, so that even the best ideas often bomb. Here's the framework for "church change for non-dummies," to help you help your church improve smartly.

Existing Church Change Challenge

Far too many of us go to pastor conferences, typically hosted by leaders who have planted their churches, and get the subliminal idea that if we try to be like them, we too would grow and be dynamic. We go back and try to implement some of the things we experience (seeker services, media, praise bands, team ministry, and so on), only to get lukewarm response—or worse, a violent rejection. As oft said, pastors go home only to find themselves "up a Willow Creek without a Hybels."

The bottom line is that especially in today's diverse and "niche" climate, you can't copy what someone else is doing and hope for the same results. Most teaching churches are led by pastors with strong leader gifts, which many pastors don't have. Therefore, many of us need to be far savvier and learn the principles of church change.

The first thing you need to do—strategically, prayerfully, and wisely—is discern the improvement you believe God would have you pursue. But determining *what* it is you want to accomplish is quite different from *how*. You need two plans, related but distinct: an improvement plan and a transition plan.

An improvement plan looks at where we're going and where we want to be in a certain amount of time. But a transition plan asks, "Where are we now?" For one church to become "seeker sensitive," "externally focused," or "equipping" is quite different from another. The difference between where

you are and where you want to be will determine how you go about pursuing this improvement.

Thus, you can't look at others and compare.

IMPROVEMENT PLAN	TRANSITION PLAN
<i>Where are we going?</i>	<i>Where are we at now?</i>
<i>Resources/structure</i>	<i>People/culture</i>
<i>Mind/logic</i>	<i>Heart/feelings</i>
<i>Left brained</i>	<i>Right brained</i>
<i>Know-how/talent</i>	<i>Relationships/influence</i>
<i>Risk/boldness</i>	<i>Patience/pastoral care</i>
<i>Managerial/strategic</i>	<i>Leadership/spiritual</i>

An improvement plan is more about resources, facilities, staff and budgets; but a transition plan deals with the messier, softer issues, such as people, church culture, feelings and issues of the heart. That's why when you approach a change initiative intellectually, armed with best trends and statistics, you'll get pushback. Transition isn't about reason. It's about feelings, even though we tend to wrap them up in all kinds of spiritual clichés and justification. Improvement is more physical and external. Transition is more psychological and internal. Both can be spiritual.

Improvement involves matters of know-how, talent, management, and strategy. These are all very important ingredients to what it is you're striving to accomplish. But a transition plan analyzes relationships, identifying the influencers in your church and spheres of influence. Because most pastors aren't strong leaders, they'll need to tap the influence of others if they want to be successful. We'll show you how in a moment.

As you can see from this brief comparison, both plans are important, but they are different. Most failed change initiatives do so in the area of ►►

transition. A good transition plan will not make a lame improvement idea effective. But a great improvement idea will be rejected, unless transitioned well. And when we fail to implement change once, it becomes more difficult the next time. Ecclesiastical grapevines are filled with failed initiatives. When a pastor leaves, the next finds an even more difficult time because of the predecessor's impasse.

The Four Factors of Change

As you study organizational change in the context of the local church, there are four primary factors to consider: Leadership Umph, Influencer Readiness, Time Speed, and Idea Impact.

LEADERSHIP UMPH typically refers to the pastor's influence capacity. I say "typically" because in some churches, the elder board is so dominant, the pastor has little organizational leverage. But don't confuse formal, positional authority with leadership. Most gifted leaders are able to either work through or around even stringent congregational polity. Of the four factors, this tends to be the least movable because leaders

encers. These are the people who, when they sneeze, everyone turns their heads and says, "God bless you." This is why congregational surveys lack potency. If you want to know what the flock thinks, merely identify the influencers, sit down, and talk to them.

When I work with a church on a change issue, one of the first things we do is plot these influencers on a sort of splatter chart, so we can estimate the basic wiring of the person regarding change, the size of this person's influence, and whether the person is for, against, or neutral to the specific improvement idea. The basic process involves listing the influencers, rating each one on a 1 to 5 scale as to their attitude on an idea, add the total and divide by the number of influencers for an average. Level 1 is a person who'll fight the idea. A Level 2 won't support it. Level 3 is neutral. Level 4 will support it, and a Level 5 will help to drive it.

To increase the readiness of congregational influencers, you need to learn why they are against an idea and what it will take to move them up a notch or two. Don't expect a 2 to become a 4 or 5. All you want to do is help that person take the hand off the brake, become neutral, and allow the idea to take

hold. When pastors get blindsided, it's because they've either failed to identify the congregational influencers or didn't know how each felt about an issue. Once

you clarify the "who" and the "why," then you can raise the level, usually with education, open conversation, and experiences such as a conference or hiring a consultant or testimonials from people who have been helped by the ministry idea you're advocating.

Other ways to raise influencer readiness involve reading books as a team and going on a brainstorming retreat. Sometimes yearning evolves by sowing seeds of discontent with status quo. Gene Appel did this intuitively as a young pastor in Las Vegas, by preaching on reaching the lost, showing his leaders stats on their church, and taking them to Willow Creek conferences. In *Managing Transitions* (second edition, Da Capo Press), William Bridges wrote, "Most managers and leaders put 10 percent of their energy into selling the problem and 90 percent into selling the solution to the problem. People aren't in the market for solutions to problems they don't see, acknowledge, and understand. They might even come up with a better solution than yours, and then you won't have to sell it—it will be theirs."

The key here is discerning who are the "progres-

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don't change significantly in their capacity. In spite of the American myth that we can become whatever we want, I've seen no research that supports the idea that anyone can be a leader. Rate your umph as a leader on a 1 to 5 scale. Take the parable of the talents as a metaphor for this. (In Matthew 25, one received 1, another 2, and a third 5.) Every pastor has at least a value 1 because of the role he or she fills in the church. The key is not to overestimate your ability because, if you think you're a 4 when you're really a 2, it will skew the results and make your transition effort more vulnerable. Simply because you're lower on the scale doesn't mean change can't happen. It merely requires you to go about it differently than if you were a 4 or 5.

INFLUENCER READINESS has to do with the top 5 to 10 percent of congregational influencers. If you broke your church into social networks, you'd find that each sphere of influence has one or two primary opinion setters. In most churches of 100 to 200, five to 15 people influence 80 to 90 percent of the rest. The larger the church, the smaller the percent of significant influ-

sive influencers.” These are the Joshuas and Calebs, the people with influence who enjoy new ideas, embrace change, and do not fear taking reasonable risks. Get these people together for a few months, off the radar, to dream, and discuss a book on church innovation. This is a fun, exciting, recklessly faith-filled team. Only when you’ve cooked the idea a bit do you want to begin sharing it with others outside of this close-knit group.

TIME SPEED has to do with how fast you want to implement the change. This tends to be one of the easiest factors to increase, unless you have some milestone impending, such as a balloon mortgage payment, sale of adjacent property, or the retirement of a senior pastor. The saying is that “speed kills.” Time tends to be a somewhat subjective issue, so think through how fast you plan to go and then factor that with the other three. A Level 1 change is 0 to 6 months. Think of this as microwave. A Level 2 is 6 to 12 months. Level 3 is 1 to 2 years, similar to a conventional oven. Level 4 is 2 to 3 years, and Level 5 is 3 to 5 years, more like a crock-pot. Don’t think more than five years out because with today’s rate of change, we can’t predict beyond that. Plus, by then, your improvement plan will need to be significantly updated. As a general rule the younger your church is or the more it is in crisis, the faster you can implement change. The older or larger your church is, the longer change takes.

IDEA IMPACT has to do with how different your church will be after the new idea is implemented. How much will it change the culture, DNA, and feel of your current congregation? A Level 1 is minimal. Most people may not even notice the change. Level 2 is minor, meaning that people will notice, but it won’t deviate far from what most accept already. A Level 3 is significant. Most people will notice and will need to adjust something as a response. A Level 4 is major. People will have to make changes to their perception of your church as a result. Level 5 is transformational. People who attend your church before and after the improvement may not recognize it as the same church. A heart-health metaphor may go like this: 1 is diet and exercise; 2 is medication; 3 is angioplasty; 4 is bypass; 5 is transplant.

If you find that the improvement you’re advocating is potentially risky, then you may want to scale down the size of what you’re attempting. Another mistake many pastors make is trying to load up too much change at one time. The logic goes like this: “Well, we’re making these other changes now anyway, so why don’t we do it all?” The problem is that

change creates stress. Imagine if your local grocery store relocated all the food items every Friday night at closing so that each week, you had to go down different aisles to get what you wanted. Familiarity reduces stress, which is why we tend to embrace it. When you make a lot of changes (such as facilities, staff, and programming) at one time, you’re running the risk of overload. Plus, most congregants are experiencing changes in their workplace and families, so pick your battles wisely. Go after changes that are likely to provide the best return on investment. You may need to build some wins under your belt with little victories before going after big ones. Gene did some things right early in his ministry at Central Christian, before going after bigger fish such as becoming seeker-friendly and outreach-oriented.

The Nelson Formula

These four factors are interrelated, meaning they affect each other as well as the whole. By creating a simple mathematical equation and assigning numerical estimates for each of the four factors, we can come up with a simple but helpful Transition Index for predicting how painful or effective our change will be. While these numbers are not tested by hard scientific research, they can provide a basic sense as well as a great communication tool for leadership teams to discuss as they consider a transition.

THE NELSON FORMULA

$$\frac{(Leader\ Umph + Influencer\ Readiness) \times Time\ Speed}{Idea\ Impact} = Transition\ Index$$

Determine a value on the 1-to-5 scale, mentioned with each one. Then plug in the four numerical estimates into the formula as follows. By adding the Leader Umph with Influencer Readiness, multiplying that by the Time Speed value, and dividing by the Idea Impact number, you’ll get a number between 0.4 and 50, which is the Transition Index. This is the predicted pain you can expect.

The Transition Index will fall into one of five levels.

LEVEL 1: (0.4-1.5) HIGH RISK. Elaborate care needed. Expect tension. Reconsider the advantages of implementing the change. Chances are high for a congregational split or leadership transition if attempted. Reassess the new idea impact factor to see if you can reduce it. ►►

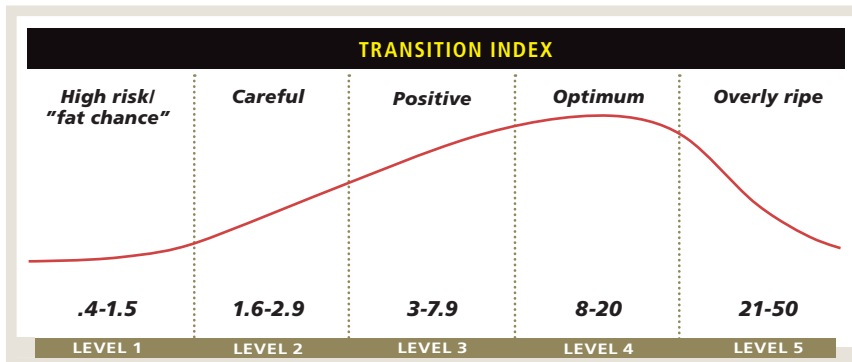
LEVEL 2: (1.6-2.9) CAREFUL. Significant planning and strategic thought needed to reduce the pain. There will be some people who will choose to not make the transition. Plan on a minimum 25 percent attrition rate. Be sure God is in the idea. You may want to reassess the speed and take more effort to prepare your congregation.

change with little preparation or development, and then wonder why they're either looking for a new job or new parishioners. Understanding how you impact the transition process can save you a lot of pain and frustration. I call this transition stewardship. You don't want to waste people or resources by being too slow or too fast. If you're a staff member, consider these principles for your specific ministry, but chances are slim that you can catalyze change from your seat on the church bus. Your attempts will often be seen as troublesome, even disloyal, by a reticent senior pastor.

A wrong solution, effectively implemented, is still a wrong solution. Unfortunately, the right solution, inappropriately implemented, will not benefit your church. A transition team needs to be honest in assessing and estimating these four factors and then thoroughly considering the

implications of modifying them or not. Most failed church change processes are due to a lack of attention to transition issues. May your church find the right solution, and effectively implement the changes needed. 🔄

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LEVEL 3: (3.0-7.9) POSITIVE. You will want to make sure your transition team does a thorough job in the transition phase. The change has the potential to go well or go sour depending on the amount of positive momentum created by the change. Heighten communication and increase your leadership team's personal social networking regarding the change. Expect a 10 to 25 percent attendance loss, but you'll likely survive the transition.

LEVEL 4: (8-20) OPTIMUM. Thumbs up to you and your team. Be enthusiastic yet gentle, in order to avoid carelessness during the phase. Emphasize the positives regarding the improvement and cover the necessary bases of communication with key influencers. Even optimum transitions can lose 10 percent of attendance, but the growth potential provided by a good change is significantly greater than any losses.

LEVEL 5: (21-50) OVERLY RIPE. Less care is needed above the normal communication and planning to implement the improvement. Unfortunately, chances are you have waited too long and as a result, have lost some progressive people as well as potential ministry opportunities that have rotted on the vine.

Knowing your personal wiring and temperament is important regarding the change process. Most pastors are nurturers by nature. They wait too long to initiate change and want everyone to cross into the Promised Land. But because they go so slow, the Joshuas and Calebs leave and windows of opportunity close. Some pastors are more impulsive, so they try to initiate

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MANAGING TRANSITIONS

by William Bridges
(second edition, Da Capo Press),

Although intended for the secular business world, William Bridges' book has proved to be a venerable source of insights and strategies for any organization in transition and ways to avoid mismanaging them.

