

Session Nine : resistance to change

It is an easily observable fact that human beings generally like things to be predictable and dislike the effort needed to adapt to change. You often hear it said that someone is not in their “comfort zone” for example. In business circles, reference is often made to the Rogers bell curve (proposed by Everett Rogers, an American communication theorist and sociologist), which indicates that only 13% of the population (called “early adopters”) are ready to take the risk of trying a new product, whereas the majority adopt a “wait-and-see” attitude before committing themselves. And a similar proportion of the population to the early adopters fight a rear-guard battle against the change which is being presented.

The best way to fight resistance to change is to develop **trust**. To do this leaders need to develop a set of skills for the revitalisation process to be successful. Of course, this is a life-long process and we must be learners until the day we die. However the need to have these skills may be the reason why Ed Stetzer quotes some very interesting figures obtained from his research on church revitalisation. In his book *Comeback Churches* (B&H publishing Group, 2007), Stetzer writes :

- “75% of comeback church pastors are over 40 years of age” (page 187)
- “They are more educated than the average pastor: 79% are graduates, in fact 51% have more than a first degree” (page 188)

This would tend to confirm that church revitalisation needs mature leadership but remember these are just tendencies, not universal truths! The important factor, I believe, is trust. The congregation must feel that the leader knows where he is going and is able to express it clearly, and the church members must feel understood.

Here is a short list of skills for leaders to work on -

- ❖ How human beings function
- ❖ How today’s culture functions
- ❖ How your church functions
- ❖ How to lead a church meeting

Firstly, it is important to learn as much as possible about how humans function. We all know that men and women have a great diversity of personalities and characters, which are partly innate and partly acquired. Culture also plays a role in imposing certain norms of behaviour in certain circumstances. The Bible doesn’t just contain doctrine, it gives valuable insights into human nature through the wisdom literature (such as Proverbs) and a wealth of stories both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. However in the first instance we learn about people by being involved with them, sharing life together, observing how they react in different circumstances. That said, a more objective approach can also be useful. An understanding of academic psychology can be helpful, but on a more accessible level, we can learn much about ourselves and others by using diagnostic tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Another way which humans have always used in every culture to understand themselves and the world is through stories. In today’s world that often comes by reading novels, but it is first and foremost conveyed through films and in particular by the extremely popular format of “series”.

Secondly, it is important to understand how your own culture functions. This can sometimes be difficult because you are immersed in it. As the saying goes, we don't know who first discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't a fish! A knowledge of the history of your nation can offer valuable insights, and books written by sociologists about recent changes in society can be extremely informative. In any culture there are common factors which affect everybody, but also a wide variety of sub-cultures. The apostle Paul was very aware of this when he wrote in 1 Corinthians chapter 9, verses 19-23 that "Although I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. (...) To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so as to win those not having the law (...) I do all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some". This is a real effort to build communication and trust. In this case the main preoccupation is evangelism, but the same goes for the variety within the church family: "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables (...) One man considers one day more important than another: another man considers every day alike" (Romans 14.2 and 5). In other words, we also need to understand the culture (and the sub-culture) people live in if we want to understand them and build trust.

Thirdly, it is important to understand how your church functions. What are the decision-making processes in your church? Where, when and how are these decisions made? As a leader, it is vital to use this knowledge to the best effect. As we mentioned in an earlier session, the best way forward from the beginning of the revitalisation process is for the revitalisation team to be approved by the church members as they express this decision (probably through a vote) at a meeting of the church membership. That also will help to build trust. People feel that that revitalisation involves them (it's not a "them-and-us" situation) and the process is being carried out transparently. But you must be aware that the formal decision making process in the church may not be the way in which things are always decided. This needs real discernment. There may be an informal authority which is relational rather than something officially recognised, and it can be used positively or negatively. Some people see themselves as "gate keepers" and find ways to prevent suggestions (or even decisions) about change they dislike from actually happening. Sometimes they have no formal authority (such as being members of the church council), but they try to maintain a quiet influence among members when it comes to voting for change. Or they may be involved in the practical organisation of certain aspects of church life and hang on to their influence in these areas. Leaders need to identify the gate keepers and make sure their influence doesn't override the formal authority and decision-making processes in the church. But informal authority can also be used in healthy ways, increasing trust among the members and with the revitalisation team. Through building positive relationships, you can win people round and accelerate change. However informal authority can be less visible and less accountable, which brings its own dangers, and so it's important to resist the temptation to bend the rules or manipulate people to drive through change.

Fourthly, it is important to acquire the skills necessary to lead a productive church meeting. Again the concept of trust is basic. Church members need to feel reassured that they will be listened to, that they won't be wasting their time talking without reaching an acceptable and applicable decision. In my opinion, leaders should not be afraid to give the lead! In other words they can give information and ideas, bearing in mind that they often have more access to what is being done elsewhere in the Christian world than most of the church members. But at the same time it

is indispensable to listen to the ideas, reactions and even the objections which may be expressed by the church members. If a leader has the humility to accept that other people can contribute positively to the project he is working on, he can sometimes use parts of what they are expressing because of their fears and hesitancy to win over the doubters and even improve his own plans. And even better, the leader can watch out for good opportunities. Whenever during a meeting anyone says anything that goes in the direction the leader wants to go, he can grasp the opportunity to show his approval because the other participants will see that the leader is not alone in having this idea.

Three factors are particularly useful in ensuring the success of meetings.

- Firstly, always keep the big picture present in people's minds. When it comes to revitalisation, this means the diagram of a healthy church. People understand change when they see why it is necessary and where it is leading.
- Secondly, prepare carefully the written report of the meeting ("the minutes"). Ask other people to look at them before communicating them to the church as a whole. Are they clear? Does the main argument hold together coherently? Is there any vocabulary which could hurt or offend someone?
- Thirdly, however many people have their say in a church meeting, ask God to give you the gift of synthesizing ideas, of summarising and of suggesting creative compromises so that you reach some concrete conclusions at the end of each meeting.

Question

How can you acquire more skills in these four areas as you progress as a leader?