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HOW CHANGING GENERATIONS . . . CHANGE: HARNESSING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENERATIONS AND THEIR APPROACHES TO CHANGE

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Abstract

This article will compare and contrast two leadership change strategies as observed in older generations (influenced by modernity) and younger generations (influenced by postmodernity). It will be suggested that modernist leadership strategies may focus more on command-and-control and vision. It will be further suggested that postmodern leaders may employ a more collaborative and mission-centric approach to change leadership. This latter approach will be shown to have been described in postmodern circles by organic metaphors and four conditions as set forth by organizational theorist Mary Jo Hatch. Subsequently, it will be suggested that the style of leadership embraced should depend upon the cultural context of the generational actors and the environment.

This study must begin with a few delimitations and explanations regarding terminology that will be employed. I present these as juxtaposition propositions.

BOOMERS VS. GENERATIONS X, Y, AND Z

Generational cultures can be designated in varying ways. The most widely accepted labels have been put forth by Philip Bump in his article, "Here

Is When Each Generation Begins and Ends, According to Facts."[1] Synthesizing work conducted by the US Census Bureau, the Harvard Center, and Strauss and Howe, Bump suggests these designations:

- Greatest Generation, born before 1945
- Baby Boomers, born 1946–1964
- Generation X, born 1965–1984
- Generation Y, born 1975–2004 (overlapping Generation X)
- Millennials, born 1982–2004
- TBD, 2003–today.[2]

To complicate matters, I have suggested the older generations are more influenced by modernity while the younger generations are more influenced by postmodernity.[3] Though it is difficult to designate an arbitrary point at which the majority of a generation crosses the modernal divide, this article will assume these influences. I have made a lengthy case for this elsewhere.[4]

MODERNITY VS. POSTMODERNITY

To contrast modernity and postmodernity is beyond the scope and scale of this article. However, the genesis of these two views coupled with a meta-perspective on culture can frame our discussion.

Modernity roughly coincides with the emergence of education as the interpreter of knowledge. Emerging with the Reformation and gaining momentum in the Enlightenment, modernity viewed the mentor-mentee form of education as the arbitrator of civilization. Modernity hoped that through education, the world would become a better place. Therefore, while sitting at the feet of experts, neophytes could build a better life for themselves and others.

Somewhere around the beginning of the twentieth century, disenchantment with the modern experiment arose. Modernity hoped that its emphasis upon education and knowledge would usher in a new world of peace. Instead, it had created new powers who tapped their educational resources to create weapons of mass destruction. The carnage of World War I was a verification that modernity had failed, as witnessed through the most edu-

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[1] *The Atlantic* magazine, March 25, 2014.

[2] Generation Z has been suggested as the descriptor for this generation by the *New York Times*, see Sabrina Tavernise, "A Younger Generation Is Being Born in Which Minorities Are the Majority," *New York Times*, May 17, 2012.

[3] Bob Whitesel, "Toward a Holistic in Postmodernal Theory of Change: The Four-forces Model of Change as Reflected in Church Growth Movement Literature," *The Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* (Fall 2008).

[4] Bob Whitesel, *Preparing for Change Reaction: How to Introduce Change in Your Church* (Indianapolis: The Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 53–56.

cated countries on the earth becoming the most likely to devise new ways to kill people *en masse*.

The reaction first took hold in the art world, which employed an oxymoron (*postmodernity*) to describe a world in which humans move beyond the modern experiment (i.e. into *post*-modernity).[5] While modernity saw education from experts as the redeemer of culture, postmodernity began to prefer experience as its arbitrator of civilization. Modernity dictums such as "Get an education to get ahead" were replaced with postmodern maxims of "Try it; you may like it." Thus arose in postmodernity an emphasis upon experience as a better teacher than experts.

To highlight this, the terms *modern* and *postmodern* will be used to highlight the difference in leadership approaches between younger and older leaders. The reader is cautioned to not apply these descriptors too narrowly or too generally. Rather, the judicious academic should allow these categories to inform his or her analysis of leadership while also taking into account the context and the players.

ORGANIC VS. ORGANIZATION

Over time, the term *organic church* has been more palatable in Christian circles than the term *postmodern church*. For instance, my publisher rejected my use of the term *postmodern* in the chapter titles of a 2011 book, because of the perceived anti-religious bent of postmodernity. Thus, I chose the term *organic* because it is helpful when describing the New Testament concept of a church as an organism with its interconnected, inter-reliant parts as seen in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 1, and Colossians 1.

Theologian Emil Bruner also emphasized that though the church is a spiritual organism (requiring pastoring and spiritual growth), it is also an organization (necessitating management and administration).[6] Therefore, the term *organic organization* will be employed in this article to emphasize both elements.

I find it interesting that secular, postmodern, organizational theorists, such as the influential Mary Jo Hatch, have detected the organic metaphor as a designation for healthy organizations.[7] Hatch suggests that organic organizations embrace four conditions, which I will utilize in this discussion to frame how change mechanisms respond to them.

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[5] Eddie Gibbs in *Church Next* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 23, explains that though Frederico de Onis created the term *postmodern* in the 1930s, it was not until the 1960s that it gained popularity due to its use by art critics.

[6] Emil Bruner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952),15–18.

[7] Mary Joe Hatch, *Organizational Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 53–54.

Condition 1: Organic, postmodern leadership understands it is dependent on its environment. While a modern leadership approach might try to colonize or impose a leader's preferential culture upon another culture, according to Hatch, an organic approach adapts its leadership practices to the indigenous cultures in which it hopes to bring about change.

Condition 2: Organic, postmodern leadership envisions a dissonant harmony that must be cultivated between the varied parts in the organization.[8] While a modernist strategy might overlook parts of the organization in order to emphasize those organizational aspects with growth potential, the postmodern sees an interconnectedness that requires addressing weaknesses in addition to building upon strengths. (Biblical examples for this view may be inferred from I Corinthians 12:12, 14, 20, 27; Romans 12: 4–5; and Ephesians 4:12–13).

Condition 3: Organic organizations adapt continually to their changing environments. The organization learns from its environment, weeds out aspects that can be unhealthy, and learns which aspects can be embraced without compromising the mission or vision. To do so without compromising an underling mission, Kraft suggests this requires us to see Christ as "above but working through culture."[9] Eddie Gibbs elaborates by suggesting that behaviors, ideas, and products of a culture must be "sifted."[10] Using a colander metaphor, Gibbs suggests this is an incarnational approach when he writes, "He (Christ) acts redemptively with regard to culture, which includes judgment on some elements, but also affirmation in other areas, and a transformation of the whole."[11]

Condition 4: Organic uniqueness recognizes that certain species flourish in some environments and die in others. Hence, to Hatch what works in one organization cannot necessarily be franchised into another context. Therefore, Hatch and other postmodern theorists like Zalesnick reject the notions of "irrefutable" and "unassailable" leadership laws or rules that can be applied in a general manner.[12]

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[8] While Hatch utilizes the term *requisite harmony*, I have substituted the helpful term *dissonant harmony* as employed by Bruno Dyck and Frederick A. Starke, "The Formation of Breakaway Organizations: Observations and a Process Model," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44 (1999): 792–822. I have applied the Dyke-Starke model to the church in Bob Whitesel, *Staying Power: Why People Leave the Church Over Change and What You Can Do About It* (Abingdon Press, 2003).

[9] Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 113.

[10] Eddie Gibbs, *I Believe in Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 120.

[11] Ibid., 92.

[12] See, for example, the hedgehog versus fox's comparison in Abraham Zalesnik *Hedgehogs and Foxes: Character, Leadership, and Commanding Organizations* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2008). Zalesnik uses this metaphor of hedgehogs that live by unwavering rules with the more long-lived foxes that adapt to their environment.

With the above understanding of generational depictions, the philosophical forces that inform them, the organization as organism, and the conditions of an organic organization, we can move on to compare two areas in which modern and postmodern leadership may differ. This is not to say these are the only or even most powerful areas in which they differ. I have compared and contrasted eight areas in my Abingdon Press release, *ORGANIX: Signs of Leadership in a Changing Church*, in which more depth on this discussion can be found. However, for the present article, I will delve into two aspects that were not discussed to this depth in the aforementioned book.

COMMAND-AND-CONTROL LEADERSHIP VS. COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Modern leadership has customarily been associated with command-and-control leadership as depicted in Adam Smith's seminal book, *The Wealth of Nations*.[13] In this model, the role of the leader or manager is to command often-unwilling workers to pursue a goal while controlling their actions to attain it. Upon Smith's ideas, Frederick Taylor built Theory X, famously asserting, "The worker must be trimmed to fit the job."[14]

Postmodern leadership, not surprisingly, reacted against this emphasis on a leadership expert and instead embraced a consensus building and collaborative approach. Harrison Monarch describes the contrast as follows:

> The archaic command-and-control approach is shelved in favor of a culture in which managers admit they don't have all the answers and will implement and support team decisions. This means managers become the architects of that team dynamic rather than the all-seeing purveyors of answers. The result is a culture of trust and employee empowerment that is safe.[15]

Support for this approach can be found in the research of Bruno Dyck and Frederick A. Starke. Not only are they organizational theorists who study the formation of breakaway organizations (e.g. how organizations lose their change proponents), but they also participate on the boards of their churches. They have applied their understanding of breakaway organizations to what they have witnessed in churches.[16] Dyke and Starke found that pastors who dictate change (or even who align themselves with a subgroup

[13] Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1976), books 1 and 4.

[14] Quoted by Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 368–369.

[15] Harrison Monarth, *Executive Presence: The Art of Commanding Respect Like a CEO* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 55.

[16] Dyck and Starke, "The Formation of Breakaway Organizations," 792–822.

of change components who do so) will usually be pushed out by the status quo unless the leader demonstrates collaborative leadership. They discovered that the successful leader will build consensus for a change, even among the naysayers, before the change is implemented. They also discovered that implementing change too fast and without vetting it with the status quo results in failed change. Thus, change often fails in churches because it is not implemented in a collaborative fashion. Disturbingly, they also discovered an end result is that pastors and those proposing change are forced out of the church because they did not attain a unifying outcome.[17]

John Kotter is a Harvard management professor who wrote the seminal article (and the resultant book) on change, titled, *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*.[18] He states that the second step for bringing about change is to create a "guiding coalition" to generate that change. He found that when one person or one side pushes for change, the other sides will push back with the resultant change, creating division rather than progress. Kotter's solution is to create (as the second step of the eight-step process) a guiding coalition of both change proponents and the status quo who will bring change in a collaborative manner.

Best practices for the church: A leader must resist command-and-control tendencies and instead embrace approaches oriented toward collaboration. Best practices include Dyke and Starke's suggestions that church leaders go to the status quo and listen to their concerns before launching into a change.[19] While field-testing this, I have found that simply giving status quo members a hearing goes a long way to helping them feel that their voice and concerns are heard. Dyck and Starke also found that when an inevitable alarm event occurs through which some change begins to polarize the congregation, the collaborative pastor will bring the people together to grasp the common vision and cooperate on a solution.[20] Kotter even pushes the establishment of a guiding coalition to the top (second) of his eight tactical steps.

MOTIVATING BY VISION VS. MOTIVATING BY MISSION

Some confusion exists among practitioners regarding the difference between vision and mission. Kent Hunter and I, in an earlier book, sought to compare and contrast various ecclesial definitions of vision and mission and suggest an abridgment.[21]

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[17] For more on this, see Whitesel, *Staying Power: Why People Leave the Church Over Change* and the chapter titled, "Go Slowly, Build Consensus, and Succeed" in *Preparing for Change Reaction*, 151–169.

[18] *Harvard Business Review*, January 2007.

[19] Dyck and Starke, "The Formation of Breakaway Organizations," 812–813.

[20] Ibid., 813–819.

[21] Bob Whitesel and Kent R. Hunter, *A House Divided: Bridging the Generation Gaps in Your Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 107.

	George Barna[22]	Elmer L. Towns[23]	Whitesel/Hunter[24]
Mission:	A philosophic statement that undergirds the heart of your ministry.	Your ministry emphasis and your church gifting.	"What do we do?"
Vision:	A clear mental image of a preferable future imparted by God, and based on an accurate understanding of God, self, and circumstances.	Same as Barna.	"Where do we believe God is calling our church to go in the future?"

My experience has been that older generations, influenced by modernity, typically emphasize the vision. By this I mean they have a clear mental picture of the future, and they try to muster all of their forces to attain it. This can, and often does, result in a parade of different programs being promoted to the congregation, which often—by their sheer frequency—overwhelms and wears out the congregants. Burnout is often the result.

I have noticed that younger generations are more likely to emphasize the mission that undergirds these various visions. This is perhaps because they have witnessed this in their parents' congregations. According to Barna, a mission is "a philosophic statement that undergirds the heart of your ministry."[25] This leads postmodern-influenced leaders to emphasize less the different programs that are being implemented and instead to motivate by stressing the mission behind them.

An interview with Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella's in *USA Today* yields a useful example.[26] In the article, Nadella criticizes founding CEO Bill Gates for mixing up the difference between a mission and a vision. Nadella states, "It always bothered me that we confused an enduring mission with a temporal goal . . . When I joined the company in 1992, we used to talk about our mission as putting a PC in every home, and by the end of the decade we have done that, at least in the developed world."

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[22] George Barna, The Power of Vision: How You Can Capture and A*pply God's Vision for Your Ministry (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 28, 38–39.*

[23] Elmer L. Towns, Vision Day: Capturing the Power of Vision (Lynchburg, Virginia*; Church Growth Institute, 1994), 24–25.*

[24] Whitesel and Hunter, A House *Divided, 107.*

[25] Barna, *The Power of Vision*, 28.

[26] Marco della Cava, "Microsoft's Satya Nadella Is Counting on Culture Shock to Drive Growth," *USA Today*, February 20, 2017.

Nadella was right, because "putting a PC in every home" is not a mission—it is a vision. It is something that can be reached, can be pictured in one's mind, and is temporally bound. Every house having a PC is something that can be envisioned. That is why every house today does not have an IBM PC. Instead, many have Apple Macs.

A mission, however, drives the company and its values, therefore shaping its decisions. It is much bigger and grander than a vision.

When Steve Jobs was luring Bill Scully from PepsiCo to become CEO of Apple, Jobs shared a mission, not a vision, saying: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world?"[27]

A mission is just like that. It is exciting, world changing, but somewhat imprecise so it could manifest in many different outcomes (i.e. visions). It is also not temporally bound, like "putting a PC in every home." A mission drives values and decisions through many different projects.

Apple's mission reminds me of the trend I see in my youthful seminary students to emphasize mission over vision. They correctly understand that mission can be realized in many different visions. Apple's mission would be realized in varied visions, including the vision to revolutionize the way music is purchased via iTunes and the vision to miniaturize the computer into a handheld device, etc. The result is that Apple devotees have a passion that IBM followers do not. Apple has an ongoing mission that continues to be realized in various visions. As a result, the clarity of Apple's mission, best exemplified in Apple's "1984" Super Bowl ad, unleashes a passion in its followers.[28]

Best practices for the church: When leading younger leaders, it may be helpful to emphasize the mission while letting many subcategories of vision come and go as opportunity rises and wanes. The younger generations appear to want to be reminded of the mission but allowed to create multiple visions of how it may be carried out. They do not want to stick to one idea or tactic but rather one mission. Therefore, the mission becomes more important than a time- and measurement-constrained vision which often influenced their parents' church.

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[27] John Sculley and John A. Byrne, *Odyssey: Pepsi to Apple: A Journey of Adventure, Ideas, and the Future* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 90.

[28] The "1984" Apple commercial is available on YouTube and is best described by MacWorld writer Adelia Cellini in the following: "Apple wanted the Mac to symbolize the idea of empowerment, with the ad showcasing the Mac as a tool for combating conformity and asserting originality. What better way to do that than have a striking blonde athlete take a sledgehammer to the face of that ultimate symbol of conformity, Big Brother?" "The Story Behind Apple's '1984' TV Commercial: Big Brother at 20," *MacWorld*, 21 (1), 18.

Though they may not realize it, Hatch's four conditions of organic organizations are reflected in the postmodern emphasis upon an unchanging mission in lieu of the temporal- and quantitative-bound nature of vision. For example, "Condition 1: An organic dependency on its environment" is reflected in the postmodern emphasis that church should not be a closed, self-contained system; but rather, it should be an organic congregation tied to those it serves inside and outside the organization. Hatch's "Condition 2: An organic harmony among the parts" is reflected in the postmodern propensity toward dissonant harmony among multiple constituencies. "Condition 3: Organic adaption to the surroundings" is exhibited as these organic experiments adapt to the culture of their surroundings by changing visions as the environment changes. Finally, "Condition 4: Organic uniqueness from other organizations" is mirrored in their intentions not to franchise what works in other churches but to create indigenous and elastic visions that serve an immutable mission.

THE TIP OF AN ICEBERG

These approaches to change are just the tip of an iceberg of divergences between the leadership modality of the modernist and postmodernist. I have compared and contrasted more areas in my book, *ORGANIX: Signs of Leadership in a Changing Church*. The reader may be interested in how I delve into the striking difference regarding how younger generations offset the disadvantages of homogeneity. For a thorough investigation of the distinctions between modern and postmodern leadership, I would encourage the reader to consult this volume.

About the Author

Bob Whitesel, DMin, PhD, holds two doctorates from Fuller Seminary and is the founding professor of Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University. A speaker/consultant on church health, organic outreach, and multiethnic ministry, he is the award-winning author of 13 books published by national publishers. National magazines have stated, "Bob Whitesel is the change agent" (*Ministry Today*) and "Bob Whitesel is the key spokesperson on change in the church today" (*Outreach Magazine*). The faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary awarded him The Donald McGavran Award for outstanding scholarship in church growth, and The Great Commission Research Network awarded him The Donald A. McGavran Award for outstanding leadership in church growth.