

Effective Leaders = Effective Transitions

Human beings are a dominant species because of our ability to adapt. But even humans dislike change. Change hurts. It requires surrender, loss, acceptance and accommodation. Groups of humans are just as uncomfortable with change as are individuals - including parishes. The Diocese of Buffalo has recently undergone what might be the largest structural change in the history of the American Church. What have we learned about change? Parishes thrive, and not just survive, in changing times by following two rules. Rule #1: Change takes time. Rule #2: First learn rule #1. But the most essential ingredient for successful parish change is skillful leadership.

Good leaders are proactive. They manage change by making conscious choices to diffuse resistance and warm the atmosphere. Successful leaders are adept at reducing anxiety. Leaders know that anxious people do not think clearly. Anxious people behave irrationally and are protective in their choices. Imagine your own feelings and thoughts if you were to arrive at church to find that a stranger was sitting in "your pew". We all want the courtesy of being informed about a change before it occurs. How can you reduce resistance by easing people's anxiety before change occurs?

When leaders anticipate change, they communicate as much as possible, as often as possible. This can be done through a website, newsletter, a blog, Facebook or Twitter. Parishioners relax when they hear about what is going to happen from their leader first. They are calmed to find out why a change has occurred, when it will happen and how more information will be made available. Consider your own parish. What methods of communication are most effective with your congregation?

Effective leaders practice self-care. When a parish is assigned a new pastor, who undergoes the greatest amount of stress? The new pastor! He is changing his home, his job, his social support system and sometimes considerably more. Other leaders in the parish are next most likely to experience stress because they experience the change for themselves while they are caring for other anxious parishioners at the same time. Change requires more energy and it means more work. Leaders need to be disciplined about getting rest and support with how to deal with difficult people. How can leaders attend to their own needs?

Effective leaders are collaborators in changing times. This helps leaders avoid falling into the superman[or woman] trap. Leaders know that one of the best ways to stay in control is by being the first to share control. Accepting change is hardest when decisions are made by others that affect us. When we are out of control we feel intense anxiety. The more choices that leaders offer to people, the more in control and comfortable, people feel. This enhances respect for the leader. How can we extend choices and control to those who feel least in control in changing times?

Leaders view the parish like a family. In one sense, a parish is a community of families. When parishes are linked or blended, it is not unlike the blending of families. Many of the same issues arise that parents and siblings face in a blended or step family situation - loyalty conflicts, unrealistic expectations, etc. Step children have less emotional attachment and less influence than biological children with the parent. A parent is often more understanding with a biological child than with a step child. The same thing happens with a pastor who had more of a relationship with one parish than another after the merger or linking takes place.

In such situations the pastor must be very careful to avoid favoritism in decision-making. This includes such decisions as where he takes up residence or which parish's Mass schedule receives greater accommodation. How will the leader insure that the best of each parish is preserved and honored in the merger? How do we blend the parish organizations (e.g. pastoral councils) most effectively and equitably? These are some of the essential questions for skillful leaders in changing circumstances.

Among the other principles and practices for effective change are:

- change is necessary and beneficial to the church – Second Vatican Council reminds us that the Church is always in the process of reform
- change is easier for people when it is self-directed, especially when the change (e.g. assignment of a new pastor) is perceived as being initiated elsewhere
- people will want more information than they need (e.g. the what of proposed change, the why of the change and the how of the change) and that is OK
- people want to be consulted before decisions are made and they want to be given options
- failure to respect and maintain the identity, culture and legacy of the parishes involved will cause considerable trouble
- people are more cooperative when they are allowed just to 'be together' in a relaxed situation without any agenda – before, during and after structural changes
- new parishes adjust faster when they help those who are losing either their pastor, their parish or their facility to celebrate their legacy and grieve their loss
- change goes well when it is introduced on a small scale and when all successes, no matter how small, are celebrated well
- it is incumbent upon the dominant community in a linkage or the surviving worship site in a merger to welcome members of the other parish
- establish and publicize a process for the inevitable problems and disagreements that arise
- monitor and evaluate progress regularly
- leaders enjoy more support when they spend more time listening than talking
- prayer focuses people beyond their own will and invites them to accept God's will
- ritual helps people move through the paschal process – suffering, loss, uncertainty, new life
- leaders need to be specially equipped in how to deal with difficult people
- parish organizations often need a facilitator to integrate their respective purposes and activities
- at least in the short term, change will increase costs

Discuss with other leaders how your parish can address just two or three of these principles when facing needed change. For assistance with making effective parish transitions call 716-847-5531 or email: parishlife@buffalodiocese.org

by Dennis Mahaney, Office of Parish Life