

LEADING WITH AGILITY, LEARNING TO DANCE – LEARNING SOME NEW MOVES (PART 2)

BY ADRIAN LOCK

In Part 1, I suggested that we need to lead with agility, appropriately responsive to a changing world. I also suggested that before we shift anything major in the way we do church, we need to strengthen what is core and unchanging. Just as a dancer needs a strong muscle core for maximum agility and balance, so does the agile church and the agile church leader.

With our eyes ‘fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith’, (Hebrews 12:1-2), we have a strong core, from which we can set out on the ‘dance floor’ and help our churches move with agility in response to the ever-changing music of a VUCA-G (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous and Globally-connected) world.

This time we will look at seven ‘moves’ that agile church leaders can make from a strong core to help their churches not only survive, but thrive, in a VUCA-G world.

1. GET LOTS OF PEOPLE DANCING

Don’t try to go it alone when you are attempting a major change such as a shift in culture and practice: leadership is a team sport. A VUCA-G world needs distributed leadership, beyond formal roles. Distribute ‘leader-ship’ as widely as possible to ensure many voices are heard, many ideas contributed, many perspectives integrated, and many people given the chance to experiment as you discern the way forward.

Early church leaders needed agility in extremis. Nobody had done church before; nobody had anticipated the response of the Gentiles to the gospel (except Isaiah the prophet – 49:6!). What was now core? Circumcision, kosher rules? It took the collective wisdom of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) to agree they needed to flex previous ‘hard and fast’ rules.

Shifts in culture and practice are rarely ‘technical’ challenges that need experts to advise (for example, what sound system should we get, or what should our new teaching series focus on?). They are ‘adaptive challenges’ (Heifetz et al 2009) that go beyond ‘complicated’ to ‘complex’, with many different interdependencies and contributing factors.

They include: how can we disciple our children in a digital age? How can we remove the scourge of knife crime from our local streets? There may be no ‘right’ answer – just a wise way forward. Leadership voices will benefit from diverse perspectives to discern what that is.

2. GET A BALCONY PERSPECTIVE

If the music has changed, your moves must change – inside and outside church. Heifetz suggests we need regular breaks from the dance floor to, ‘get on the balcony’ to discern what is going on, listen for new rhythms and look out for new moves. How aware are we of the most pressing needs of our community? How closely do we connect with, and gather data from, people

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meeting those needs in our local authorities, schools, and charities? Are these needs addressed in some way in your church's local expression of the global Church's mission?

The wider the group involved in gathering data, the more people will be able to see the need for change. Perhaps your church could facilitate the conversation in your community, bringing public services, local businesses, charities and schools together into the conversation?

Internally, are church members growing as disciples? Are your sermons helping them tackle the challenges and disorientations of a VUCA-G world? How do you know? In these turbulent times, when the church is increasingly seen as irrelevant and out of touch, we cannot afford to preach sermons that don't address the question: "How then shall we live?"

3. TRY NEW MOVES – HARNESS CREATIVITY, LEARN FROM OTHERS

Once you have a picture of what's going on, inside and outside, and you have a sense of which 'tunes' the Spirit is calling you to dance to as a church, it's time to generate ideas as to how to respond, return to the dance floor and try out some new moves.

Again, involve a wide diversity of people in coming up with new ideas. In Obolensky's 2014 study of 2,500 business units in over 50 countries identifying where breakthrough ideas come from, less than 10% came from the leadership teams, and around 60% came from below middle management level. Give up the idea that leaders should have all the ideas.

Nurture experimental church. In a VUCA-G world, we may feel we have discerned God's way forward, but it's impossible to have all the information you need to ensure a new initiative is going to work.

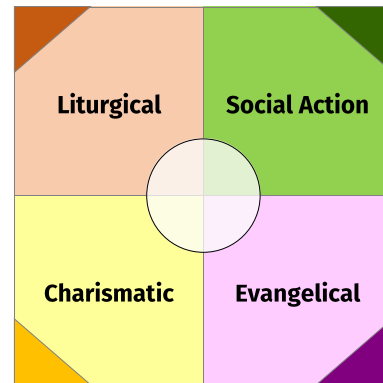
Collins and Hansen's (2011) study of organisations that thrived in especially volatile and fast-moving conditions found they showed 'empirical creativity', gathering available data before carrying out low cost, low risk, low distraction experiments, expecting most to fail. But when something worked, they backed it with resources.

Learn from experiments that other churches have carried out. Join those networks that are generating and experimenting with fresh ideas, for example Fresh Expressions. Be part of a larger learning community.

4. DANCE WITH MANY PARTNERS

To help address the pressing social needs of our communities, we increasingly need to work collaboratively. The challenges are too complex for us to go it alone.

In Finding our Way Again, Brian McLaren refers to this diagram by Phyllis Tickle. The four quadrants illustrate four sectors of the Church today, each bringing a different emphasis and something of great value to the Church of God.



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We have a choice to either inhabit the small corners of our traditions or to explore the overlap at the centre, learning from and enriching one another. In such a learning community, new collaborative possibilities can emerge.

5. DANCE BEYOND THE DANCEFLOOR

A key message from the pandemic was that we need to be a church without walls. In the western world, the church has become synonymous with 'the building', but that wasn't Jesus' intent, it wasn't the case with the early church, and still isn't the case with growing churches in areas of persecution. Our buildings serve a purpose, but perhaps God is calling us to dance on different dancefloors in the community, so that we don't expect people to 'go to church', but the church goes to them?

Two of the most exciting recent initiatives in my own church that left me buzzing were our youth worker taking over a local café for an evening of music, poetry and rap for the under 30's, and partnering with a local coffee shop for carol singing and mulled wine at Christmas. Both attracted encouraging numbers of people we had no previous contact with, and far greater numbers of the under 30's demographic than we ever see darkening the doors of our church building.

6. EXPECT TOES TO BE STEPPED ON

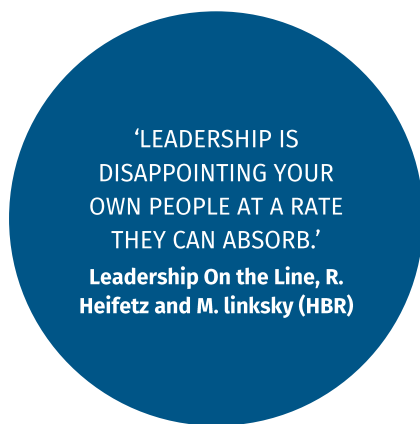
If you are shifting behaviour, culture or practice, you will upset the equilibrium, and some, perhaps many, won't like it.

Many Christian ministers are expert peacemakers - such a helpful skill. But you need to accept that keeping everyone happy just won't be possible. This is the time to hold your nerve and remind people that the mission is paramount,

not the status quo. Remind people frequently of the church's hub and axle.

Your toes will be stepped on too. Most won't do it deliberately, but as they feel the loss of change, some will fight to prevent it and to maintain 'business as usual'. It may sometimes feel personal: your friends won't always be your allies.

Find a balance of maintaining relationship with those who oppose you, while spending most of your energy with those who catch the vision. And those that oppose, no matter how clumsily and unfairly they express it, may still have something useful you need to listen to that can help refine your plans. There may well be a 'pearl in the poo' that gets thrown at you! Take time to find it (and then wash your hands!).



Agile and adaptive leadership is about managing the discomfort levels present within the system as things shift. Learn to read the discomfort levels and regulate the speed of change accordingly, without giving up.

7. REST THOSE WEARY FEET

Church leadership is hard work, adaptive church leadership even harder. It will be more important than ever that you take time out regularly from the dance floor, not just to take a balcony view, but to take a complete break, to recentre yourself, to 'come away with (Jesus) and rest' (Mark 6:31).

Almost every leader I work with, in secular and sacred contexts, struggles with this. They are caught up in the 'tyranny of the urgent', so characteristic of this VUCA-G world. Accept that the work of a church leader is never truly 'done' to avoid burn out. Looking after yourself is not a luxury, it is your first leadership responsibility. Every airline steward tells you that if cabin pressure fails, put on your own oxygen mask first before you help your dependents. If you pass out, you will be no good to anyone. Schedule in regular retreat days and holidays at the beginning of the year and protect them diligently. Make sure you have a small group of supporters as you move your church forward.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. What's the view from your 'balcony'? What's going on in your local community that you need to respond to? To what extent are you growing disciples? How do you know?
2. What other 'dancefloors' does your church need to dance on – outside of your church building?
3. To what extent are you looking after yourself as you attempt to lead with agility? What network of support can you gather around you?

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- How to Lead When you Don't Know Where you're Going – Leading in a Liminal Season, Susan Beaumont (Rowman and Littlefield).
- Canoeing the Mountains – Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory, Tod Bolsinger (IVP).
- Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck - Why Some Thrive Despite Them All, J Collins and MT Hansen (Random House).
- The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, RA Heifetz and M Linsky (HBP).
- Finding our Way Again, BD McLaren (Thomas Nelson).
- Complex Adaptive Leadership, N Obolensky (Gower).