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Why Churches Struggle with Change: Jesus' Amazing Approach to Leadership Development

"Hi Franz! How have you been?" I greeted my good friend from the Netherlands.

"Great," replied Franz. "How have you been, Kent? Did you have a good trip from the U.S.?"

Franz and I met at a conference in England.


"How is your church doing?" I asked. His response was all too familiar.

"Oh, it's good. But we struggle so much with change. It seems Christians find change difficult," he shared.

"All people don't like change, Franz," I chuckled. "It's just that of all people, Christians should be open to change. We have experienced the change from death to life, from sin to forgiveness, despair to hope. We should be experts at change. But it doesn't always work that way, does it?"

"No. It sure doesn't. We took our leaders to a conference and they got excited about becoming more effective for the Great Commission...to make disciples." He paused, with a hint of pain on his face. "We...we began to implement change. It went well for awhile. Then we hit a wall. All of a sudden, people...I don't know...I guess you could say...they rebelled. We have division in the church. We are on the edge of a church split."

I listened to Franz for about a half an hour. What happened next was amazing. His face lit up—like an "a-ha" moment. He said, "Oh, I get it. Jesus didn't focus on developing *leaders*."



Kent Hunter says, "Jesus didn't raise leaders. He made disciples who became leaders. If more churches would get this right, it would change so much." Hunter is a Church Consultant radically in love with Jesus and wildly committed to help the local church get it right. He is Founder of Church Doctor Ministries.

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He focused on making *disciples*. Our goal for mission is right, but our strategy is all wrong.”

Franz experienced “breakthrough.” What we covered in that half hour is summarized below. I hope it will help you on the journey to breakthrough as well. Will you read on?

The Common Focus

The human tendency in the church is to leverage change by top-down methods: leaders get ideas and are motivated to implement them. These ideas can be very biblical. They can originate from Scripture study, teaching by the pastor, a book, blog posts, or an exciting conference. Honestly, most of these ideas are good—and should be implemented. Most churches, for the sake of the Kingdom, need to change. We look at issues as roadblocks that, once removed, will allow God to be God. Then the church can effectively change lives, impact communities, and turn the world upside down. When we get out of the way, the Holy Spirit accomplishes amazing and wonderful changes for the earthly and eternal good of everyone.

The issue is not the goal. Most churches embrace the goal of the Great Commission, to make disciples. They also get the Great Commandment to love others, and all that entails. Most even get the inseparable chemistry between the two.

Casting vision for the goals is not complicated either. Vision casting revolves around buzz words and phrases: “make disciples,” “church growth,” “reach the lost,” “effective evangelism,” “becoming missional.” All these phrases—and more—simply repackage the mission Jesus gave to His disciples in Matthew 28:19-20. This was repackaged already, by Jesus Himself, in Acts 1:8, “When the Holy Spirit comes, you will be My witnesses....”

Repackaged yes, but more. In Acts 1:8, Jesus moves beyond the goal to an entirely different issue: strategy. Strategy is where many are challenged. Strategy is always more complicated than the goal. *The goal describes the “what.” The strategy describes the “how.”*

Why is strategy so tough? Because there are many ways to get it done. The goal is non-negotiable. Jesus didn’t just teach it, He did it, all the way to the cross, the resurrection, Pentecost. The strategy? The strategies are many. Some are biblically infused, others are not—and don’t work.

This is what happens in many congregations. Someone gets rebooted—charged up again—about the mission. They share it, if they are smart, with others. If they are very smart, they share it with those who are influencers. In most churches, that means the leaders.

TEN MOVES TOWARD BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP

1. Leaders are called, not elected or recruited.
2. God raises leaders, they are not chosen by people.
3. Leadership is a spiritual gift God gives to some, not all.
4. Leadership is also a role, exercised best in the church among those who have an intimate connection with the head of the church and *therefore* display the wisdom of Christ.
5. Change led by leaders is top down, unbiblical, and impractical: it runs off believers and splits churches.
6. Jesus did not raise up leaders. He developed disciples.
7. Leadership is political. Discipleship is relational.
8. Leadership can become manipulation. Discipleship is about multiplication.
9. Leadership does not birth discipleship. Discipleship gives birth to leadership.
10. Disciples become leaders of influence. They are humble seed planters of spiritual power so great, it changes lives, churches, communities, and nations.

Leadership Confused

Jesus did not focus on leadership. His focus was on discipleship. Discipleship gives birth to leadership, but leadership does not produce discipleship.

Discipleship is all about growing people. It is organic growth—like growing a garden. Think about it, it's not rocket science: Jesus used words like sowing seeds, He demonstrated cultivating people. Paul spoke about watering the plant, Jesus even taught about pruning and production. Some excuse this language as useful only for that agricultural society, not ours. But the *concepts* are universal and enduring. Scripture says we are children of God. Raising God's people to change is organic, like raising children: slow, a long process, gentle, loving, relational, personal, disciplining (pruning), directing.

Consider how many churches initiate change: top down, dictatorial, votes, rules, bylaws, direction from the leaders. Parents who raise children that way often reap a harvest of rebellion. So do churches. You can be a large, "staff led" church and still be nurturing, directing, empowering. It is not *what* is done as an organization, it's *how* you influence others.

In their quest to change from maintenance to mission, churches often focus on a top down, leadership-driven approach. That may be the world's way to launch a program, but it is not the Kingdom approach. Christianity is a movement—the greatest movement in history. The key to outreach is a biblically healthy church—where people operate in a Kingdom culture. The culture includes the values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, and worldviews of the King, Jesus. You can't superimpose those elements on people in the church by a group of well-meaning leaders. Parents can't even superimpose those elements on their kids. So how does it work?

Great Commission Culture—Jesus' Way

Jesus focused on the harvest that is ripe. Right now there are people in your church who are "ripe" for reaching the lost as a priority. In most churches, the majority are not ripe for mission. Sorry to say that, but it is true. So, start with those who are receptive, and nurture them.

Jesus said the way the Kingdom of heaven works is slow—like yeast in bread (Matthew 13:33). It takes most parents about two decades to raise their kids. Are you prepared to nurture the children of God and work on it with perseverance over the long haul?

Here is what happens if leaders try to use top down methods to superimpose Great Commission culture. Some members respond. Many do not. The church becomes divided. Some feel they are "second class Christians" because they are not as enthusiastic as the leaders and some of the "early adopters."

Rather than growing the church, this approach often results in division and, sometimes, a church blowup. For anyone who's experienced it, this is a spiritual train wreck. When a church suffers an ugly split over a Great Commission push by well-meaning leaders, that church is crippled for effective outreach for up to ten years.

Warren Bennis, in his book, *Managing People Is like Herding Cats* says, "Leaders inspire and empower people; they pull, rather than push. This "pull" style attracts and energizes people to enroll in vision and motivates people by bringing them to identify with the task and the goal, rather than by rewarding or punishing them. I mentioned this once in a lecture at AT&T, and a woman in the audience said, 'I have a deaf daughter, so I learned American Sign Language (ASL). This is the sign for manage.' She held out her hands as if she were holding onto the reins of a horse or restraining something. Then she went on, 'this is the ASL sign for lead.' She cradled her arms and rocked them back and forth the way a parent would nurture a child. I was impressed with that."

Source: Warren Bennis, *Managing People Is Like Herding Cats*, page 96.

John Maxwell in his book, *People Power* says, "Seek to be a plow rather than a bulldozer. The plow cultivates the soil, making it a good place for seed to grow. The bulldozer scrapes the earth and pushes every obstacle out of the way."

Source: John C. Maxwell, *People Power*.

When a church splits, it is a terrible witness to the community. Unbelievers completely misunderstand the tensions that result through this poor strategy of top down change. The result? It inoculates the church from reaching non-Christians in the community, the actual goal of the Great Commission in the first place!

The Jesus Model

Jesus did not develop leaders. He multiplied disciples. He spent most of His time with the disciples, modeling and teaching Kingdom culture. How much time do you spend in that kind of relational endeavor?

Jesus invested years with a few people. He didn't "go big," which is the first reaction of most people in modern society...and most churches. Jesus' strategy was with a few over several years. From the human perspective, this approach does not look like the way to change the world. However, Jesus made this claim: His Kingdom (and approach) is not of this world—not like this world. By slowly sharing the Kingdom culture with a dozen ordinary people, Jesus launched the most effective movement in history.

What can we learn from Jesus? (1) Work organically, from the bottom up. (2) Don't rush people. Nudge them gently and lovingly through relational discipling. (3) Growing other Christians to a mission mentality is not a program. It is not a class. It is not a sermon or a series of sermons. It is more like growing children: a long, loving, relational process. You don't want to lose one of your children...not one, not ever. Every person matters to God. Parents who force their children often run them off. Church leaders who superimpose Kingdom values—like mission—do the same to the children of God.

Jesus is the head of His body, the church. Church leaders are not. The disciples became apostles, not by majority vote or elections. They were apostles only after the Holy Spirit encounter at Pentecost. According to the letters in the New Testament, the apostles provided guidance and advice. They were "servants," as Jesus taught (Luke 22:24-27).

This is the most important lesson for leaders: don't push, don't force, don't superimpose mission thinking on people. Just lovingly invite them to come along when *they* are ready, as the Holy Spirit moves in them. Discipling is a long process. It may include a Bible class. Most likely, it will occur through many conversations over coffee—a relational connection. In that relationship, you will share what the Bible has

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to this earth to save all people. Jesus is the ultimate genius who began the greatest movement in the history of the planet. His approach to motivating people was not top down, forced leadership, but the counter-intuitive approach of discipling—which is vastly different than the "kings of the gentiles, who lord it over people" (Luke 22:25), or for that matter, the religious leaders of the Old Covenant, the leaders of the Pharisees. His approach was to gently encourage and empower.

Twenty plus centuries later, behavioral scientists have proven what Christians should have known all along: intrinsic motivation produces more results than bossing people around. Daniel Pink, in his book *Drive* builds on extensive social and psychological research conducted by Edward Deci (*Intrinsic Motivation*, 1975) and Richard Ryan. Pink summarizes, "Human beings have an innate inner drive to be autonomous, self-determined and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and live richer lives."

Under the leadership of Jesus, Christians, by faith, have accomplished amazing efforts that changed the world: hospitals, orphanages, missionary activities, the fall of de-civilized empires, the rise of education, the development of universities—the list is endless. Christians are liberated by faith under Christ who is the head of the community called the church. They experience the Lordship of Jesus not by top-down leadership that pushes them to act, but through servant, bottom-up discipleship that invites them, like Jesus: "Come, follow Me" (Matthew 4:19). This raises a serious question: how could so many churches, so many leaders in congregations get this wrong? So many churches are operated backwards to Kingdom approaches. No wonder so many congregations are ineffective for the Great Commission. And, to make matters worse, when they want to be more "faithful" and "productive" they jump to top-down superimposing methods that split their churches!

Source: Kent Hunter; Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2009, page 71.

meant to you.

Get over the temptation to focus on the masses. You can't mass produce disciples. You can only disciple a few at a time. Jesus disciplined twelve, and lost one. He is the Son of God, and He did it full time. You can't match that.

Focus on launching a missional movement. If ten disciples disciple three people each over the next three years, and, in year four, they begin to disciple three each, and in three years they disciple three more, and you all disciple disciplers—fast forward and do the math. This is the power of exponential multiplication. In twelve years, (less time than raising a child), you are looking at a movement. Even with a 10% “failure” rate, the group of ten has grown to 1,876.

To schedule a phone appointment to discuss this topic further with Kent, call Terry Atz at 1-800-626-8515.

Would you spend twelve years to develop a mission mentality in your church?

KEY RESOURCES

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- Chan, Edmund. *Mentoring Paradigms (Reflections on Mentoring, Leadership, and Discipleship)*. Lifestyle Impact Publishing, 2008.
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