

ISSUE 3:6
MARCH
2009

"In the change from being a caterpillar to becoming a butterfly, you're nothing more than a yellow, gooey, sticky mess."

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TODAY'S PARISH LEADER

Learn the three-step process for internal change

Manage conflict in your parish

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Two caterpillars are conversing and a beautiful butterfly floats by. One caterpillar turns to the other and says: "You'll never get me up on one of those butterfly things."

It was evident that most of the parishioners were excited and enthusiastic about the changes taking place at St. Anywhere. However, the pastor could see that not everyone was smiling as he looked out from the ambo during the Sunday liturgy. Both he and the staff had received a few letters (signed and anonymous) complaining that the changes were destroying the old way of life at St. Anywhere, arguing that the efforts toward social justice awareness and action were Communist, and even a couple who said the parish



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was becoming too Protestant and that they would be leaving. (You've never heard these, right?)

When the team gathered with the facilitator for their session on change and conflict, they wanted to understand how they could better manage the change that was transforming St.

Anywhere and what to do about the people who were uncomfortable with or downright angry about the changes (especially those who might be upset but who never wrote letters). The parish secretary and the youth minister wanted to believe that everyone could be convinced that the changes were not only beneficial but positive steps toward salvation. The music minister, the director of religious education, and the pastoral minister weren't so sure, but wanted to see what the facilitator wanted to teach them. The pastor was cautiously optimistic.

The facilitator began by stating the session topics:

- How different people handle change
- How to manage change at St. Anywhere
- How to handle difficult people

He explained that there are two types of change: external (a new policy, a new practice) and internal (a psychological reorientation). St. Anywhere was hoping to achieve both kinds of change, but the team understood that it was internal change that would enable St. Anywhere to live out its vision and mission in the world. The members also grasped the fact that this kind of change could not be forced—the parishioners themselves had to be the ones who wanted to change. The leadership's responsibility was to guide, direct, coach, and encourage.

Timing is everything

The facilitator then described the three-step process people underwent when

BIGGEST MISTAKES IN MANAGING CHANGE

1. Not understanding the importance of people

Organizations don't change. People do—or they don't. If parishioners don't trust the pastoral leadership, don't buy into the reason for change, or aren't included in the planning, there will be no successful change, regardless of how brilliant the strategy

2. Not appreciating that people throughout the parish will have different reactions to change

Expecting everyone to handle change in the same way or within the same time frame is unrealistic. Consistent and repeated coaching and direction is required of effective pastoral leadership.

3. Treating transformation as an event, rather than a mental, physical, and emotional process

Large-scale organizational change usually triggers emotional reactions ranging from denial and negativity to acceptance and commitment. Leadership can either facilitate this emotional process or ignore it—at the peril of the transformation effort.

4. Being less than candid

Communicate openly and honestly. Not everyone will thank you for your candor, but they will never forgive you for anything less. You need to proactively, even aggressively, share everything—the opportunities, risks, mistakes, potentials, failures—and then invite people to work on these challenges together.

5. Not appropriately "setting the stage" for change

Prepare parishioners by giving them pertinent information in a timely manner (external vs. internal change).

6. Trying to manage transformation with the same strategies used for incremental success

Understanding the effects of asking for external versus internal change on parishioners is a key element in effectively managing change.

7. Forgetting to negotiate the new contract between pastoral leadership and parishioners

You need to make sure that while parishioners may understand what they are losing, they might not have a clear picture of what they are gaining.

8. Believing that what you thought you communicated is what parishioners heard

Make sure your communication strategy is consistent with your actions.

9. Underestimating human potential

Trust in the innate intelligence, capability, and creativity of your parishioners.

10. Forgetting to include God in the changes

Pray...pray...pray...in small groups, in large groups, on prayer lines, everywhere, all the time. Make the presence of God felt and known throughout all phases of change and transformation.

EXCERPTED AND MODIFIED FOR PARISH LIFE FROM WINSTON J. BRILL & ASSOCIATES (TINYURL.COM/6T3M66)

faced with internal change. First, a person must let go of the old ways. For the creative risk-takers in the parish, letting go would be much easier. These personality types readily accept new challenges and are often bored with the status quo. These were the cheerleader types whose energy and enthusiasm would filter through the parish and become contagious. It was up to the pastoral team to seek out and recruit these types to head committees and lead strategic change. On the other hand, for many people—especially some of the elderly—letting go of the familiar can cause anxiety, depression, and even an experience similar to grieving. During this phase, it was important to give people enough time to understand and appreciate the benefits of the changes being asked of them.

People then enter the second phase—they've let go of the old but haven't as yet fully embraced the new. This makes people very uneasy. At this point, people might either insist on making all the changes at once and getting them over with or try to go backward in an attempt to return to the familiar. This can be a dangerous phase for those trying to implement change. Move too quickly, and changes may not be effectively or fully accepted. Move too slowly, and people become distracted and return to their old ways.

The final phase of change moves people forward into transformation. This phase requires constant reassurance, guidance, and effective leadership. Small successes need to be celebrated so that everyone feels as though they are part of the accomplishment. Careful planning and sustained movement are goals throughout this phase. Knowing when people have had enough time to absorb and internalize one change before moving to another requires having a constant finger on the pulse

WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

- Start out by examining yourself (often we are also part of the problem and not the only solution)
- Explore what you are experiencing with a trusted friend or colleague (not gossip, but seeking good counsel)
- Approach the person with whom you are having the problem for a private discussion (face-to-face is always the best way to resolve differences)
- Follow-up after the initial discussion (make sure that what you both agreed to is what will work)
- You can confront the person publicly (only if you can be objective and can do so kindly)
- If you have done what you can do and employed the first five recommended approaches with little or no success, it's time to involve others. Ask if any other ministers are having an issue with the difficult person (not for the sake of gossip, but in order to bring it to the difficult person's attention—we are following St. Paul's advice)
- If these approaches fail to work, try to limit the difficult person's access to you
- Change your ministry (it's not about who's won, but about bringing about the peace of Christ)
- If all else fails, change parishes

of parish life. The facilitator reminded the team that, above all, honesty and forthrightness were crucial during the transformation phase. If people feel they are being deceived, not part of the process, or on the receiving end rather than in collaboration with the parish team, they will simply refuse to cooperate.

The facilitator reminded the team that each time transformation is required, the leadership team needs to allow the parish to experience all three phases of change before moving on to

the next cycle.

Looking backward before moving forward

With that in mind, the facilitator asked the pastoral team members to rate themselves on how they've been doing for the past few months as agents of change within the parish. While the team felt very good about many of the changes that have already occurred at St. Anywhere, they could see where they hadn't given parishioners enough time to adjust to a new focus or adapt

to the new mission. They decided to review these at their next staff meeting and even go back a few steps in the strategic plan if necessary. They vowed to communicate more effectively and frequently with parish organizations, catechists, ministers, and parishioners. The facilitator stressed that this kind of corporate self-reflection was extremely important if they were to stay on track with their strategic planning cycle.

Why can't everyone just get along?

The final part of the session dealt with how to handle difficult people. The facilitator stated that no one likes conflict since it is both uncomfortable and stressful. However, to avoid or eliminate conflict would mean to live in isolation. Conflict exists whenever two people do not share the same goals. It is a natural part of human interaction. And uncomfortable as it may be, people can learn to use conflict as way to grow personally and spiritually.

The facilitator offered ten tips on how to deal with conflict (see the accompanying sidebar).

The facilitator then focused on some important skills that the team needed to hone. First, they needed to listen—but listening is not as easy as it sounds. Many people hear but do not really listen to what is being said by the other person. Each person is often too busy constructing their retort or another argument to fully understand the viewpoint of the other person. The facilitator supplied several role-play

Difficult Behavior Type	Behavior Traits	Coping Mechanisms
Sherman Tanks	Attacking, accusing, abrupt, confrontational, angry	Let them run down; get them to sit down; avoid head-on arguments
Snipers	Teasing, sarcastic, unrealistic, hides behind crowds	Ask questions to validate or invalidate voiced criticisms
Know-It-Alls	Low tolerance for criticism, condescending	Do your homework; listen carefully; ask questions; make time for reflection
Super Agreeables	Want to be liked by all, tells you what you want to hear	Be personal; be non-threatening
Unresponsives	Won't participate, clams up when asked questions	Ask open-ended questions; use the friendly, silent stare; listen rather than talk
Negativists	Pessimistic, bitter, already knows it will end badly	Avoid getting drawn in; don't argue; use comments to make decisions
Exploders	Throws adult tantrums, yells, blames, is suspicious	Interrupt the tantrum; let them run down; keep voice moderated
Complainers	Finds fault with everything, feels everyone else is slacking	Listen attentively; acknowledge what they say; don't agree or apologize; move quickly into problem-solving

situations in which each member played both themselves and then a parishioner who was not pleased with them or their ministry.

The role-plays helped staff to appreciate some of the skills needed for handling conflict including:

- Rephrasing or repeating statements made by the other person to ensure that what was said was heard correctly
- Drawing on the different strengths and insights of those with whom

they might be in conflict

The facilitator then described some of the personality types who were most likely to resist change and how to deal with those personalities in conflict situations (see accompanying sidebar).

I will never be a butterfly

Finally the facilitator tackled the exception rule. No matter how hard you try or what wonderful tools you employ to resolve the conflict, there will always be those who really don't want to resolve differences, to be cooperative, to do anything but win, and who are exactly the ones Jesus meant when he said to love your enemies. □

Resources

- The Thiagi Group (training resources, thiagi.com)
- Conflict resolution (PDF file, tinyurl.com/conflictres)
- How to handle difficult people (tipsforsuccess.org/difficult-people.htm)
- *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, Roger Fisher (Penguin)



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