

Effective Leadership Transitions – The Tips and Traps by Dennis Mahaney

Communities are living organisms. Without change most organisms decay and die. However, such transitions are often experienced as times of crisis – danger and opportunity, for a congregation. So when a new administrator is assigned to lead a parish, the parish experiences a mix of anxiety and expectation. Awkward or prolonged transitions create a heightened sense of anxiety, which can manifest itself in several ways, including: anger, frustration, discouragement, resentment, even indifference and disaffection. But moments of change also possess tremendous paschal power. Aware of this, every good leader - temporary or permanent, is intentional about managing the process of change. Skillful leaders follow good tips, and avoid the traps.

Consider these best practices:

1. **Over-communication is preferred.** Because transitions are a time of heightened anxiety, many in the parish fear the loss of a priest, which can be amplified by the arrival of an administrator, which is often perceived as an omen of parish closure.
 - **The Trap:** The fear of closure can be a self-fulfilling prophesy if not corrected emphatically and quickly. Jesus must have been hoarse from repeating lessons to his followers, but that did not stop him from repeatedly explaining his lessons.
 - **The Tip:** Communicate frequently, positively, and broadly. Encourage the congregation, and assure them that this is not the end, but a new beginning. And while temporary administrators are not typically charged with instituting changes upon arrival, and more often than not, they are instructed to just maintain existing programs and services, an administrator fails whenever failing to lead. Effective leaders over-communicate.
2. **Build on parish strengths.** Individuals can lose a sense of themselves in times of crisis. The same is true of congregations. Churches move forward when they motivate the right people to have the right focus, at the right time. The early church grew after Pentecost, inspired with its newly acquired power and sense of purpose.
 - **The Trap:** Sometimes a congregation needs a reminder of who they are at their best. Any lost opportunity to communicate what is positive, can unintentionally communicate something negative.
 - **The Tip:** Be an avid student of parish life. Extol parish virtues. Learn all that energizes and brings pride to the parish. Affirm the identity and values that undergird the parish, while communicating a vision for future vitality and growth. This message must go beyond the Sunday homily, beyond the bulletin, and beyond a few newsletter remarks. It must include visits to organizational meetings, parish-wide gatherings and strategic visits to key authorizers, endorsers and, yes, even the agents of anxiety within the community.

3. **Look ahead, and leave the past behind.** Transitions require an adjustment in expectations, because no new leader is a Mary Poppins, and no parish is practically perfect in every way. Jesus was guided by the past, but he always looked ahead. Because the congregation does not care how much leaders know, until they know how much they care, new leaders gain credibility by demonstrating respect and affection for the parish they serve. Thus, the conventional wisdom: avoid making any changes upon arrival unless absolutely necessary, because of what this action says about the parish. It is an art to attack problems, while sparing the people.
 - **The Trap:** Forgetting that change needs to happen. Because changes are so easily interpreted as a rejection of the way things have been done, new leaders sometimes fail in that they fail to lead the change.
 - **The Tip:** When it comes to failures, let the past be, *theirs* alone. Avoid condemning the past or owning it. Develop what the prophets called a divine amnesia. Remember it no more. Observe the need for change in positive terms and seek confirmation, while warming the atmosphere and diffusing resistance with the help of the most respected in the community. Refuse to play the blame-game. Avoid criticizing others and redirect unconstructive remarks.

4. **Listen well before acting.** Every organization is also an organism. And organisms have both an internal and an external life. And just as each person is unique with a unique personality - outlook and needs; likewise, every organization has a unique personality and distinct capacities. And much like an iceberg, the largest part of who we are is well below the water line. Conscientious leaders will explore these complexities before acting, in order to achieve results.
 - **The Trap:** It takes time to get acquainted, with all aspects of a community. The most significant part of a parish can be hidden to the untrained eye. This requires a more cautious approach than that which a new and energetic leaders typically prefers.
 - **The Tip:** Jesus did a lot of listening before acting. Take the time needed to understand the personality and nuances of a parish culture before acting. Spiritual discernment advises: observe, judge and act. Beware abdicating responsibility for difficult decisions. A lesser angel will always be willing to fill the leadership void.

5. **Avoid ambiguity.** Many parishioners make the mistake of assuming that the arrival of a new leader spells the end, while others assume that a talented leader relieves them of responsibility for their own future. Doing the right things, in no way exempts the leader from criticisms. In fact, it assures it. The early adopters will quietly follow, but

opponents will just as quickly coalesce to resist change. Ambiguity smells like fear, and indecision invites opposition.

- **The Trap:** Serious damage is done by new leaders who send mixed messages about themselves and their purpose.
- **The Tip:** Jesus was clear about his purpose, and you can be too. Be clear about your role, its limits, and your term of service. Share the conviction that good leaders enable others to lead. This message should be restated at regular intervals – at three months, six months, nine months and at twelve months. And, because transparency builds trust, let the congregation know any other pertinent facts, including whether or not, you are either eligible, or under consideration, for permanent assignment to the parish.

6. **Start by listening at the margins.** As St. Paul assures us, the body has many parts and every part is necessary. Both he and Jesus were boundary-crossers and border walkers. Maybe, that is because they knew that whenever power is exercised, it attracts some and repels others. Very often those who desire power, emerge in times of transition and uncertainty.

- **The Trap:** Too often, weak leaders defer to the loudest voices and strongest personalities. While, the most vital voices in the community may be the softest. And the prophets among us often avoid or resent those at the center of power.
- **The Tip:** Reach out to those at the margins of the community. This may be especially arduous, particularly when the voices at the margins have been too long ignored. That is why it is most critical to listen to *everyone*.

7. **Avoid lingering when it is time to go** – When you think about it, Jesus could have stuck around after the resurrection. No doubt, he would have done a better job. But, he knew that the mission must be shared and everyone contributes in their own way. In order for the church to grow, many need to own and lead.

- **The Trap:** The desire to help a parish can mislead an outgoing administrator to extend their stay beyond what is best for the community. Even after a pastor, or an administrator is replaced, some at a parish will find it hard to let go, and may even encourage the outgoing leader to stick around.
- **The Tip:** Once relieved, step out of the picture, unless the new pastor or administrator initiates further contact. Nothing should be assumed beyond what is stated explicitly by the new pastor or pastoral administrator, since any further involvement can result in confusion over parish direction, policies or procedures. Remember how you were treated when you took over. If a parishioner calls for additional service or support, simply and politely refer them to the newly assigned leader.