

A Survivor's Guide to Church Change

[Leadership Advance Online](#)

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Have you ever tried to turn an ocean liner around in the middle of a river? Or tried to put Humpty Dumpty together again? All the king's horses and all the king's men could not prevail. That's the attitude many people have toward organizational change. "It's impossible. It can't be done," they say. But fundamental change is possible even amidst a world of tradition such as in a church. If anything, the challenge is greater within a church, lest the traditions become proverbial sacred cows.

So, how does a church transform itself from a traditional to a contemporary-style church?

Researchers believe that creating a readiness for change helps to preempt the probability of resistance, thereby making a change more successful. The primary tool used to create readiness is communication, the "message for change." This includes two elements, the change agent—in this case, the pastor, and the affirming message. The pastor must build the case for needed change by communicating the differences between the churches' current state and the desired state. Then, the pastor must affirm the members' ability to change.

To accomplish this, the pastor uses persuasive communication, engages members in learning activities, and manages external information to support the message. Obviously the credibility, integrity, trustworthiness, and expertise of the pastor are essential. Moreover, the leader must assess the readiness of the group and the urgency of the situation to know which of these influential strategies to employ.

Finally, creating readiness for change is not a once-and-for-all process. Fundamental change takes time. Therefore, the pastor must continue to communicate with and influence members so that they are ready for change throughout the process.

In the late '80s, Calvary Church of Souderton was a traditional, forty-year old evangelical church in the greater Philadelphia region. Sunday morning attendance wavered around four hundred and was falling. One year after the senior pastor resigned, Meredith Wheeler, the thirty-something youth pastor, was appointed to take his place. At that point, everyone knew that things were going to change.

Wheeler determined that the church needed to change quickly, yet its people were not ready to accept the challenge. This low readiness/high urgency scenario was a crisis, according to situation change experts. Young families were not joining the church, and its population was rapidly graying. At that time there was no local church that provided a message of unchanging truth and biblical values in a style that was easily understandable and attractive to the unchurched community. However, the congregation was content with its traditional forms of worship and was not at all ready to change.

Beginning with the elders and then the church as a whole, Wheeler, needed to convince the church that they could be the church that reached the baby boomers within their community. To do this, Wheeler followed the prescription for a crisis situation by using rich personal persuasive communication built on the leader's positive

attributes. Through face-to-face meetings, sermons, and casual conversations, Wheeler persuaded the congregation to believe that they ought to be and could be the church where people mattered to God so much that the congregation would leave their comfort zones of tradition for the sake of loving people to Jesus. His strategy of using the elements necessary to create readiness for change amongst his congregation worked!

The organizational culture of the church has changed dramatically in the last ten years, slowly at first and then with increasing rapidity. Changes did not come without resistance, but the preparation helped to minimize this and improve the problems. The church leadership used all of the tools in their arsenal to maintain the congregation's readiness for change. Persuasive communication continues in the pulpit and the meeting rooms. External sources of information confirming the need for change are used to bolster the message. Members and leaders alike have actively participated in their own learning activities like community surveys. And the rock-solid integrity and evangelistic heart of Wheeler continue to inspire and motivate a church now numbering 1300.

An often-overlooked cause for failure in organizational change is a failure to create readiness for change. Building on a leader's own credibility, he designs a message fitting the readiness and urgency of the situation that persuasively explains why the organization should change and convinces people that they can change. Maybe you can't make a silk purse out of a (sacred) cow's ear, but you can fundamentally change a church and live to tell about it.