

An Introduction to Organizational Defensive Routines

Part One: Introduction

Let's begin with a personal case study that you create for yourself here:

1] Think of a problem:

- choose a persistent problem in the church you are involved with
- choose a problem that seems to resist change
- consider briefly the nature of the problem as you see it

2] Imagine someone at the church you could talk to about this:

- someone in a position that could do something about it
- someone who might not be entirely sympathetic to your concerns

3] Now, this is the crucial bit: In talking to this person, what feelings or ideas would you NOT communicate in your conversation with this person?

A few examples:

- The organist is a great musician, but he is turning off choir members with his behaviour. His lack of people skills is killing the choir.
- A committee has stalled, and is not effective in managing / fulfilling their tasks.
- Someone who is known to be "an important financial contributor" appears to be power hungry in the church.

Overall, this little exercise names:

- a problem which is real for you
- identifies someone with whom you can talk to help resolve it
- conceives an initial strategy for dealing with the problem

YET.... did you have something you were not willing to communicate to this person?

Some typical reasons why you didn't communicate your thoughts:

What it represents:

- "nothing will change anyways"

Malaise

- "I can deal with this problem without dealing with this person"

By-Pass

- "The minister won't like this! He will get angry"

This could be a double bind:

- "nothing will change unless I talk to our minister" BUT "if I talk to our minister he will explode". You feel stuck in this tension.

Embarrassment

- "People will want me to get off this committee if I'm honest"
- "I'm responsible for this situation, and I don't want to admit that"

In your scenario, if you chose not to talk to this person directly and honestly about your problem, you have just engaged in self-censoring behaviour. This is a very common practice, isn't it... not saying what is actually on our mind.

Here's an example of self-censoring behaviour. You walk into your boss' office, and pitch him on your new proposal. The boss replies by saying:

- "Thanks for your feedback" (he doesn't say what he really thinks: "it won't work!")
- "That was interesting" (he doesn't say what he's really feeling: "how boring!")
- "I'll have to give it more thought" (what he might really be thinking is "I'll have forgotten it by the time you've left my office")

But when you leave the office, what you were told leads you to believe that your boss liked the idea and will give it serious consideration. The boss said these things to spare your feelings, but in the process set up some false expectations. In the long run – when the boss doesn't act on your suggestions – you will feel more hurt and angry than if he dealt with the issue up front in the first place.

Take a real life church example: you have a person who keenly volunteers every year to teach the grade 7 Sunday school class, but the kids hate her. Every year the grade 7 class declines throughout the year and the kids (at this critical age for church involvement) never seem to come back after that. The leaders know this is a problem, but they don't want to deal with what will probably be a highly emotional issue if they face it. Instead they are willing to sacrifice class after class of grade 7 kids instead. But, when you think about it, what really needs to be done??? What is important here? Why do we self-censor ourselves in discussion? We do not want to find ourselves or put others in positions which may be either threatening or embarrassing.

Here is a personal story from my own life of self-censoring behaviour in action:

I was a ship navigator on a 30 year old, wooden-hulled training ship in the Navy. One day we were out in very rough weather and the ship was taking a real pounding. For the first time ever I was worried about our ship getting damaged. Plus, the weather was such that there was no training value in being out – the students couldn't do their exercises. I was really responsible for telling the Captain my assessment, but I couldn't. I "knew" that the Captain would call me a wimp if I suggested such a thing. Sailors were supposed to have "hearts of oak".

I "knew" that the Captain's estimation of me would drop considerably if I expressed my concerns (OK.... Let's be honest... if I expressed my fears!). So, to keep myself from an embarrassing situation, I said nothing. Fortunately (for me), a full sized freezer broke loose on one of the other ships and started skidding back and forth across the deck, pounding ship's hull with some force. It became a live battering ram. After this we were all ordered back to port because "the weather is too rough for the ships and there is no training value to being out here".

I made an assumption about what the Captain would think, and this assumption led me to inaction. It was more important to me to keep myself out of an embarrassing or threatening situation rather than do the right thing. This kind of behaviour is actually anti-learning. If I had shared my thoughts I would have: (1) done the right thing (respond to the problem, not my feelings about the consequences), (2) learned what the Captain really thought, (3) built our sense of team by being more honest.

This kind of behaviour is "normal and predictable"

- 1] We hesitate to put others or ourselves in situations that are either threatening or embarrassing. The trouble is: change situations are usually embarrassing and threatening!!!
- 2] It is not the situation we want to avoid, but OUR FEELINGS IN THE SITUATION.
- 3] In dealing with our situation, we want to get away from those feelings.
- 4] Two options for dealing with the feelings, then:
 - A] Deal with the situation directly, but this means you have to go through the tension and anxiety.
 - B] Avoid the situation, which means you avoid those feelings but never actually deal with the actual problem. .Which is the healthiest? Which is the hardest?
- 5] By not dealing substantially with the issue at hand, we are not learning. Correcting errors, improving perspectives, making better decisions and fostering change requires looking honestly at our problems.
- 6] Fundamentally, it is about our inability to be honest with each other.

This is the core emotional tension of Organizational Defensives.

Part Two: Defining Organizational Defences

Definition:

Generally in our society we relate to each other through a set of social virtues which seek to "save face". We do not want to put others or ourselves into positions that could be threatening or embarrassing. People tend to assume that dealing with the issue at hand will mean wading into difficulty, yet they still need to deal with the threat of these feelings. Therefore people tend to act in ways which will push away the feelings indirectly. When this happens in the behaviour of groups these actions are called "organizational defensives". They are habitual behaviours for dealing with emotional tensions in an organization. In the end the tensions are avoided but the issue is not dealt with.

This creates some inherent problems. In reality, most problems and change issues are, by their nature, threatening and embarrassing. By using defensive routines people disable their ability to identify, name and correct actions / behaviour / structures / beliefs / assumptions which are working against the best interests of the church. Since the goal is to dispel feelings of tension by dealing indirectly with the issue at hand, the routines can result in unexpected consequences that can add to the original trouble. As people see these routines engaged in time and again, it can lead to mediocrity and malaise in a church.

I asked a group of ministers at a workshop I presented on this topic: "What are the topics we tend to avoid dealing with?". Here are some of their answers:

- anything that can be interpreted as "conflict"
- meaningful relationships
- we want to avoid "bruised egos"
- anything that might imply "failure"
- theological differences
- congregational decline
- anything to do with change and the future
- calling members to responsibility and clergy to be accountable for competency
- the state of our eldership
- the decline in connectionalism in the church
- sharing of power.

This behaviour can be so simple and personal. A woman loaned out a book to a friend, but the friend receiving the book never returned it. The book owner wanted it back, but couldn't bring herself to ask for it. Why? She did not want the borrower to feel embarrassed. So instead, she invited the book borrower to a meeting! The woman hoped that the book borrower would think, "Well, since I'm going to see my friend at this meeting, I'll take the book along with me and return

it". Rather than deal with the problem directly, the book owner planned a "by-pass" in the hopes that the by-pass would achieve indirectly what she wanted to happen. The day of the meeting came, the woman who borrowed the book attended, and she changed the dynamics of the group substantially. The meeting went poorly. The by-pass had unexpected consequences (how the meeting went) and the goal (the return of the book) was not achieved.

Organizational Defences, then, impede change. As we tend to give priority to avoiding the stress of the feelings of threat and embarrassment, we seek to push the threat away without dealing with the root cause of the threat – the needed change.

Part Three: Routines for Organizational Defence

There are certain common habits that we (individuals and groups) tend to use. These are called Organizational Defensive Routines. They can be unique to us as individuals, they can be common to a group such as a church. We may use a number of routines: separately, sequentially or in tandem. We may have a few preferred ones that we tend to rely on. Here are a few that we might draw upon to help us not even go to that place of anxiety in the first place

A] Avoidance Mechanisms:

- change creates stress,
- people do not like the feeling of stress,
- people do what they can to get rid of the feeling,
- there can thus be a tendency to avoid going to the place that will cause the stress.

Examples of Avoidance Mechanisms:

1] Rejection:

- EG. "We can't do that, the Book of Forms won't allow it".
- To cut short a discussion on a change, people can raise up a roadblock such as this to stop discussion on the topic before it even begins.

2] Procrastination:

- EG. "Let's table that decision"
- For example, church committees can leave a task on its agenda month by month but never actually get to it.

3] "Paralysis by Analysis":

- EG. "We need another study on that before we change how we do things".
- This reflects a lack of implementation and follow-up, probably pointing to a lack of commitment to implement necessary changes.
- For example, successive committees of the General Assembly have highlighted the same needs for change in our denomination. Yet we tend to restudy the issues rather than deal with them. Studies can give the impression of movement, but in reality they can be used to impede movement.

4] Indecision: "death in the drawer"

- EG. A church goes through a long process of creating a Mission Statement as the first stage in implementing new changes in the congregation. Everyone is pleased with the statement and has a great sense of accomplishment. Then the church does nothing with it. The statement is never used to direct or motivate actual change in the congregation. The exercise, then, gave them a sense of accomplishment and the "death in the drawer" meant that they never really had to do anything by way of change.

5] Strategic Ineffectiveness:

- "The more we promote involvement the more it declines". These tend to be spiral effects, or self-defeating behaviours.
- For example: a church is having trouble meeting budget. The Board decides to hold fundraisers to make up the difference. These take a lot of effort, people grumble through them, but in the end not enough money was raised to meet the shortfall. Yet the Board, year after year, continues to suggest the same solution. Why? It is more palatable to continue to work simple, ineffective solutions than deal with the actual problem: stewardship, commitment, decline in membership, the cost of having a full time minister, etc.
- Business author Peter Senge calls these "fixes that fail" -- it is safer to use an ineffective fix over and over again even though it fails because it will allow us to think "we're doing something" while also allowing us to avoid dealing with the real issues.

6] Sabotage: "What the minister doesn't know won't hurt him".

- eg. A committee member refuses to follow through exactly on a change, thus disabling the change. Poor implementation of a plan, by concerted effort, can do a lot to damage outcomes and prompt people to desire to go back "to the way things were".

7] Regression / Reductionism: "If the minister only preached the Bible this church would grow like a wildfire!"

- simplistic solutions can be easy to grasp, and be appealing emotionally, but in complex systems they tend to frustrate things more than fix them. Simple solutions can be a means to hold up an answer and, at the same time, avoid talking about the real answers.

8] Mixed Messages:

- these tend to be ways to tell organizational lies for the sake of being gentle.
- Examples:
 - "We'll think about it" ("but, really, I'll forget it")
 - "I appreciate your feedback" ("that will give the person a warm fuzzy, but I won't use the idea")
- we use them to soften an anxious moment, but by using mixed messages we can end up shooting ourselves in the foot. The problem is the ambiguity, since it leaves the statement open to interpretation.

9] Dealing with Distractions

- this is best summarized in the image of "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic". It is a form of procrastination.
- It is focusing on the minor issues with such concentration that people have a sense of satisfaction that they are working hard. At the same time, they are avoiding what really matters.
- While many people and groups use these mechanisms for many different reasons, all of them are popularly used to impede change.

Not all situations are avoidable. Therefore we can draw on another collection of defensive routines to help us with the anxiety that comes from dealing with the situation.

B] Superficial Analysis

By staying with the symptomatic we can avoid the root issues. We may not want to go where the real problem is, so talk is left on the surface.

A common example: a man has been slowly going deaf, but for years he would not acknowledge it. His answer for a long time was "people do not speak clearly enough". This form of denial in this simple analysis meant he didn't really have to confront the real problem. In his analysis the problem belonged to other people. In fact, people compensated for him, thus he managed with his hearing loss for quite some time.

In church life a version of Superficial Analysis frequently used is called "blame the victim". For example, most churches on a regular basis try to answer the question "why aren't the young people coming out to church?" The answers, frequently, put all the burden and responsibility on the

young people themselves (their lack of interest or commitment, their turning away from their upbringing, their secular ways, their priorities, etc). One tends not to hear assessments by the church of its life and what it has done to prompt younger people to stay away. Have you ever noticed how we tend to judge others by their actions but judge ourselves by our intentions? It is safer to put the responsibility all out there and more comfortable to avoid the stress of reflection and change for us. But when this kind of Superficial Analysis happens, the real change a church needs to make and can control will not happen.

C] We work with Untested Assumptions

We can blind-side ourselves in real situations by making assumptions about reality rather than try to appreciate reality. Yet it can be far more comfortable staying with our assumptions since that means we don't have to deal with the fallout for us of questioning and changing our assumptions.

For example, most congregations would say that evangelism is an aspect of our Christian mission. An idea, which had a great deal of currency for a time, was called "Church as Evangelist". The idea was that the best witness is the church in action, so we should be a good, welcoming church that is totally user friendly for the non-Christian. Then, when they come, they will discover what the faith is by watching us. It sounds great until you unpack the Untested Assumptions:

- that non-Christians will seek out churches.
- that they will be willing to take all the risk to cross into our space and life and ritual (which they don't understand) into that place where we feel most comfortable and they feel most alienated.
- it assumes that what is there in the church now – meeting the needs of the faithful – will (of course!) meet the needs of every seeker who strikes up the courage to visit.

In reality, many non-Christians are touched by seeing a vital, living faith in a Christian, lived out in a way that demonstrates that God does make a positive and meaningful difference in the life of this Christian. Christians living faith out in the secular world with integrity impress them. The burden, then, is totally on the Christian to go to where these people are most comfortable, and demonstrate vital faith in terms which are understandable, honest and attractive to the non-Christian. But this puts a huge demand on us as Christians to change and grow to become meaningful witnesses for Christ. In light of this, it is safer for the Christian to live with the untested assumptions about what is needed for faith sharing, since it is less embarrassing ("I'm not capable to do this!") and

less threatening ("I can't make these huge changes!") and less demanding for us.

D] "By-Pass and Cover-Up"

This is, unfortunately, very common... even in churches. For example: A presbytery had been involved with a congregation in a very difficult situation that did not go well. In the Presbytery people held very different opinions on what had happened and emotions were running very high. However, a "truce" was unofficially declared, and the topic was dropped. Everyone seemed to silently agree that these events were "non-discussibles". The executive of the Presbytery felt that the Presbytery owed an apology to the congregation for how it was treated. The letter was written, saying, "the Presbytery apologizes..." and was signed by the Presbytery Clerk as its clerk. The executive took this dramatic action on behalf of – but without the permission of – the Presbytery, and then kept that action secret. Wanting to act, but not wanting to risk more conflict, the executive by-passed the Presbytery process and then covered up their actions. As you might guess, a few people found out about this after the fact, and the executive found itself in an embarrassing and heated situation.

This Presbytery had an experience that went badly. What was needed was a discussion – a debriefing – of its actions. Actually talking about a letter of apology would have provided the focus for the Presbytery to work through the history of the events, learn from them, and move on to not repeat them. It would be a growing point. Instead, rather than do what would be most helpful in the long term, people reacted to the threats of the emotional situation in the short term.

E] "Fancy Footwork"

This is about being inconsistent in what one does in the life of a church, playing loosely with rules and practices in some situations and then being firm and difficult in others. Challenges prompting change can be stymied by taking a different approach to "how we do things".

For example, a majority of members of the Board of Managers are not happy with the recent decision by Session to add contemporary music to the worship service. The Session asks the Board if they can find money to purchase a drum set for the sanctuary. The Board has some trust funds available, which have been used for such purchases in the past for items not planned for in the congregational budget. The Trust Fund has some written guidelines that provide a modest degree of control on what the monies can be used for and how much can be spent in any one year. The Board has a history of not being consistent in how they apply these

guidelines. When the Board has been excited by the proposed purchases they have been known to bend the guidelines quite liberally to ensure the purchase was made. However, the proposed drum set purchase has the majority of the members concerned. In this case the guidelines are interpreted so conservatively that they were able to deny the request.

F] Not debriefing a group's actions

This is probably the most common defensive routine in any organization. One of the greatest learning points for improving a congregation's life is to spend time after some change or activity reviewing how things went with the goal of learning from experience for the sake of future action. However, such reviews always present the potential of naming problems, hang-ups and errors.... things which may point back to people. Debriefs like this can be perceived as threatening and possibly be embarrassing. The consequence can be that a mistake can be repeated time and again because people are more concerned about potentially hurting people. For example, I ran an 8-week program on spiritual gifts. At the end people thanked me for the course. But, before they could go, I passed out an evaluation form on the program. I learned that people liked it, but everyone thought it was too long. Simply by having people review the course I was able to improve it for those who would take it the next time.

An Example of the Routines Used in Combination – A True Story

A Presbytery Executive was discussing the upcoming business before the court. One item was a congregation that had decided to no longer pay its Presbytery Assessment. The members of the executive dealt with the matter through "superficial analysis". The response to the situation was simply: "They can't do this. We will send two from this committee to talk to the Session". For them the issue was settled. One executive member raised a question, however, "But why did they choose to do this? What is the underlying issue which prompted this response?". The executive did not want to do anything more than superficial analysis. The one minister pursued the issue further, suggesting that the congregation in question lacked a sense of connectedness to the Presbytery and the wider Presbyterian Church.

The next item of business had to do with presbytery membership. A congregation was asked to name a Parity Elder. This meant that two of the elders from that Session would attend the Presbytery. Word came back that this Session barely managed to guilt one elder into attending Presbytery. They could not provide a second representative. The executive again responded with superficial analysis, quickly naming a solution, "We'll just ask another congregation to send an extra elder then".

That one minister noted the similarity in these two items of business. This one too was about congregations not feeling a sense of connectedness to the church beyond the life of the congregation. She raised this again – this time managing to prompt a real discussion about the issue. The members of the committee agreed that this was "a sad state" and then went to proceed on to the next point of business. This is "death in the drawer".

This one minister would not let it go so quietly and pushed them to agree to make some response. The committee agreed that this was a concern of the Congregational Life Committee of Presbytery. With that statement they again pressed to move on to the next item of business. However, no representative of the Congregational Life Committee was present, and no plans were made to encourage that committee to pursue this matter. This is called "strategic ineffectiveness": taking actions that will not change anything. Undaunted she pressed the Executive to minute the concern, table it, and raise it at their next meeting to ensure that the responsible committee would be asked to take up this issue. As I understand it the whole committee sat in dead silence for 30 seconds until one executive members finally said, "Fine".

What transpired? The two ministers went out to visit the dissenting congregation and was told in no uncertain terms by the Session that they knew the rules, they fully appreciated what their decision meant and that they would not be changing their mind. There were other expenses in their congregation's life which, frankly, had a greater priority than Presbytery. The Session's clarity, forthrightness, determination and courtesy surprised the visitors. When this was reported to the Executive the members of the committee quietly expressed their outrage, but then simply let the issue drop. This was "death in the drawer" since the committee ended up being indecisive about their response.

As for passing on the concern for the decline in connectionalism among the churches, this was not even mentioned at the meeting and never passed on to the Congregational Life Committee. This could be labeled as "fancy footwork" as they were playing fast and loose with their own procedures.

Why did this happen? The executive really did not want to face the issue of growing congregationalism. By acknowledging it as very real they would be forced to take a further step by way of response. They simply did not want to go there, and so the committee utilized a variety of defensive routines to shut down the issue.

How Can We Deal with Organizational Defensive Routines:

I hope by now you have recalled your own examples of these routines in the life of your own church. While any of these can be used at any time, groups such as a church or a committee typically have a couple of routines which they habitually use. The following suggestions can help you overcome these routines and get beyond them to the business that needs to be done in your church.

1] Develop an ability to observe your organization's behaviour even while you are engaged in it.

As Ronald Heifetz puts it: "be able to leave the dance floor and get up on the balcony to observe the dance". Our tendency is to be caught up in the business at hand. What is needed is the conscious effort to step back mentally from what is going on so you can ask yourself, "What is going on here? Why is this decision being avoided? How is it being shut down?"

2] Learn the basic defensive routines

This is like learning to spot and identify birds. Once you learn the basics, and then spend some time routine-watching, it becomes easier and easier to know what you are looking at.

3] Learn what routines your organization relies on:

There are two advantages to doing this. First, when you see one of your congregation's habitual routines being put in play, you can use that as a prompt to ask yourself, "What are we trying to avoid right now? What is below the surface that people right now are finding threatening?" Secondly, by recognizing the routine being used, you can know how to disarm it and allow the people to move deeper into the issue at hand.

4] Conversely, learn the "sensitive topics" that people dance around

When those topics surface, the routines are engaged. By knowing what people in your church want to avoid, you can be more prepared to look for the routines when one of those topics is raised. By being sensitive to look for the routines, you will have a greater chance of spotting them and disabling them.

5] Deal with the routines when you see them:

work avoidance:

- recognize that these stop action before you go to where it is threatening or embarrassing.
- Response: don't let it stop you

- a learning point for the group: help people reflect on this question, "Why do we want to stop talking about this issue right now? What is sensitive about this topic?"

superficial analysis:

- Peter Senge calls the fix here: commit to the question "WHY?" When people come up with a simple answer for the issue, ask of the answer, "Why?". Simply do this again and again of the simple answers until people are pushed to think more deeply about the issue.
- Superficial analysis tends to move people to come up with a single, general, blah answer to the issue. In analysis, require that three reasons (or five, or whatever you choose) be found for any problem. This builds into your analysis the assumption that the reasons behind any problem are numerous and complex.

By-passes:

- By-passes only work with cover-ups, therefore exposing the by-pass robs them of their power.

Failing to debrief activities:

- implement debriefs (what is sometimes called "post-mortems") as a standard practice in the life of your congregation, with the goal of learning from experience.

Fancy footwork:

- like by-passes, exposure works best

Parting Thought:

You can have one basic attitude that can prompt you into action:

Live with the assumption: "I am a part of the system in this congregation, and thus I am a part of all defensive routines being used in our church". This kind of systems assumption helps us appreciate that "when I change my behaviour the system of this church changes".

Make yourself responsible for what is happening in the system of your church. Commit to what Peter Senge calls "creative deviance": acting outside the normal behaviour of your church in a way that highlights the bad behaviour of your church.

For Further Reading:

Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning by Chris Argyris. Prentice Hall, 1990.

The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of Learning Organizations by Peter Senge. Doubleday, 1990.

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