

## **BRINGING CHANGE - John Sweetman**

*As a leader, you have to be a change agent. Leaders take people somewhere and this inevitably means that things will change. However there are effective ways and damaging ways to bring about change and knowing the difference is important. In this article, John shares a few of the things he's learned about bringing change. He hopes that they will help you avoid some of the mistakes he has made.*

### **Principle 1: Don't try to change things until you understand what's happening.**

You really can't know what changes are needed until you understand the situation. Wise change agents learn about the present situation by taking time to talk with those involved, hearing their perspectives, and praying for the people. You have to stand in the shoes of those who will be involved in the change. It's no use trying to solve problems that are not perceived by those who are most affected by the change.

Let me give you an example. In the early 1980s, small groups were starting to appear in churches, but many people remained suspicious. They were concerned that groups would spiral out of control without pastoral supervision. I had been involved in leading small groups for many years and at 28 was the small groups' pastor at Kenmore Baptist. I loved small groups and was convinced that all churches desperately needed them.

I was invited to speak to a group of pastors about growing small groups, but didn't take the time to really find out where they were coming from. I presumed that they were committed to small groups and wanted a few ideas from a cutting-edge practitioner. In my youthful enthusiasm, I talked about the depths of small group life, and attempted to sell the advantages of being completely honest, tackling intimacy barriers, dealing with personal pain in the group, and even crying together.

In fact, this group of conservative pastors was skeptical of small groups and concerned about the excesses that could result. My attempts to change their thinking actually confirmed their worst fears. (My modern gear and long hair didn't help things.) I set back the introduction of small groups for years in their churches. I had not taken the time to understand their mindset and my attempt at bringing change was counter-productive.

Some of you look at a new situation and immediately know what needs to change to fix or improve it. Don't rush things! Take time to build relationships and get a feel for what's happening. Talk to people. Feed in some of your ideas and gauge the reaction. And don't be too critical of those who are maintaining the status quo. At least stand in their shoes first.

Of course there are exceptions to this principle. Can you think of times when you shouldn't wait?

### **Principle 2: When people oppose change, reduce the blocking forces.**

Change is almost always met by resistance. You see change is costly and for many people it's much easier not to change. For example, say you want to divide the youth group you and your team run into tribes with two leaders for each tribe. Sounds great. No problems. But for some leaders this will mean greater effort, or more time, or taking on responsibility they don't really want or are not gifted for. It's certainly not a good change for some of them. So they oppose the change you suggest. They don't think that it's a good idea.

When people oppose change sometimes the leader gives up, but more often he or she will increase the pressure to change. You shame them, or show them that this is the method Jesus used, or argue that this

will make a huge difference. You push the change through, but get no commitment from the leaders. Sometimes increasing the pressure to change is the right thing to do (like Jesus with the Pharisees), but most of the time it only increases the resistance.

Here's my idea. I don't know if you're familiar with physics, but when an object is not moving, it's because the driving forces and the blocking forces are equal. So if you're sitting on a seat now, the downward forces of gravity are being cancelled out by the upward forces of the seat - you're not moving. If you are determined to go down, you could increase the downward (driving) forces (by getting someone to sit on the seat with you), but probably the upward forces would also increase and you still wouldn't move. You'd only put the seat under a lot of pressure. This is what happens when we try to force people to change. People resist more strongly and the situation often grows more volatile.

Another option is to reduce the blocking forces. In the seat example, you could take the seat away, you will then go down for sure. In bringing change, this means looking at why people are opposing the change and trying to understand and allay their concerns.

So if we wanted to introduce the tribe concept to the youth group, how would we reduce the blocking forces in the leaders? Ask the leaders what their real concerns are and try to deal with these concerns. For example, if time pressure is the real issue then devise a system that will not require any more time outside of the youth group night. If it's gifting, then assure the leaders that are more program oriented than people oriented, they will be paired with someone who will lead the people side. As the blocking forces are reduced, the change will happen without huge stress.

Some of you are thinking - that's the wimp's way. You don't pander to people; you just push the change through. They can like it or lump it. I appreciate the passion (and occasionally you will be right), but that doesn't sound much like servant leadership to me.

### **Principle 3: Change cannot occur without significant dissatisfaction.**

To help you understand the reason for this principle, let me make a few preliminary comments. Most change agents live with a constant sense of dissatisfaction. They see what could be and this is what drives their leadership. They realize that God wants to change the status quo. They have a vision and will not be satisfied until the vision becomes a reality. This dissatisfaction usually does not lead to negativity or cynicism, but to a passionate pursuit of change. To change agents, the need for change is just so obvious.

It may surprise you (if you are a change agent), but most people do not think this way. They are reasonably content with the status quo and are mostly happy with the way things are. They don't see change as a good thing but as a pain and problem that will upset their familiar ways of doing things. They more easily see the losses associated with change than the gains. In other words, most people are quite satisfied with the way things are and don't particularly see any need for change. This is not bad; it's just the way things are.

Satisfied people do not change. Why would you change when you are content with what you have? So effective change requires the raising of dissatisfaction among the people affected by the change. This is not easy, but it is necessary. Without significant dissatisfaction with the status quo, effective change cannot occur.

Let me give an example. You're the leader of a small group that is bursting at the seams. To you it's obvious that the group needs to split to reach and disciple even more people. You will feel some of the pain of dividing the group, but for you the benefits far outweigh the challenges. But not everyone sees it like that. Many in the group will wonder why you want to damage what is going really well and put it all at risk. Why not get someone else to start another group? They are very happy with the way things are. They are satisfied and will resist the change.

Creating dissatisfaction with the status quo is a risky business. Create too much dissatisfaction and everything will fall apart if the change is not effective. But you can do it in a positive way. Let me illustrate with the small group example. Here are some ways you could create dissatisfaction:

1. Divide into two groups during the night and let members see how smaller groups allows more involvement.
2. Tell stories about people who would like to be involved if there was space.
3. Have your assistant leader share his/her vision of a new group.
4. Have people share names of people they would like to invite to the group.
5. Talk personally with group members about the opportunity.
6. Get the leader of a group that has split successfully to share the process and results with the group.

Effective change begins with a sense of dissatisfaction with the present.

#### **Principle 4: “Leaking” information is an important skill for change agents.**

Few people immediately accept the need for a change. When the idea of a change is first introduced the immediate reaction of many people tends to be shock and opposition. This is followed by the expression of a litany of problems with the proposed change. It’s not that people won’t eventually change, it’s just that they need time to adjust to a proposed change and to see its benefits.

So if a suggested change is unexpectedly dropped on people, it has little chance of immediate acceptance. The initial response will usually be concern and resistance. That’s why effective change agents tend to gradually leak information about a change.

Now I realize that such an approach seems to reek of dishonesty. I can hear you saying, “Just be honest. Get the facts out there. Don’t try to manipulate people.” Leaking information conjures up pictures of politicians who have it down to a fine art. For example, information about proposed costly budget or policy changes is always leaked to the media before politicians make official pronouncements. Difficult changes are aired in the media long before they are proposed to parliament.

But before we relegate the gradual dissemination (perhaps a more politically correct term) of information about change to the sin bin, let me ask a question. “Isn’t this what Jesus did?” He didn’t reveal all of God’s plan at once. The disciples weren’t ready for it. He gradually revealed the enormity of what God was going to do through him. In a sense, he slowly “leaked” the information to his followers.

Effective change agents leak, they don’t dump. They let out ideas and possibilities bit by bit. This gives people time to work the changes through, to respond to the problems, and to adjust to the challenges involved. It also gives the leader space to hone the proposed change through discussion and feedback. So when the final decision is made, the people are more open and the proposed change is more suitable and acceptable.

I remember dumping a significant change of church practice (regarding baptism) on the church people at Bracken Ridge and getting this huge negative reaction that threatened to split the church. If only I had been more patient and had known about leaking the ideas.

Effective change agents leak, they don’t dump.

#### **Principle 5: Most change fails for lack of a support group.**

Here’s a typical scenario. Amanda (worship pastor) gets a great idea about a change needed in the evening worship service. She’s been attending lectures on worship at Malyon and feels that if the sermon could be moved to the front end of the service, it would leave plenty of space for the young people to really respond

to the truth in worship after the sermon. This made sense in the lectures and she is keen to make the change.

Amanda talks to the youth pastor. He's ambivalent about the change and raises a few half-hearted concerns, but Amanda is passionate (and forceful) so she starts working on the change. She tells the music teams and worship leaders what will be happening and reorganizes the evening service. Everyone seems okay about it and Amanda is really excited.

This proposed change will almost inevitably fail! You know why? Because there's no support group. It's Amanda's idea, Amanda's passion, and Amanda's effort. She has no-one sharing and pursuing the vision with her. Oh you say (and Amanda certainly will), "Everyone seems pretty happy and no-one is opposing the idea. Most are actually cooperating well." Maybe so, but with the first sign of difficulty (and problems will come), they will run for the hills.

Change should never be attempted until you have a group with you sharing and supporting the vision. If no-one really buys in beforehand, the change will almost inevitably fail.

Change agents don't like this. They get a good idea, tell everyone how great it will be, and want to make the move before their enthusiasm fades or they lose momentum. Bad idea.

You have to take time to build a support group who will work through the change from a range of perspectives and then will stand with you through the ups and downs of the change process. Without this group you really have little chance of successful change.

I'm a slow learner. I have had to learn this lesson at least ten times. "People convinced against their will are of the same opinion still."

Wait for the support group. It doesn't have to be everyone. It won't take forever. Most change fails for lack of a support group.

## **Differing Reactions to Change**

You need to be aware that we all react to change in different ways. Research has shown that some people adapt to innovation far more quickly than others. Here's a brief summary of the groups of people that research has identified and how readily they will change.

1. Innovators (3%) - always the first to try anything new no matter how risky, love novelty.
2. Early adopters (13%) - keen to move on something new when it appears to have some credibility
3. Early majority (34%) - will move readily when others have shown it is possible and desirable
4. Late majority (34%) - slow to move, but will do so when fully convinced
5. Laggards (16%) - very slow to move or change, love the status quo, critical of changes

If we reflect on Jesus' disciples, it is likely that Peter was an innovator. He was always quick to try something new - even getting out of a boat to walk on the water. On the other hand, Thomas was probably a laggard. No matter what people said, he wouldn't believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he could actually see and touch him. He had to be convinced without any doubt.

Our various reactions to change ensure a church's health. Imagine a church or group in which everyone was an innovator. Life would be chaotic. Imagine a group full of late adopters or laggards - nothing new would ever happen. We must learn to appreciate and respect each other.

If you're an innovator, that's great. We need you to push us and excite us. But just remember that you too need the wisdom of others. Be a little patient.

If you're a late adopter, that's fine. We need you too. You stop us doing stupid things. But just be careful that you don't keep standing in the way of healthy change when most others have accepted it.

Of course we're often a mixture of the above, depending on the context. I'm an early adopter when it comes to ministry ideas, but I'm a late adopter with some technology. (I'm not even on Facebook.)

As long as we accept that change is inevitable (we're growing in our relationship with God and he's calling us to be different) and that we need each other (because of our differences), we'll do fine. We're on the move. As Paul says, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." (Phil. 3:12)

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*John Sweetman is the Principal of Malyon College and Director of Malyon Leadership. He lectures in the fields of pastoral ministry, leadership and preaching.*