



Twenty ideas to help people change

TN12 Training Notes series: Planning

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Here are 20 ideas if you want help in how to ease a church congregation or organisation's staff through a process of change. The first six are more like foundational, planning principles and then the list gets more specific. Ideas such as these would come towards the end of a training event on managing change, so what you see here is far from the whole story (see the box at the end for other material on this website on a change theme). But if you know the theory and now want some action, here is some help.

Whether it is a new form of church service, a different approach to outreach or a revised staffing structure, most people are not going to find the process of change easy. Some of these are general principles which would almost always be true; others are simply ideas to consider in any given situation.

You should be able to pick out a number that would be especially relevant for the change process you are about to initiate.

1 **Ask 'Why?' before you ask 'How?'**

Understanding the purpose of any change is crucial. Never divorce the actual change from why it's being undertaken. Ensure your answer to the 'Why?' question starts with 'So that...' and not 'Because...' One takes you to the future, the other takes you back into the past.

2 **Distinguish purpose from vision**

Purpose is what we are called to be and do and it will describe activity. Vision is what we have the faith to believe God might do if we are faithful to the purpose he has called us to. It is about a destination in the future which we are praying for.

3 **Understand the purpose of any church**

Work out what the Bible has to tell us about this. Without this foundation we may end up with the wrong context for understanding the need to change and the change we are making.

4 **Help everyone to think visionary**

People default to their own, limited viewpoints (and that includes whoever is leading the change process too!). We all need to grasp the bigger picture and, in particular, what might be possible without restraints such as finance or other resource limitations.

5 **Keep God's Kingdom as the focus**

As all change is messy and painful (whatever some may tell you), see it as a journey of faith – so prayer is central. God's Kingdom is the biggest vision picture of all. But be careful: never use 'spiritual blackmail' to silence doubters.

6 **Never lose sight of the destination**

When things get difficult, don't let the end-point go out of sight. People tend to focus on the process at this stage, not the destination. Always distinguish means from end.

7 **Show it's part of something bigger**

If the change is simply part of an agreed strategy, such as given in a purpose statement, you can show that this is a natural consequence of what has already been agreed. Appeal to a higher issue whenever you can so people can see the context.

8 **Communicate in every way you can**

You want to tell people, to reassure them, to involve them. Take a risk and let them discuss it all in detail. If people are in the dark, they worry. Worry leads to fear. Fear to rejection. You are most unlikely to overdo the communication.

9 **Listen to feedback at every stage**

This is the return loop in the communications process. Listen, listen, listen. Check misunderstandings, welcome feedback, be ready to adapt plans in the light of reactions without compromising leadership.

10 **Think before you go public**

It sounds like a good idea, but subject it to rigorous examination first so that you anticipate the weak points in the argument. Many people rush a poorly thought through idea into public announcement. The weaknesses are rightly exposed; it is then almost impossible to repair the damage.

11 **Try an experimental period**

Some (but not all!) changes can start as an experiment: try the new arrangement out for a fixed time and then review. If the change is worthwhile, the hesitant can be won over when they see it does work and the pain is not too great. It can backfire though.

12 **Keep everyone together**

As far as possible, hold the enthusiasts back and encourage the slower ones on, but not at the expense of losing the enthusiasts. It is a delicate balancing act so ask others how you are doing.

13 **Ripple it out**

Convince those at the centre first, without worrying about the rest. Then get them to convince the next layer out, and so on. The picture is of a stone thrown into a pond: eventually the waves of change reach the edges.

14 **Model the new setting**

Many people resist change because they fear the unknown. So help them to experience this unknown before they get to it: describe it in a vivid way ('a land flowing with milk and honey' sounded pretty good to the Children of Israel), build a model of it, draw it, let people ask questions about it (and ensure you have truthful answers).

15 **Know your history**

Many changes are in fact a return to something that existed years ago. People who say "It's always been done like we do it now" often have very short memories! Read up your history to check how true this kind of statement really is.

16 **Take it in stages when you can**

It is often helpful to bring in the change gradually. Whether this is so or not, pay more attention to the implementation stage than to the design stage as this is where things go wrong.

17 **Let people say good-bye to the old**

Let people grieve for what is being lost. Hold a rite of passage event and say good-bye properly, with thanks for all that the old has been and has meant. Never rubbish the old.

18 **Celebrate milestones**

As the process develops (if lengthy), mark the milestones and celebrate achievement at each one. Break a long journey down into shorter units so everyone can see progress.

19 **Admit when you get something wrong**

Never bluff. You will get things wrong and it is better to own up to this and learn from the experience. Remember, change is never easy and there is no technique that is foolproof.

20 Learn from every mistake

You will make several, but see each one as experience gained for future leadership, although be aware too that every change is different and what works well this time may not do so next. On the other hand, this time's mistakes are likely to be mistakes next time too.

Leading people through a process of change is never less than a challenge. Yet change, as they say, is here to stay and leaders need to be expecting it as an on-going feature of their role. In fact leaders, by definition, take people through change.

Postscript

The box below lists other resources on change but you might also be interested in the following.

Training Notes TN124, *What's the point of church?*, considers what any church's purpose should be, checking this out from a number of angles.

Training Notes TN48, *Let's get purpose statements right*, and TN32, *What do you mean by vision?*, explain the different meanings of these two terms. Many churches muddle them up, often coming up with a purpose they describe as a vision statement.

Article A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, takes you through a planning process avoiding typical planning jargon.

Training Notes TN38, *We've got news for us!*, looks at internal communication within a church.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN12. They cover one aspect of a possible event on managing change in churches or mission agencies. See also Article A44, *Making things happen*. Also Training Notes TN3, *The bewildering world of change*, TN28 *No two leaders are the same*, TN59, *Don't you dare change anything!*, TN81, *Changing the scenery*, TN121, *Making a case for change*, and TN133, *Planning the next step*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN12 under Planning.

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