

## **WHEN PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO CHANGE**

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**Scott Peck's book**, "The Road Less Travelled", offers a thesis which is as relevant to churches as it is to individuals. On the basis of many years' practice as a psychiatrist, Peck pints out that change is necessary if we are to grow and mature. Yet change makes us uncomfortable: by definition, it takes us away from the place we have been in, and takes us to somewhere we have never been before. Not everybody wants to go that route. Some prefer not to change – and, as a result, not to grow. Hence the road of change is all too frequently "the road less travelled."

For church leaders seeking to lead their congregations along the path of change – not for the sake of change, but in order to pursue growth and maturity in Christ – there will inevitably be the same resistance to change which we encounter in life in general, and frequently in ourselves, too. How we deal with resistance not only determines whether change will go forward, but is also a test of our own spiritual maturity. Here are some practical guidelines for dealing with opposition to change:

- (1) **Remember that those who oppose change are not usually being deliberately difficult.** Change seems to say, "What we did before was wrong." That is hurtful for those who have loved the old ways and see no reason to change. What we really want to say, with pastoral gentleness, is that what we did before was right for that time and that culture, but is simply inappropriate in the present context. We need to connect with this culture, and the culture has changed so much that we need to find new ways of connecting.
- (2) **Resistance to change is often more emotional than rational.** At the root of resistance to change is often fear over the loss of what is familiar, and the loss of identity which that seems to threaten. Thus to respond to opposition with rational argument – "Here are ten reasons this change is a good thing" – is not going to help. Often a hug is a better response, to come alongside someone who is resistant to change and to say, "I know what you're feeling. I feel the same way. But if we're going to be effective, we need to bite the bullet and go this way."
- (3) **We can expect people to have conflicting feelings about change.** People in the congregation may well give mixed messages about proposed changes: "I agree with what you're saying, but I just don't feel good about it." "I worry about where we're going, but I realize we have to change with the times." Such confusion is normal. Parishioners who talk like this are not trying to make our lives miserable! They genuinely feel confusion, and need to be listened to and encouraged.

- (4) **People adopt change at different paces.** Normally 15% of a congregation are what I would call early adapters, people who just can't wait to get a new idea and see if it will work. At the opposite end of the spectrum is another 10% who will probably never come on board. And there are the 75% in the middle who will eventually be persuaded – but not immediately.

Most clergy have been trained to operate in a pastoral mode, so it is hard for us then to become leaders who initiate change that causes hurt. Clergy with pastoral hearts tend to see only the 10% who are hurting because they do not want to change. We see their pain and we feel responsible. Sometimes we lose sleep worrying over them.

However, while we must love them, we cannot back down. There is a price to pay for change. Leadership calls for hard decisions. Ultimately, I remind myself that, through every one of the 15% who are prepared to change, I will be able to reach 25 people who are currently outside the church.

- (5) **Establish a grievance procedure.** Grievances will come, and we need to be prepared to respond to them graciously. We can say, "If you have questions about this, talk to any of the people on the committee. They would be very willing to listen to your concerns." Unless we provide a legitimate outlet for grievances, they will simply come back in a form that is far harder to manage and respond to.
- (6) **Deal directly and personally with resisters.** Invite those who resist change to tell you their problems. Take time to explain the vision to them. "Here's how we see the problem. Here's the solution we are proposing. Do you see a better way?" The question is not asked in a way that is sarcastic or challenging, but genuinely wanting to know. Sometimes, such people will say, "I don't think there's a problem," which opens up a different discussion – but also a potentially worthwhile one.
- (7) **Don't personalize dissent.** Encourage people to express their feelings and thoughts. Don't take disagreement personally, and encourage them to do the same. Discuss the issue, not personalities. Don't let them impute bad motives to you, and don't impute negative motives to them. Encourage healthy disagreement. Discourage name-calling on either side.
- (8) **Let people blow off steam in private.** If you know someone is unhappy, try to come alongside them in private before the public meeting, and let them have their say. Once a person has made a huge impassioned speech in a meeting, it is very hard for them to change their minds later and back down. If the impassioned speech is made to you in private, however, will be easier for the dissenter to change later.

(9) **Try pilot projects.** Change does not have to happen all at once. Try experiments. Suggest, “Here’s an idea that might work. I don’t know how it is going to work, but why don’t we try it for six months and see what we learn.” Agree on the criteria by which the experiment will be assessed. If the pilot project goes well, people will be open to other experiments.

Even if it doesn’t, you have proved your openness to be proved wrong, and increased the likelihood that people will trust you more when you suggest the next pilot project.

(10) **Don’t take yes or no votes until you are well along in the process.** Votes divide communities. Try to develop consensus on each step before you take it. A yes/no vote will probably be unavoidable at some point, but try not to go to a yes/no vote until you know you are going to carry it! Until that point, every issue is a study issue.

As far as possible, just count the yes votes. Suppose you propose a new sound system, which not everyone supports. It is simple enough to say, “Since there are different opinions about whether this is good use of money, we will only go ahead until we have the money.” That way, those who vote yes have their way; those who oppose the idea are not forced to pay for it.

(11) **Keep teaching the vision.** The leader has to share and teach the vision, again and again and again. We need to say it, show it, and repeat it. When we get tired of hearing ourselves saying it, we have only just begun. Often a question needs to be answered more than once. Maybe people were not present the first time it was answered, or maybe they were not ready to hear the answer. We need to be patient and answer the same question as often as it is raised. John Maxwell says, “You have to see the vision clearly, you have to say it continually, and you have to show it creatively.”

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#### **AUDIO LINK:**

Parish Leaders in Rural Areas: Listen to this CBC Maritime Noon podcast, which includes an interview with the author of, "**13 Ways to Kill Your Community.**"

A hopeful perspective on community and church development. Very inspiring!  
(Skip audio ahead to 7:40)

<http://www.cbc.ca/list.../shows/maritime-noon/episode/13640863>