How to Lead a Church Through Major Change: A Road Map for Successful Innovation

Jim Egli

"I want to turn our church into a cell church, how should I do it?" the enthusiastic young pastor on the other end of the line asked. Before venturing an answer, I asked him a few questions. I learned that he was pastoring a small traditional church in Nebraska. He had only recently graduated from seminary and eagerly wanted to revitalize a rural church predominantly made up of older people.

"Have you initiated any changes in the church so far?" I probed, "And if so, what was the response?"

"Last year I tried to introduce scripture songs and choruses in addition to the traditional hymns," he replied, "but that quickly got shot down."

I tried to help the pastor see that major change was unlikely in his church and that, if it was possible, it was going to take a lot of time, prayer and hard work. Churches that "shoot down" small changes are not ready for major ones.

Pastors wanting to initiate growth strategies in their church often find themselves in the role of change agents. Seeing the need to contemporize worship, introduce evangelism training, effectively incorporate new believers, etc., pastors and other Christian leaders face the daunting challenge of moving churches from maintenance to mission. Very often their change initiatives fail not because they have bad ideas or because their

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church members are "unspiritual," but because they do not understand the dynamics of effective change leadership.

Fortunately, extensive studies have been done on organizational change that can greatly help the would-be change agent. Research on change has yielded many practical insights. Unfortunately, most pastors and other Christian leaders are unaware of this research because it is found in publications in the fields of communication, business and education.

Organizational change theory in the past has traditionally dealt with what researchers and consultants call "Organizational Development." More recently as the pace of change has been accelerated by rapid progress in electronic technology, proliferating mass media, expanding global communication and economic competition, a new sphere of research and planned change called "Organizational Transformation" has emerged. 1 In contrast to traditional Organizational Development that had emphasized the incremental improvement of existing structures, Organizational Transformation looks at how corporations and other establishments can totally reinvent themselves in order to survive and thrive in today's changing world. Organizational Transformation looks at change at a deeper level. In terms of change in the church, this level of planned change include something like a major reorientation of the church involving, for instance, going from a traditional to a seeker-targeted model of ministry.

This article will draw from literature in Organizational Development and Organizational Transformation as well as other areas of communication research such as the Diffusion of Innovations to give you practical insights on planned change. In particular I want you to understand the process of change. Research from a variety of disciplines has reached the same conclusions: that successful planned changed generally proceeds through a logical and predictable sequence.

Understanding the Process of Change

Major changes take time. In order to be welcomed and internalized within a church, new concepts and methods must overcome obstacles, meet real needs and become part of the established order. Even when changes are embraced and clearly seen as advantageous it is very easy for things to revert to old patterns. How can you make sure that your new idea will be accepted and integrated within the life of a church? Understanding the total process of change will help you know where to start, how to proceed and what needs to be done at each point along the way. Two particularly helpful books on the process of planned change are The Change Agent's Guide, by Ronald Havelock (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1995) and Leading Change, by John P. Kotter (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996). The first book is written primarily to address change in educational settings and the second deals with change in the business world. It is encouraging that Havelock's book addresses schools because, while change might be harder in churches than it is in corporate settings, change in educational institutions is probably just as challenging as in the church. Both books are very practical and applicable. If you can only get one of them though, buy Kotter's. It is superb and easier to find. Kotter repeatedly emphasizes the differences between management and leadership and the fact that it is leadership, far more than management, that makes change possible. The book then describes the leadership that is required in the eight stages of change that Kotter identifies.2

- 1. These eight stages are:
- 2. Establishing a sense of urgency.
- 3. Creating a guiding coalition.
- 4. Developing vision and strategy.
- 5. Communicating the change vision.
- 6. Empowering employees for broad based-action.
- 7. Generating short-term wins.
- 8. Consolidating gains and producing more change.
- 9. Anchoring new approaches in the organization's culture.

Almost all failed change efforts can be traced to the fact that one or more of these stages was omitted or botched. Drawing from Kotter's book and other sources I want to explain these stages to you and the most important elements of each stage. As you read about them I encourage you to reflect on past or cur-

rent change projects and how the principles apply to situations you have experienced or are now experiencing.

As Christian change agents considering Kotter's stages of change, we must also recall the Bible's emphasis on timing. Change must be done with both boldness and sensitivity. There must be, above all, a hearkening to the voice of God, His purposes and timing. When Moses first felt an impulse to deliver his people he took matters into his own hands and ended up killing an Egyptian. Frustration can be good because it moves us out of our predetermined rut. But when we act in frustration alone and not in response to God's voice, like the young Moses we will bring destruction and not life.

In Ecclesiastes 3:1-3 we are told, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to tear down and a time to heal...." The rhythm of life suggested in that passage also implies that there are times for change and times to leave things along. The insights shared in this article will do you little good if you are not in touch with God and acting in obedience to His voice. If you are, however, these principles will help you see situations more clearly and implement change that is more effective and more sensitive to the needs of church members.

Stage 1—Establish a Sense of Urgency

Overcoming the inertia of business-as-usual requires a strong sense of urgency. Although it is sometimes possible to begin a change process before a fair level of discontent has been produced, the change effort will probably stall two or three stages down the road and things will revert to the status quo if there is not a strong conviction that things must change. Of course, not everyone must embrace this conviction but there must be a strong core within the church who are willing to put themselves behind the new changes and see them through the obstacles that they will inevitably face.

Kotter's book outlines what business leaders can do to create a sense of urgency: setting ambitious goals, highlighting

competitors gains, broadcasting valid customer complaints, tying employees wages to new quality control standards, etc. Likewise, the Christian leader guiding a church through change should realize that simply waiting for a sense of urgency is often not enough. Sometimes urgent situations go unrecognized by members. A pressing need for change can be proactively created through leadership initiative.

For example in the small church that I began pastoring when I was in seminary, the church had experienced an extremely slow but prolonged decline. Attendance had dropped by an average of one person a year over a period of about 30 years. This change was hardly detectable to long-term members. There was no sense of urgency. But when we charted the trend and projected it ten years into the future it was apparent that the church's days were numbered if there was not change. Some members pointed to the fact that their children were leaving our small community to go to college and never returning. But when we dug up the census figures for the surrounding towns and school districts it was obvious that the community itself was not shrinking and that there were many people in the area that needed Christ. Find the statistics and stories that illustrate the need for change and communicate them clearly and repeatedly. If you are a pastor, don't write only glowing pastoral letters in your communication. If your church is growing but only through transfer growth, realistically point out that in fact no kingdom growth is occurring.

Havelock points out that there are always concerns latent within a system. "All human systems are unfulfilled, incomplete, or lacking in some ways." As a change agent you should listen to these latent concerns. For example, careful listening in your church may reveal a high felt need for a quality youth ministry. This may guide the way that your particular innovation is to be implemented or communicated. Or it may show you that change in your church should begin in a different area than you at first anticipated.

Realize that a sense of urgency must be in place for any major change initiative to ultimately succeed. Sometimes this can

be created by clearly, creatively and repeatedly communicating needs that members are unaware of. At other times, you can uncover and tie into felt needs that are already in place.

Stage 2—Create a Guiding Coalition

Successful change is always guided by a team of people. The new concept may begin with a single leader but if it does not come to be shared by an influential group of individuals who see it through to implementation, it will consistently fail. Kotter calls this group the "guiding coalition." In my consulting work with churches I call this group the "dream team." The word "dream" implies that they must brainstorm, pray together and discern God's vision for the church. The word "team" communicates that they must work together using their combined gifts and influence to put the new plan into action.

There are three steps to developing this team according to Kotter.⁴ Here they are and what I see them involving for change agents in the church.

1. Find the right people. They must be people who have high credibility and influence. There should also be a mix of leadership and management gifts. Individuals with leadership gifts are those who can set a direction and make things happen. Managers are those who can organize and follow-through on the plans that are made. Leadership gifts are especially crucial. How can you tell who has leadership gifts? Look at their past experience. Look for individuals who either in the church or in other areas of their lives have directed and successfully initiated new endeavors. Sometimes the established leadership group, such as the elders or deacons, within the church can be the dream team. But this is unusual because often this group does not have the time and energy necessary and may not be composed of visionary individuals. Such a group, however, must bless and endorse the guiding coalition that initiates change and also have representation in the group that can act as a relational bridge and advocate for the dream team. It is often helpful to bring in an outside person at strategic points who can serve as a consultant and guide for the planning and implementation process.

- 2. Build trust. The members of this vision team must know and trust one another. It is not enough for them to have a relationship with the pastor or leader. To function together they must be knit together relationally. This is best accomplished through planning retreats. Ideally these retreats should involve overnight get-aways at off-sight locations like a camp or summer cabin. The focus of these retreats should be honest sharing, praying and planning for the future. They should include mixing people up in smaller groups to pray and brainstorm in order to maximize personal contributions and ownership. There can also be informal times of sharing over meals and in the evenings. Times of informal sharing about personal goals and shared recreational activities can help build the cohesiveness necessary for team success.
- 3. Develop a common goal. Although the initial change agent will have a rough vision, it will often be incomplete and unfocused. This is good because it allows the broader team to shape it and create ownership. In a congregational setting it is also crucial to get feedback from the broader church on what their needs, hopes and frustrations are. As Havelock cautions, "The testimony of countless change agents suggests that ... outside forces are almost invariably underrated in the early stages of a project."5 Members of the broader church are going to want a sense of input and involvement in any significant project. Their input can be gained through surveys and strategic informal interaction with key power people. This input can and should inform the vision and its plans but it must not be seen as its ultimate determinant. Vision does not come from large groups or committees. It proceeds from God's heart and is communicated to the hearts and minds of key leaders and the guiding team as they pray, dream and take responsibility for the vision.

Stage 3—Develop a Vision and a Strategy

Once a sense of urgency is created and a guiding coalition has been formed it is time to hammer out the vision and its strategy. It is hard to over-emphasize the first two stages. Many change agents anxious to get to the task at hand attempt to start

at stage three. This is a big mistake! It may look easier and faster, but if a compelling urgency and an influential team are not in place the rest of the project is doomed to failure and irrelevance. Assuming that those two components are in place, though, the vision must now be clarified in a compelling, understandable way.

What is an effective vision? Kotter outlines six characteristics:⁶

- 1. Imaginable: It conveys a clear picture of the future.
- 2. Desirable: The new vision is appealing to all concerned parties.
- 3. Feasible: It is realistic and attainable.
- 4. Focused: It is clear enough to guide decisions.
- Flexible: It is stated generally enough to allow individual initiative and alternative responses in light of changing circumstances.
- 6. Communicable: It is easy and can be explained in less than five minutes.

A church's vision should not be confused with their mission statement. Mission statements are often very short and memorisable, sometimes only one or two sentences. A church's expressed vision is likely to be a sizeable paragraph. Besides saying what a church's purpose is, it will give some specific directives on how the purpose will be achieved. It is not the place for detailed plans nor is it the place for glowing generalities. A balance must be struck. There must be clear direction that can guide decisions, laying the ground work for strategy, planning and budgets that must then follow.

Developing a clear, compelling and communicable vision is hard work and takes a lot of time. That is why the urgency level must be high or the process will be short-circuited. The process often involves two steps forward and one step back.

How do you arrive at this vision? Kotter says a logical starting point is for one person to sketch out their own personal thoughts on a vision for the future. This gives the team a beginning point, from there they can brainstorm, refine, argue and share. It is sometimes a messy process but it is crucial.

In working with churches I recommend that the leadership discuss significant factors that God has spoken into the church in the past. For example, one church that I consulted with shared that at the founding of the church over 60 years ago it was clear that the church was to be heavily involve in world missions and that it was to be a place of racial reconciliation. Items like this are divine points of destiny that should shape a congregation's vision and in turn its strategy, planning and budgets.

The vision must be compelling. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:8: "If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?" A vision statement must motivate and direct. If it doesn't, go back to the drawing board.

Stage 4—Communicate the Vision

Kotter relates that many change efforts fail because they are undercommunicated "by a factor of 10 (or 100 or even 1,000)". Change agents in the church must realize that it is almost impossible to overcommunicate a new vision. Varied communication channels must be used over an extended period of time for a new vision to be understood, grasp and pursued.

In fact, communication researchers studying change in corporate settings have found that even negative communication is better than no communication in making employees feel good about change!⁸ Apparently uncertainty creates anxiety and negative communication about how change will effect people is better than no communication in relieving uncertainty.

Kotter outlines seven keys to communicating vision.⁹ Here they are with my suggestions for a church setting:

- 1. Simplicity: Avoid theological and technical jargon.
- 2. Use metaphors: A simple word picture can communicate a thousand words.
- 3. Multiple forums: Use many different communication channels including the pulpit, meetings, newsletters, bulletins and informal meetings and contacts. If there are seminars, books or videos that explain the new approach that you are implementing utilize those, realizing that different people will respond to different channels of

- communication more readily.
- 4. Repetition: Remember all of us need to hear new ideas multiple times before they soak in. How many times did you hear the gospel before you personally responded? Don't expect people to understand and respond to ideas the first time they are presented.
- 5. Leadership by example: The pastor and key leaders must "put their money were their mouth is," so to speak. If the new ideas are truly important to them they must invest their own time and energy there, or people will assume change is not really a priority.
- Explanation of seeming inconsistencies: If some things in the church conflict with the new changes, yet it is not time to change them, communicate the reasons honestly and openly or people will get mixed messages.
- Give-and-take: The most powerful communication is two-way. Listen to people's concern, questions and suggestions. Listening will improve both your communication and your new ideas.

Stage 5—Empower Members for Broad-Based Action

Kotter's actual wording is empower "employees" but I have translated it to "members." For a change to take root and effect the entire direction of the church, it will require action on a broad scale. Many times people are actually in favor of the change, yet are at a loss to implement it because of structural barriers built in to the church. Kotter outlines several key factors to effectively involve people in planned change. ¹⁰

- 1. Make structures compatible with the vision. Enthusiasm and new plans are not enough for major change. Very often structural elements in the church must be modified to align themselves with the new vision or change will be blocked, no matter how much it is desired.
- 2. Provide training. New ways of doing things will require an investment in training. Training is expensive. It requires lots of time, money and energy. But without it, change is usually impossible. Here the change agents must clearly identify the new skills

and attitudes needed and supply or create the needed equipping. Most likely other churches have tried the new changes that you are implementing. They can help you know what training and other elements are needed as your church makes similar changes.

- 3. Align information and reward systems to the vision. All organizations, including churches, have reward systems—even if they are unconscious. People are shown appreciation, recognized and given visibility. Reward systems communicate to people what the church really values. Evaluate how this is down in your setting and find ways to reward and affirm those investing themselves in the new vision. This can greatly reduce resistance and accelerate change.
- 4. Confront leaders who are blocking change: Very often sincere people subtly sabotage change because they don't understand it or because they do not see how they personally can fit in to the new way of doing things. If these persons are not engaged, they can slowly kill change efforts. Instead of cutting these people off through political maneuvering, the best approach is to frankly dialogue with them and discuss what the changes could mean for them personally or their area of ministry. It could be that they can go along with the change or at least not covertly undermine it. Seek collaboration instead of conflict.

An important innovation concept to understand in relationship to empowerment is "reinvention." It is explained by Everett Rogers in his fascinating book *Diffusion of Innovation*. As he states, reinvention is "the degree to which an innovation is changed or modified by the user in the process of its adoption and implementation." Reinvention means that a new idea or technology is seldom taken over as is, but is almost always altered as it is put into practice. For example, the non-profit organization that I work for—TOUCH Outreach Ministries—helps churches implementing a cell strategy. Churches always modify our recommended methods adapting them to their own setting. Often reinvention is good. Sometimes, however, key concepts are altered in ways that will ensure their failure or make change more difficult. As you communicate new vision to your church

there will also be some reinvention at each level. So you must set parameters and allow flexibility at the same time. For example, if you are implementing cell groups, you might let people innovate as to when the groups meet and what population segment or part of town their group targets. To ensure quality, however, you would want to have consistency on the purpose and formats of the meetings and how leaders are trained.

Empowering members means communicating a clear vision and plan. Then equipping them to fulfill that plan in the unique ways that God is calling them as you give them the necessary training, reinforcement, guidelines and support.

Stage 6—Generate Short-Term Wins

This key concept is often over-looked by change agents and is a major cause for failure. Large change efforts take a long-time before they are genuinely integrated within the life of the church. Kotter states that in the business world change efforts generally take from three to ten years. He points out, "Most people won't go on the long march unless they see compelling evidence within six to eighteen months that the journey is producing expected results. Without short term wins, too many employees give up or actively join the resistance." Paul Mundey in his book *Unlocking Church Doors: 10 Keys to Positive Change* makes the same point: "The launch of any change effort accelerates with signs of success and movement. A common leadership error is to bank only on long-term results, rather than to attempt quick wins as well. Both are necessary in an effective implementation process." 14

Short term wins are crucial for several reasons. They provide evidence that the sacrifices necessary for implementing change are worth it. They give those investing most heavily in the change a deserving pat on the back. Short-term wins also allow you to fine tune your strategy with concrete data and real-life learnings.

Kotter points out another crucial benefit of short-term wins:

... quick performance improvements undermine the efforts of cynics and major league resisters. Wins don't necessarily quiet

all of these people (which is probably good, since diversity of opinion can keep a firm from blindly walking off a cliff), but they take some of the ammunition out of opponents' hands and make it much more difficult to take cheap shots at those trying to implement needed changes. As a general rule, the more cynics and resisters, the more important are short-term wins.¹⁵

Effective short-term wins must be visible and clearly related to the change effort. They are so important that they can not be left to chance. At the onset of the implementation process the guiding coalition needs to look for strategic areas to begin their efforts where they will most readily see results. For example, one church implementing cell groups began among college students where they had a strong leadership base and ready interest. Results were substantial and visible. This created momentum, learnings and experienced leaders to later implement cell groups broadly in the church.

Stage 7—Consolidate Gains and Produce More Change

Celebrating short-term wins is important and necessary but it can also have the reverse effect if the celebration sends the message that the hard work is done and now people can relax. It is important at this point to use the momentum created in the short-term to expand change efforts. Kotter gives five points for what this seventh stage should look like. Here they are with applications for a church:

- More change, not less: Now is not the time to relax. The guiding coalition must use short-term wins to tackle larger and more difficult change.
- More help: Additional leadership should be mobilized and perhaps additional staff must be added to support the new changes..
- Leadership from the top: The pastor and key leaders must continue to clarify the vision and keep urgency levels up to see change through to its destination.
- Leadership from below: As change is increased at this point in the process, leadership for specific areas and new projects is delegated to members with leadership

and management giftings.

 Reduction of peripheral systems: At this point inconsistencies in your administrative system may become apparent. Where it is advantageous, systems should be streamlined to keep efforts focused on the key vision and priorities.

In addition to Kotter's points, be mindful of the advice of Havelock for this phase in the change process. He states, "Part of the first round of evaluation should be a consideration of whether you or key members of your team have the requisite skills in different areas." In other words, as you intensify efforts in this critical phase you should also strengthen resourcing and training. You have probably learned a fair amount from experience in your first change endeavors but you must again reach beyond yourself to get the outside expertise, training and counsel that will further improve and speed your efforts.

Stage 8—Anchor New Approaches in the Culture

As change takes root in an organization or church the values corresponding to the structural changes must be embedded in its culture. In his article on "Organizational Culture," Edgar Schein points out: "Many organizational change programs that failed probably did so because they ignored cultural forces in organizations in which they were installed." Culture is a largely invisible but powerful dimension of any organization. Culture is composed of the shared values and the behavior norms in a group. If the culture does not change along with structure, changes will typically revert back to previous patterns and behaviors. Interestingly, Kotter states,

One of the theories about change that has circulated widely over the past fifteen years might be summarized as follows: The biggest impediment to creating change in a group is culture. Therefore, the first step in a major transformation is to alter the norms and values. After the culture has been shifted, the rest of the change effort becomes more feasible and easier to put into effect.

I once believed in this model. But everything I've seen over the past decade tells me it's wrong.

Culture is not something that you manipulate easily. Attempts to grab it and twist it into a new shape never work because you can't grab it. Culture changes only after you have successfully altered people's actions, after the new behavior produces some group benefit for a period of time, and after people see the connection between the new actions and the performance improvement. Thus, most cultural changes happen in stage 8, not stage 1.18

Kotter is not trying to say that cultural issues should left entirely until stage 8. They must be addresses and strategized throughout the process but significant cultural change will likely not occur until the later phases of the change process.

How are changes anchored in an organizational culture?

- Talk about it. The benefits from the changes must be highlighted and the corresponding value changes emphasized. Pastors and leaders must articulate the new values and how they fit with Biblical themes and admonitions.
- Affirm the old culture while embracing the new. It could be that the old culture served your church well. Thank God for its positive attributes while you consciously move on to something new.
- 3. Eliminate leadership and staff that does not fit the new culture. Habits formed over years and decades are very difficult to change. If some people cannot ultimately make changes that God is calling the church to, they may need to step out of key leadership roles into other positions.
- Promote those who best fit the new culture. As you
 move people into leadership positions you must be sensitive to whether they are going to fit or undermine the
 needed values and culture.

Additionally Schein commends that leaders can "create new emotionally charged rituals and develop symbols and artifacts

around the new assumptions to be embraced."19 This can be very powerful. For example a youth pastor I consulted, put in place a new leadership development system and ministry mobilization program. To go along with it he gave teenagers involved in different levels of ministry appropriate T-shirts with the logo for their ministry. Team leaders received attractive sport shirts embroidered with the same logo and titles designating their role. At the next level, volunteer staff were awarded sharp-looking jackets that also reinforced the mission of the ministry and their leadership role. This all went to reinforce the larger changes taking place in the ministry and showed that the church and youth pastor were serious about the changes. The clothing gave visibility to what was taking place and gave the youth clear goals to strive for. It got people attention and helped realign values and behavior. Spiritual dynamics were perhaps more important, but these external displays were powerful reinforcement that greatly contributed to a successful reorientation of the ministry.

Putting It All Together

Perhaps in reading about the stages of successful change you can see why change efforts you have initiated in the past have succeeded or failed. Inevitably, it is tempting for change agents to charge ahead and to try to eliminate or shorten certain phases. Major change, however, almost invariably requires each of these steps in order to succeed and thrive.

Are you currently involved in a major change in your church? What stage are you in? What do you need to do next to ensure that your efforts are as effective as possible?

Are you contemplating a new approach or project in the near future? What does the outline of these eight stages teach you? What stage or stages are you tempted to skip? What might be the consequences if you do? How can you use the outline of these stages to plan an effective change initiative?

If God is calling you to be a change agent, there are many encouraging and insightful examples in the Bible. One of the greatest change agents in the Old Testament was Joshua. As a young man he was one of the spies sent into Canaan. He could

see the future when others couldn't. He recognized the obstacles ahead, but knew that God was larger than the obstacles. No one listened at that time. But later in life he was put in charge of the change efforts and successfully led God's people to their new destination. It must have seemed overwhelming when he took over from Moses, but God's clear word came to him as he took command. It is the same word for every change agent that God calls today: "Have not I commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

Writer

Egli, Jim.

NOTES

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- 2. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 21.
- 3. Ronald Havelock, *The Change Agent's Guide*, 2nd edition (Engelwood Cliffs, New Jersey: Educational Technology Publications, 1995), 55.
 - 4. Kotter, 66.
 - 5. Havelock, 64.
 - 6. Kotter, 72.
 - 7. Ibid., 9.
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 - 9. Kotter, 90.
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 - 12. Kotter, 13.
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- 15. Kotter, 123.
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- 17. Edgar H. Schein, "Organizational Culture," *Organizational Development and Transformation*, ed. Wendell L. French, Cecil H. Bell, Jr., and Robert A. Zawacki (Chicago: Irwin, 1994), 157.
 - 18. Kotter, 155-156.
 - 19. Schein, 157.