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leading forward – habits can hinder

We all know how difficult it can be to change a longstanding habit – even one that we know to be unhealthy and would like to give up. It is often the same with groups of people. We all have habits – even groups – and they can be highly resistant to change.

Sometimes even when church leaders can see the need to change and start to advocate it, the church remains firmly stuck in its current habits (aka a rut!). It can be very difficult to get out of these, and they are a source of tension for those in leadership trying to bring about change.

Good habits enable groups to move forward, but many habits inhibit the pursuit of a healthier life in God. Even neutral habits can hinder progress by binding us to the past rather than the present.

In church such habits range from the tangible (things we like to sing or do in a service) to the intangible (how much energy we put into welcoming visitors and newcomers). Often transparent to the outsider, habits become so embedded that they are invisible to members of the group.

Recently on holiday, I visited a village church and was immediately struck by the fact that the 20-30 people who attended the service, although they clearly knew each other, came into the building and sat in ones and twos far apart from each other. Despite the geniality of the people and leaders the gap restricted interaction and reinforced that very British sense of the personal space of each member of the congregation – maybe not a strength if you wish the church to grow in influence and numbers.

Vision versus habit

Frequently, leaders instinctively launch change by raising expectations for the future: painting an exciting vision, launching an inspiring project or challenging aspirations in the congregation. The unwritten assumption is that presenting a compelling case – such as sharing the nature of the opportunity or preaching the need to change (e.g. invite people to the 'back to church Sunday' service) – will move people to act differently.

Sadly, what often can happen is that certain members (often the most involved) catch the vision and start to push forward only to be frustrated by the general blanchmange of the rest. As one of my ex-bosses once said, 'No matter how fast you run at the blanchmange, it quickly slows you down once you get into it'. As this happens the 'early adopters' can become frustrated and 'check out' of the change. Then after doing this once or twice they are typically a bit more sanguine about visions (and leaders).



If this is the case how is it best to lead a change forward?

There is no single right answer to this question, but in my experience of both church and secular organisations I am struck how often little consideration is given to the best path to take.

One approach that seems powerful in addressing poor habits and bringing about change is to find a small, specific behaviour to address rather than starting with a big vision. In individuals this has been shown to lead to habit change. For example:

- Simply recording calorie intake, or forsaking potatoes, rather than setting a bold weight loss target and new diet.
- Resolving to walk up and down stairs rather than training for a marathon (half-marathon, 5k run or whatever seems faintly plausible!) to build healthiness.
- Going to bed and getting up at set times this week rather than trying to organise every minute of the day to become more productive.

What those working with individuals have found is that often these specific, limited and sometimes almost tangential goals can galvanise widespread change in a person's life – unlocking habits which were previously untouchable. The discipline in one area cascades to others and small changes enable the bigger without creating the yawning intellectual or emotional gap that visions on their own can often generate. The small practical change enables widespread change in the individual.

So what about churches?

All too often church members struggle to engage (i.e. start to do something different or even really think differently) with either a reasoned argument or an exciting future picture. They might be too general, too difficult to visualise or simply the church member may not be listening. Especially with longstanding members who may have been there 20 years and listened to three or four differing visions, they settle into a mindset

of 'leaders and visions come and go... and it doesn't make a lot of difference to me.'

Often though, I suspect that even if they are listening, the message may conflict with engrained corporate routines – ways of doing services, meetings, groups, youth, coffee, Bible study and so on. These habits can provide a natural rut that undermines collective commitment to move forward.

In these cases perhaps the most effective trigger for change might be focusing on a small daily habit in the life of the congregation that can be challenged and changed, rather than painting a big vision. Identifying such a habit, how it needs to change (and what reward there is for that) will be easier to explain, easier to gather support for, and easier to realise. Also, in the process, it will unlock a route to raising the expectations of the church in a wider range of areas.

For example, teaching people how to speak to new people each week (new to them or the church); identifying a practical way of helping people to devote five minutes a day to personal prayer; encouraging people to sit near each other in the building by creatively blocking off certain pews.

It might even be a good time to reinvent the church prayer meeting and place it at the centre of church life. A communal coming together to be with God might be a key lever in building the openness and engagement needed to unfreeze the habits of the church and unleash new behavior.

Small habit changes lead to energy for larger habit changes. Perhaps starting small rather than big is the way forward!

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What do you think?

- Do you have experience where addressing a habit in the church has led to much greater commitment and expectations to move forward?
- What 'poor habits' in church behaviour can you see? Why do they persist?
- Have you seen a future 'vision' undermined by the habits of the present?

Share your thoughts and experiences on this at www.cpasleadon.blogspot.co.uk.

