

“Leading Major Change in Your Ministry”
Dr. Jeff Iorg
Book Note ~ Dave Kraft

Every leader must continually be a catalyst for change if he or she wants to keep their organization relevant and successful.

Leadership is “great men and women with certain preferred traits influencing followers to do what the leaders wish in order to achieve group/organizational goals that reflect excellence defined as some kind of higher-level effectiveness.”

“Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.”

If you want to have the kind of influence required to lead major change in your ministry setting, your followers must be convinced you are passionately driven to serve them. While meeting every need is impossible showing concern and caring for someone in need is always possible.

In healthy leadership relationships, the followers are neither submissive nor subversive. They are engaged and willing to follow because they respect and trust their leader. The best leaders are not those who “pull rank,” but those who present a compelling mission and marshal their troops to use their insights, gifts, and talents to get the job done.

Leadership relationships are non-coercive, meaning both leaders and followers have the freedom to express themselves (positively and negatively) and ultimately decide if they will remain in the relationship—either leading or being led. All followers decide—based on multiple factors—if they will engage in a leader/follower relationship. Many leaders have stories of disengaged employees, slacker troops, or disinterested members. Without mutual buy-in, a leadership relationship does not exist, and real change—much less major change—cannot happen.

Only when real change is required is leadership needed. Leadership involves real change, not incremental adjustment. Some people are so entrenched, some organizations so dysfunctional, and some relationships so frayed that anything new—no matter how simple—is fraught with difficulty.

A clearly articulated mission—both the overarching mission of God and the specific mission of a church or organization—is the key to unity between leaders and followers who intend real change.

There are—by biblical limitation of the concept—no self-serving Christian leaders, only self-serving people occupying leadership positions.

A major decision is not about what we are leaving behind, but about the future we are headed toward.

When people passionately devote themselves to mutual purposes, amazing progress is possible because supernatural results occur.

Some leaders, and even more followers, are reluctant to initiate major change. They are unwilling to move forward, preferring present problems to future possibilities. Some justify their spiritual inertia by claiming real spiritual leaders protect people and avoid creating organizational upheaval or personal pain. Leading major change is disruptive and can be messy and difficult for both leaders and followers and can create chaos and inflict pain. Several years ago, a trusted friend told me, “You can’t lead if you can’t inflict pain.” Leaders intend real change—and that is often painful.

Good leaders do not enjoy hurting others, but are responsible to make difficult decisions (in the short run) for the long-term benefit of advancing God's mission and the particular mission of the organization they lead.

When we resist change by ascribing eternal permanence to human-created systems or methods, we are guilty of idolatry. We become idolaters, more committed to preserving religious practices than practicing a living faith in an active God. The pace of change is often as important in determining success as the nature of the change itself. Leaders who initiate major change must remember people respond to change in a variety of ways. Making major change requires new structures. Leaders often announce the change, but fail to create the organizational structures to reinforce it. No new wineskins means no sustainable changes. Trying to force new outcomes from old organizational wineskins would be counterproductive.

Deciding when major change is needed is a weighty responsibility. Decisions about major change require thoughtful, prayerful, courageous leadership.

The key diagnostic questions are:

- Is the change essential to the mission?
- Is there shared urgency about the change?
- Is relational trust high enough to sustain the change?
- Is the timing right for the change?
- Am I willing to see the change to completion?

The first diagnostic question—"Is the change essential to the mission?"

A second issue about the priority of mission in major change is initiating it to make people (leaders and/or followers) more comfortable. Another problem is making changes that actually serve the organization's mission—but without improvement commensurate with the expense and effort it takes to accomplish the changes.

Every church or ministry organization needs a short, one-sentence mission statement (written without commas or conjunctions). The main reason for the seminary's remarkable unity through the entire process was the communal ownership of our clearly articulated mission statement. Healthy organizations lift up God's mission and continually reshape or retool their mission accordingly.

Is relational trust high enough to sustain the change? Leaders must earn their followers' trust before asking them to undertake major change. Leaders gain trust in two primary ways: sacrificial service and demonstrated competence. Leaders earn trust by serving people. When a leader has a history of successfully leading one level of change, they earn the right to be trusted with more significant changes. When leaders demonstrate competence, they earn trust from both current and future followers.

When a leader refuses to delegate tasks or allow others to make final decisions (even on mundane matters), opportunities to demonstrate and build trust are lost.

Clear vision of future possibilities makes it hard to wait for the right time to initiate major change. Right timing, however, is essential in determining the receptivity among followers for making a major change,

- The wrong decision at the wrong time = Disaster
- The wrong decision at the right time = Mistake
- The right decision at the wrong time = Rejection
- The right decision at the right time = Success

The leadership team lost confidence in the leader for what they perceived as cowardice in a critical moment.

The onerous part of major change is not the dreaming or launch phases; it is the completion phase.

Change is the new circumstances introduced into organizational life, i.e., a new staffing plan going into effect on a specific date. Transition, on the other hand, is the emotional, psychological, and spiritual adjustments people go through when change is implemented. The hardest part of leading major change is really leading major transition.

It is pastoral work—shepherding people from where they are to where they need to be. It is about communicating well (and often), helping people discover higher purposes (rather than selfishly focusing on their needs), and patiently motivating them to faithful and faith-filled choices about the future. Leaders misunderstand or overreact to initial opposition. First, some leaders are insecure. Second, some leaders misinterpret opposition from followers because they do not understand major change produces grief.

Change produces a sense of loss. When any major change impacts followers, they feel a sense of loss expressing itself as grief. Followers feel loss—personally and organizationally—when faced with major change. Loss is experienced as grief. These stages or phases of grief are shock, anger, denial, bargaining, exploration, and adjustment.

Providing pastoral care for people experiencing major change is critical. Remember, change is the new set of circumstances, but transition is our response to them. When you talk about these issues, you are not being rebellious, murmuring, gossiping, undermining my leadership, or being disloyal to our mission. You are being a normal Christian grappling with what God is doing with all of us. Real unity means we share a bedrock commitment to our mission. It doesn't mean everyone agrees with every decision being made,

Change always includes some uncertainties as an organization progresses toward a new normal. Faced with these uncertainties, leaders can vacillate between two extremes—overpromising without substantiation or ignoring concerns and communicating nothing. Followers need organizational assurance, not personal platitudes. We wanted people to trust us, not because we told them to, but because our actions were trustworthy. Major change requires carefully formulated, clearly written, formally adopted strategic plans.

The biggest problem was that we went far beyond “strategic direction” to “operational control.” The potency and specificity, not the length, determines the value of strategic documents. Reluctance does not equal opposition. Managing transition requires leaders who can discern the difference between reluctance to accept a major change, reticence to move through transition, and genuine opposition to God's will.

Most of the time, once followers have the right information, they will eventually agree with the conclusions their leaders have recommended. There may, however, be some people who oppose major change despite legitimate efforts to help them embrace it. This may seem harsh, but those followers have to leave the organization. If they are employees, they have to find another place to work. If they are members, they have to find another church with a vision more suited to them.

While some non-supporters can be taken along for the ride, vocal dissenters cannot be allowed to derail major change. For the good of the whole, there are times when a leader has to make the difficult choice of separating someone from their church or ministry when their opposition impedes the organization's mission. Courageous leaders are willing to make those tough decisions and live with the painful consequences.

Collective wisdom about God's activity is always more trustworthy than cult-like autocracy by someone who claims ultimate interpretive insight.

The six axioms for leading major change are:

1. Major change begins with direction from God.
2. Major change requires initiative from a leader.
3. Major change is accomplished by followers.
4. Major change depends on God's intervention.
5. Major change is messy and difficult.
6. Major change brings glory to God.

Major Change Begins with direction from God. God speaks through His Word. Major change should only be made when it will legitimately advance God's mission. God guides through prayer. God Directs by the Holy Spirit

A signal event is a supernatural orchestration of circumstances revealing God's intentions. Signal events pave the way for major change, confirm the timing of major change, and unify people around making major change.

God communicates through people. A leadership group creates more ideas and options about a major change than any one person can produce. A group can also edit out bad ideas. Good ideas can be turned into great ideas as the leadership group sharpens them.

When leading major change, because of the scope and impact of the change, those with ultimate authority must make the final decision. Wise leaders know to whom they are accountable and who has ultimate authority in their church or ministry organization.

Major Change Requires initiative from a leader. Someone must take responsibility to envision, strategize, implement, and complete a major change, or it will not happen. A dream is usually birthed in the mind of an individual who then becomes its passionate advocate. Even when an idea emerges from a group, some leader has to own it personally and commit to it fully before real progress will be made. Real change requires a point person who will pay the price to make it happen.

If you are a member of an organization that needs major change, make sure you have the right leader before attempting those changes. Major change starts with having the right leader; leader before strategy. Character over skills.

Strength of character must be prioritized over skill assessment in selecting Christian leaders.

Teachability—an innate curiosity and capacity to learn new things and adapt—is more important than a fixed set of rigid, already established leadership practices.

When God is ready to lead a major change in a church or ministry organization, his first step is installing the right leader—a person with strong character, adequate skills, and formative experiences preparing them for the task.

Leaders must lead. Leaders lead. They take initiative. They stand up at the appropriate time, give definitive direction, and supervise the job to completion. Taking charge is more about taking responsibility than throwing your weight around. It is stepping forward to make sure difficult issues are addressed, crucial issues are decided, and action plans are implemented to accomplish your organization's mission.

Fear of failure. People who lead major change admit their fears, face them, and stand strong because the mission demands it. Leading major change means stepping forward, often while you feel afraid, and doing what God's mission requires.

There is a fine line between protecting people and pleasing people. When leaders only do what satisfies others in the moment, they become people-pleasers and forego long-term leadership integrity. Mature leaders know they cannot lead if they cannot inflict pain. Dreading conflict can keep leaders from initiating major change.

Personal Cost. Leaders must take risks. Planning manages risk. Trusting God should be part of a strategic plan. Planning increases trust.

Be careful of cajoling people rather than communicating with people.

Christian followers want to be shepherded, not stampeded.

Planning must include the "God Factor"

Plans cannot be the sum total of our intelligence offered to God for his approval and blessing; they must be bigger than we can dream up or accomplish on our own.

Leaders count the true cost—including the full duration of time required to implement a major change—and then commit to seeing it through to the end.

Leaders take the lead. They stand up for what needs to be done even when it costs them personally.

Major change is accomplished by followers. Good leaders galvanize their followers into a cohesive force, resource and support them for the challenges they commit to overcome, and celebrate with them when God uses them to make major change successfully. When people are going through change, they crave (and that is not too strong a word) certain things from their leaders, which make the change more palatable.

We need clear and consistent communication. Many leaders vastly underestimate the effort required to transmit accurate, timely, and helpful information to their followers about major change. People usually need to hear the same information multiple times before it registers with them. The greater the investment you expect from followers, the more information they need about the proposed change.

Resources to Accomplish the Change

- Time
- Tracks

Leaders must lay the track their followers will use to travel to the destination. Leaders do this in several ways. First, leaders lay out workable steps for followers to make measured progress on a major change. Second, leaders create way stations—stopping points to reevaluate, reassess, and reboot for the next phase of the journey.

Some leaders mistakenly think being good at some things makes them good at everything.

Here are three categories of recognition leaders can provide followers

- Verbal praise
- Meaningful gifts
- Sharing the credit

Wise pastors show appreciation and give volunteers the honor they deserve.

Change is the new set of circumstances; transition is how people respond to and work through the change.

Major Change Depends on God's intervention

“Where God guides He provides.”

People will give to fulfill a God-inspired and God-sized vision.

While all struggled with the transition, they did so from a perspective of implementing the change, not opposing it.

For major change to be successful, God must do what only he can do.

Major change is messy and difficult. So it is with major change. The process is messy and difficult, but worth it in the long run.

Learning to diagnose and respond to conflict associated with major change is a significant skill for ministry leaders.

Encouraging healthy conflict. Relational conflict can occur in at least three interpersonal dimensions: struggles with God, debates among decision-makers, and tensions among followers.

When necessary, wise leaders even encourage appropriate conflict to make sure all issues are aired and all aspects of a complicated decision are put on the table.

When we finally reached a unified decision to recommend relocation, it was a solid decision, thoroughly vetted with no stone unturned and no opposition left unspoken.

Robust, honest, forthright debate contributed to the confidence the board had in its final decisions.

Conflict among leaders trying to decide about a major change can be a healthy part of the process when it engenders honest debate.

When any debate becomes personal—more focused on winners and losers than advancing the organization's mission—it becomes detrimental.

Tension resulting from honest questions or personal concerns about a proposed change demands a different response than dissension or opposition.

Tension among followers can be alleviated by three strategies.

- First, provide information
- Second, allow adequate time for followers to process that information
- Third, give your followers permission to dialogue about their concerns

Remember, change is the new set of circumstances but transition is our response to them.

Honest dialogue—including shedding tears and venting frustrations—is essential to working through grief and reaching the “adjustment” phase.

Sometimes, Christian leaders demonize followers who don’t immediately embrace change announced to them.

There are two primary sources of unhealthy conflict,

1. Dissent from insiders. Their conflict is not tension about the transition; it is opposition to the change. If they acquiesce to the decision, they can continue as non-adopters who enjoy the fruit of the change without making much effort to support it. If, on the other hand, they continue to aggressively oppose the adopted change, they have to leave the church or organization. Since major change determines the future of a ministry, no matter how painful it may be, people who threaten accomplishment of the change may have to leave for the long-term well being of the organization.

2. Attack from outsiders. While leaders can acknowledge outside attackers, they should minimize, rather than magnify, their influence.

Wise leaders spend less time decrying conflict as unspiritual or unnecessary and more time developing a principled response for managing it in their ministry setting.

Anticipate Conflict.

Address Conflict Intentionally.

Dealing with conflict requires leaders to go where angels fear to tread.

When it becomes evident unity about a major change is not possible, there are only two options left for disaffected followers: quiet cooperation with the new direction or separation from the organization.

Resolve conflict appropriately. It is untenable for leaders and followers who cannot agree on a major change to remain together.

A second unacceptable option is using conflict as an excuse for dropping out of Christian service.

Most leaders want every conflict to end with everyone happy and satisfied, but that is seldom the case.

Leaders who cannot accept mixed results are doomed to a perpetual sense of frustration with themselves and the people they lead.

Move on. When every reasonable and spiritual effort to resolve conflict has been exhausted, avoid perpetual preoccupation with the past at the expense of missional advance. It's time to move on. What is done in God's name requires the best effort that can be given, the most generous allocation of resources possible, and an intentional commitment to excellence.