

*Understanding Change as Loss:*  
Motivation as Helping People Move On from the Past

Introduction

It is common to hear people in traditional churches say that “nothing ever changes... people don’t want to do new things...” and so on. Then, when a change is proposed, some people can respond out of feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and anger. The expression of these strong feelings, combined with our general fear of conflict, can slow down and even derail a concerted, thoughtful and well managed process for change. Because this is so common, we need to understand where these feelings come from.

There is always something meaningful about "how things are" and about “how we do things”. Who we believe we are, what we give priority to, how we view our faith and our world, what we choose to do, what has been bred into the habits of our congregation... all contribute to our congregation’s sense of identity. Suggestions of change can be interpreted as criticisms, put downs and dismissals of the congregation’s sense of identity. Everything a congregation does it does because at some level they find it "meaning-full". As a consequence, proposed changes can foster a sense of grief and loss in a church. Secondly, "the way we do things" is also a point of security. This alone has become a vital reality in so many congregations. People can experience a great sense of insecurity in a rapidly changing world. This leads many people to want some safe havens in their lives that will be change free. For them church is a secure harbour in an insecure world. Proposing change in a congregation, then, can foster anxiety. As a consequence of these two realities, change is often not made lightly. In this setting, change can be felt as a loss, with its associated grief.

Business consultant William Bridges has made an invaluable contribution to the literature of organizational change with his emphasis on "transitions". His basic premise is that change is difficult, not because people don’t want to do the new thing, but rather because people find it hard to give up the old ways. His great suggestion is that if we consider change as loss for people, and help them to acknowledge and deal with their feelings of loss, then change can happen more easily.

**Checklist For Making Transitions:**

When it comes to helping people leave the old ways behind, Bridges makes the following suggestions:

1] Understand who is losing what:

Understand, in great detail, what exactly is all going to change. Look for any cascade effects: what secondary changes may occur as a consequence of the planned changes? Next consider, who is going to be affected (and how will they be affected) by the above? Think about the church as a whole, groups and individuals.

## 2] Recognize that loss is a subjective experience

You need to care about the feelings of people, even if the feelings seem "irrational". What may seem remarkably sensible to you as a leader may feel wrong to others. This is because the experience of loss is unique to each of us. Don't be surprised if there are overreactions. For some the feeling of loss may be greater than for others. Some people may be reacting to previous experiences with change and taking it out on this situation. Or, someone may think (and fear) that this is the first of a series of bigger changes yet to come. It may be the feeling that this is the "thin edge of the wedge" that is prompting the reaction and not this initiative specifically. Overreactions are never really that. They point us to look at the losses behind this loss.

## 3] Acknowledge the Losses Openly and Empathetically:

Express simply and directly what is actually being lost (honesty is needed) as well as your concern for those who are experiencing the loss (compassion is needed). By acknowledging people's feelings of loss in a time of change you are acknowledging that these people are important. It helps to be an expression of care. If we don't do this we can find ourselves drifting into the "bait and switch" approach to change. In the "bait and switch" leaders fear people's strong feelings and strong reactions to the new changes. So, to soften the blow, some leaders try to minimize what is really going to happen. However, when people begin to appreciate what's really up, they tend to react even more strongly. They feel like they were duped. "Honesty is the best policy" from the very beginning. Expect strong feelings and respond honestly and empathetically.

## 4] Expect and Accept Signs of Grieving:

Some of the classic reactions to loss are denial, anger, bargaining, anxiety, sadness, disorientation, and depression. Anticipate these and respond pastorally to them.

## 5] Compensate for losses:

Ask yourself, "What might we give back to balance what has been taken away? Is it status, role, team membership, recognition, memento's, a time for that worship practice...?" If it is appropriate to compensate for losses in your situation, it can help bring a sense of balance for people ("I lose this, but I gain that").

## 6] Give people information again and again:

People have to be helped to appreciate what is being lost. This makes communication very important. Calculate how much communication you think is necessary, then multiply that by a factor of three. Avoid half-truths and incomplete answers, for they will only lead to decline in trust in the end. In the end a solid communication program on the changes will help people deal with [7] next.

7] Define what's over and what isn't:

This helps people focus on doing just the new thing. It helps reduce worry and anxiety by limiting what they worry about. If you aren't clear on what is changing and what is not, people will make their own decision on what to do and what to keep, and that will create chaos. There is also a flip side to this: if you aren't clear on what is changing and what is not, people may toss everything about the past out, including what you need to keep.

8] Mark the endings:

Liturgize or dramatise the endings. Help people formally come to closure on the past. Depending on the situation, it might help to formally make a historical record of the past practice so people know that it is still valued even if no longer done.

9] Always treat the past with respect.

If you don't treat the past with respect, then people can interpret this as your not respecting them.

10] Give people an opportunity to take a piece of the past with them.

The past is never, ever gone – it is retained in our memory and our history. The question is then, how will the past be remembered and honoured? An example: the Presbytery decides to close a struggling congregation and amalgamate them into a neighbouring church. The Communion Table and Baptismal Font from the closed congregation could be used in the new church. This helps the people from the closed church to feel that a part of their past is here with them.

11] Help people appreciate that the ending helps the continuity of the bigger picture:

For example, a church may not want to make changes needed for numeric growth. However, steady decline puts many, fundamental things about the congregation at risk..... things valued by the members. If people can appreciate that the small losses that come with change can help preserve things of great substance that people also value, people can be more inclined to let go.

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**Bibliography:**

"Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change" by William Bridges. Addison Wesley Publishers, 1991.