

One Man's Secret in a World of Tradition

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The words 'we've never done it that way' echo down the halls of most churches. Like other institutions, churches gravitate away from change. Their pastors may desire to remain culturally relevant and lead these churches toward a new vision. However, these pastors soon determine that tradition is a formidable adversary. Pastor John Powers, on the other hand, holds a different perspective toward the challenge. "It's not as hard as it seems," he states. "You just need to know the secret of change."

Dr. John Powers pastors the First Baptist Church of Norfolk, Virginia, one of the largest churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. He has led many churches through pivotal times of transition. According to Powers, the secret to a smooth transformation is engaging the church influencers as leaders of the change.

In a recent interview with Powers, he elaborated on his secret of mastering change. Powers' four-step process includes determining the influencers, processing change with influencers, encouraging diversity among the influencers, and improving decision quality with influencers. His points are well taken since Powers' thoughts converge with the findings of two leading theorists in strategic leadership, Dr. Sydney Finkelstein and Dr. Donald Hambrick.

Determining the Influencers

"When leading change, an effective pastor focuses on the influencers in the church far more than the governing bodies," explains Powers. "I discover the church influencers by asking church members, 'who do you talk to when you need critical advice? Who do you ask when you need someone to pray for you?'" Several names quickly bubble to the top. "These are your influencers," he adds. Other members of the church value their opinion. They look to these influencers for leadership. The influencers provide stability and direction both in the routine and turbulent times.

Processing Change with the Influencers

Powers supports Finkelstein and Hambrick's premise that decision-making bodies with long tenure often resist change. "The tenure of these leaders can develop strong ties to the past. In fact, these leaders probably created many of the current programs" elaborates Powers. "Pastors must help each leader understand and process the upcoming change. Each leader should be involved in the decision-making process." This creates a dilemma, though, for the pastor. "Pastors do not have the time to process the changes with each individual," he notes. Herein lies the advantage of concentrating on the influencers of the church. "I closely involve the influencers in the change. The influencers then move other leaders through the change process. You delegate influence – give it away to others. In turn, more church members accept the new direction."

Encouraging Diversity among the Influencers

When setting a new direction, wise pastors involve the influencers early in the decision-making process. "You should always seek their input before making strategic decisions." Pastors should build consensus with these individuals before they bring a decision to the governing bodies. Powers further cautions pastors not to ignore influencers who disagree with the pastor. "While diversity may create some tension, it also generates better

decisions.” Finkelstein and Hambrick agree. Capable leaders quickly develop open communication with the influencers. Powers continues, “influencers must feel free to disagree with their pastor. Once a pastor establishes this type of rapport, then influencers offer frank input,” improving and refining decisions. “Effective pastors gain from this diversity,” observes Powers. “They listen to others’ opinions,” even when these opinions are in contrast to their own. “You cannot be afraid of people disagreeing with you. You cannot take it personally,” Powers quickly adds. “Influencers must believe that a pastor desires their input, not just a rubber stamp.”

Improving the Decision Quality with Influencers

Powers, Finkelstein, and Hambrick further agree that members of smaller groups are more involved in strategic decision-making than members of larger groups. Powers declares that “centering the strategic decisions among influencers usually improves the decision quality and ownership.” “In most Southern Baptist churches” Powers notes, “the deacons generally function as the primary governing body.” However, most deacon bodies are large, making ineffective strategic decisions. Ironically, when a small group of influencers form strategic decisions, the pastor may actually engage more people in the process. “Large groups are ineffective and inefficient in making decisions. Members of small groups usually offer more input,” observes Powers. “By placing the influencers at the core of the decision, the pastor improves the decision quality. He also remains connected to other church members because the members listen to these influencers.”

So, just what is the great secret? “Recognizing and using your influencers is the secret” of mastering change, Powers summarizes. Once developed, this leadership skill “adds an effective tool to a leader’s arsenal,” a formidable weapon against tradition. When employed, it neutralizes the words “we’ve never done it that way in our church.”