



Don't you dare change anything!

TN59 Training Notes series: Planning

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So you want to rip out all those Victorian pews, carpet the floor and buy comfortable chairs. This will give a completely different atmosphere for Sunday services. You've researched different possibilities, the benefits are obvious and clearly outweigh the cost. The case is compelling.

But, alas, not quite so compelling for several church members. The OMDB (Over My Dead Body) brigade are hard at work. The clash, when it comes, is bloody and painful. The talk is of 'sides', relationships are soured. People decide to leave.

You blame your opponents of course. If only they had more sense, more loyalty, more reasonableness, more openness and, in a church, more faith and holiness.

But hang on a minute. Even if your proposed change is such a good idea, there are many reasons why other folk may be less than happy. Changing buildings, routines or attitudes in any way is not just a question of signing the cheques or publishing the plan, but of winning over the users – or as many of them as possible.

Of course there will be some who are just out to block everything. But here I look at ten people whose seeming opposition to change arises from genuine reasons. If you can put yourself in their shoes and understand where they are coming from, you can then sort out how to work with them to try to help them. Each section closes with a question or two about the character concerned (printed in italics). These notes are best shared with a group and worked at together. They deliberately set questions rather than provide neat answers.

If you've got any buildings where you feel a JCB is the best bit of equipment to bring in, or structures that need changing, or attitudes that need reversing, put yourself in the shoes of my ten friends. It may well help you succeed in the long run. The examples chosen come from a range of church and community backgrounds.

So here are **ten stories of people who opposed change.**

1 **Alf's own nature**

While some people revel in rearranging everything in life as frequently as possible, Alf is deeply disturbed by anything different from his normal routine. He would be shocked if you suggested he changed his pattern of one cup of coffee for breakfast on weekdays and two on Sundays.

It doesn't need a Myers Briggs exercise to tell you that some people are like this. If you love unpredictability and are also proposing a change, be aware that some need a lot of help, time and reassurance before they can accept any rearrangement at all. Your own excitement may be light years away from their fears and worries.

"Help, time and reassurance" are needed. How would you do this in Alf's case, given any change you are currently proposing?

2 **Beryl's present circumstances**

Beryl's mother died three weeks ago, she is coping with a new staffing structure at work, her last child has just left home and she is trying to move house without much success. So she is not going to be in a fit state to consider yet one more change at church or anywhere. She seems to be against your idea, but try her in a year's time and her reaction might be very different.

Most of us can cope with a certain level of stress in life at any one time, but when that level rises above a critical point, we easily collapse.

You cannot necessarily wait one year, so would you forget about Beryl or are there ways you can help her?

3 **Callum's understanding of the reason**

Callum's daughter goes to a local secondary school and he discovers that a new timetable is planned which means an earlier start each morning. As he drops his daughter off on his own way to work, this change to his routine will not be welcomed. It was a pity he did not go to the special meeting arranged by the head teacher to explain why the change was being introduced, nor read the letter his daughter brought home.

If you can see that there is a good reason for a change, even though the change itself may be painful, you are more likely to try to support it. You need to grasp the real reason and then the cost of the change is in perspective.

How can you try to communicate so that everyone gets the message and understands it? What more could the head teacher have done, or is it wholly Callum's fault?

4 **Debbie's personal enthusiasm**

Debbie finds the present database she uses in the hospice administration office to be perfectly acceptable. She found it tough enough learning how to use database software, having come back to work after several years away bringing up her family. Now she is told different software is being purchased.

Enthusiasm may come from dissatisfaction with the present state or a longing for the new proposed state (or both). So people unhappy with how things are now will be much more open to change (the danger is, any change) than those who value the status quo.

Debbie's position is understandable. So what should her boss be doing to help her?

5 Ewan's level of control

Ewan is uneasy about certain aspects of the new syllabus for the young people's activities at his church. The materials look foreign; they seem to cover all kinds of things that he was never brought up on. No one consulted him, a parent, about the change. The Church Council made all the decisions.

If you are presented with a change which you can then help amend, you are likely to feel more comfortable than if you have no say at all over the outcome. If you have a major say in its final form, you feel happier still. Your level of control may be affected by your position in leadership, but there are other possibilities too.

You cannot let everyone have control over a change or nothing will happen: everyone will disagree or people will exercise a veto. So what could be done in Ewan's case?

6 Fran's previous experience

Fran has just moved to a new area and joined a church considering a major new building project. But she has come from one where they had already done something similar which had split the congregation. She is petrified the same thing will happen here.

In this case it seems to have been the process that was at fault, but sometimes experience of the final state may be just as frightening. On the other hand it can go quite the other way. If Fran's former church had not had the split and the new building was a great success, then she might have been a real enthusiast for the change at her new church.

Previous experience can go either way. What would you do for Fran if the case was as described? How would you get Fran to help you if her previous experience had been good?

7 George's friendship base

George is a member of the local golf club but stands out from most others as something of a loner, with only one or two friends to play a round with. When there was a compulsory purchase order slapped on part of the course for a new road and five holes had to be completely redesigned, everyone found it hard but discussed it endlessly. George was not part of this and suffered alone.

Change can be much easier to live with if we go through it with others whom we know and trust. So a close-knit group of people can help each other through a change, but the loner may find it much harder.

Are there people who will suffer from your change on their own? How could you help the George's you meet, bearing in mind they are loners?

8 Helen's emotional involvement

Helen is a keen classical musician. Her own church's organ was a tolerably good one, and her grandfather had helped to build it – his name is inscribed on the case. But the church decided that, rather than keep maintaining it, they would buy a modern digital organ instead. Helen was infuriated. How dare they discard such a wonderful instrument for some cheap imitation!

Changes involving one's passions or family history can be exceedingly painful. Sometimes people do not open up easily and the leader may fail to realise that there is some deep-seated reason for resistance to change.

Emotions run high in churches – and music attracts much emotion. If you observed Helen's opposition without knowing the reason, what should you do? If you discovered what you are told above, how would you help her?

9 Iris' trust in the leader

Iris wasn't that keen on the changed layout for the church kitchen; it had clearly been designed by a man, and made no sense at all. But the real reason for her opposition for the new plans was her on-going feud with Ian, the Church Secretary who was fronting them. She had long decided that he was not to be trusted. She opposed anything he stood for.

It may be that the relationship people have with the leader of the change is more important than anything else in this list. If you trust and respect them you may be prepared to do anything, whatever the cost. But if you distrust them you may block any change they suggest.

If you knew the real reason behind Iris' opposition to the change, how would you go about sorting it out? Assume you are not Ian, the Church Secretary.

10 Jack's level of faith

Jack has been a member of the local church for years, but the spiritual teaching never seems to make much impression on him. When there's a plan to appoint a full time church community worker, there is real enthusiasm from everyone – except Jack. He points out that financial giving is already stretched and there is no way the church could afford to raise a salary. The rest of the group pray about the idea and feel convinced God is calling them to take this step of faith, believing the money will then come in.

Jack is horrified. What on earth's it got to do with God and prayer, he asks. This will bankrupt the church. He seeks to veto the idea and stirs up his friends to block it.

It seems that it is finance not the appointment as such that is the problem with Jack. Is this a fair point? How can the rest of the group help him to trust God?

Most of these ten characters will be around when you next propose a change. The good change agent will seek to understand where everyone is coming from. That will not solve everything by any means, but it will be a valuable start.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN59. See also Article A44, *Making things happen*, and Training Notes TN3, *The bewildering world of change*, TN12, *Fifteen ideas to help people change*, TN81, *Changing the scenery*, and TN121, *Making a case for change*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of advice or training on some aspect of change management.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN59 under Planning (with a link to Management).

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