

Leadership Qualities: Change and Innovation

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A cartoon I saw in *The New Yorker* showed a CEO winding up his speech at a board meeting with the following sentence: “And so, while the end-of-the-world scenario will be rife with unimaginable horrors, we believe that the pre-end period will be filled with unprecedented opportunities for profit.”¹ Somehow that seems to capture the spirit of our times.

Many of us live with the same perspective as King Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20:19. After being told that, because of his pride and arrogance, his wealth and posterity would fall into the hands of the Babylonians, he actually says, “The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.... Will there not be peace and security in my lifetime?” Hezekiah was only concerned with how things would be during his own time here on earth. He gave no thought to the hardships others would endure after he was gone. Many of our environmental and financial decisions demonstrate this same outlook. And yet our time on earth is only a speck in cosmic terms. A.W. Tozer was rightly said,

The days of the years of our lives are few, and swifter than a weaver’s shuttle. Life is a short and fevered rehearsal for a concert we cannot stay to give. Just when we appear to have gained some proficiency, we are forced to lay our instruments down. There is simply not time enough to think, to become, to perform what the constitution of our natures indicates we are capable of.²

If life here on earth is all there is, then our mortality is distressing. But the Bible invites us to see that there is more to this life than the constant pendulum-swing from happiness to regret. You are not defined by your past; you are defined by your future. You have a destiny, a hope and a future. The past is finite, but the future is unbounded. The past is fixed, but lasting change is

¹ Robert Mankoff, *The New Yorker* 9/9/2002.

² A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 52.

possible for those of us who are united with the God who makes all things new (Revelation 21:5). In fact, change is not only possible, it is normative for those who live their lives with a sense of holy calling, a determination to follow Jesus wherever he leads.

Jesus, the Change-Agent

An old story has a husband asking his wife, “Honey, why do you cut off the ends of a roast before you cook it?”

“Because my mother did it that way,” she responded with a smile.

Curious, the husband called the wife’s mother and asked her the same question. When she gave an identical answer, he called his wife’s grandmother. The moment the elderly matron heard the question she laughed and said, “I don’t know why *they* cut off the ends of the roast, but I did it that way because a full roast wouldn’t fit in my pan.”

That story illustrates how most practices are initiated to serve a purpose. But over time, even the best practice can lose its usefulness. It takes a wise leader to know when to change something. It takes insight to recognize when it’s time for innovation. Jesus certainly understood the role of change and rebuked those who stood in the way of innovation:

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, “How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?”

Jesus answered, “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins.”

Mark 2:18-22

The Pharisees chided Jesus because he didn't force his disciples to fast. Jesus informed them that he had not come to add a few new rules and regulations to Judaism. He had something entirely new to impart. The Lord made it clear to those religious leaders that he hadn't come to patch an old system. Such an effort would be as foolish as putting a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, or putting new wine in an old wineskin. When the patch shrank, the garment would tear. When the wine fermented, the wineskin would burst. The old forms of Judaism could never contain the spirit of Jesus' message.

Change challenges our existing categories. In order to change we must reorder our thought processes and see the same things in new ways. The idea that the Messiah would suffer and serve and live in poverty and humility – that was unthinkable for Jewish people prior to the Christ's incarnation. They would never have imagined that the Messiah would be born in obscurity and die a criminal's death. This was out of their box. Jesus was an innovator, a change-agent. So is every effective leader.

Change on a Cosmic Scale

In one way or another, all of us have an aversion to change, especially when things appear to be going reasonably well. But we serve a God who makes all things new (Revelation 21:5). God is not interested in preserving the status quo; he is committed to nothing less than an entirely new order or creation. The incarnation of God the Son brought about a radical change that disrupted the status quo for all eternity. The Gospel of John begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all

men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.

John 1:1-18

John deliberately opened his Gospel with an allusion to the opening words of the creation account in Genesis 1. Actually, John goes back before Genesis 1, which talks about the beginning of creation. Even before creation, the Word existed. At the time of the beginning, the Word already *was*. Through the mystery of the incarnation, the Word who created the world entered into his own creation and became one of us. He who forever existed as spirit has now and for all eternity become the God-man. There is a man in heaven – Christ is now in his glorified resurrection body – and because of this, he has made it possible for us to enter into the intimacy of fellowship with God himself. “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24).

Significantly, the world he created is complex and elegant – filled with clues about the character and nature of its creator. The more we learn about this created order, the more sophisticated its designer appears. The magnificent design of the solar system and all the many galaxies we are now able to observe make it clear just how creative the creator must be. But we

need not limit our observations to a telescope. By looking through a microscope, the same variety and imagination can be seen. From the very large to the very small, God's intricate design reveals him to be a creator of amazing innovation and diversity.

It should not be surprising, then, that the One who infused creation with change and innovation should himself be innovative in his dealings with human beings. The flood, the call of Abraham, the Mosaic covenant, the new covenant, the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the day of Pentecost, the second advent, the new heavens and new earth – all of these illustrate the dramatic and unprecedented innovations that have been wrought by God.

The Apostle Paul picks up this theme when writes:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:14-21, *emphasis added*

Here is the most inventive mind of all, taking on human flesh and limitations. He does this so that you and I can enjoy intimacy with him. As we grow in him we are being made truly human. Through his transforming power, we become the people God intended us to be. James S. Steward, noted Scottish preacher and friend of the famous William Barclay, tells us there once was in the city of Florence a massive, shapeless block of marble that seemed fitted to be the raw

material of some colossal statue. One sculptor after another tried his hand at it, without success. They cut and carved and hewed and chipped at it, until it seemed hopelessly disfigured.

Then someone suggested they give Michelangelo a shot at it. He began by having a house built right over the block of marble, and for long months he was shut up there with it, nobody knowing what he was doing. Then one day he flung open the door and told them to come in. They did, and there before their eyes – instead of a shapeless, meaningless block – was the magnificent statue of David, one of the glories of the world. So it is that Christ takes defeated and disfigured lives and refashions them, changing them into the very image of God.³

No other religion has a concept such as this. In every other religious system, men and women are left to save themselves. To paraphrase Larry Hall, we are left to lift ourselves off the ground by our own shirt collar.⁴ Only the Bible shows us a true assessment of the human condition. Only here do we see our great dignity and our great depravity. Because we see ourselves honestly and accurately, we understand that God had to reach down in order to lift us up. Luder Whitlock, former president of Reformed Theological Seminary, writes:

The gospel offers an escape from the deadening influence of sin that chokes the joy from life and dashes it to the ground, producing an ugly, broken mess. God converts the believer into a new person in Christ. As the Lord remakes that person in his image, he gives the believer a new ability to reshape life and the world into a thing of beauty reflective of God's own nature. The innovative, aesthetic dimensions of life find redemptive stimulation, and the corrosive, destructive tendency of sinful influence gradually diminishes as spiritual maturity increases. As the Bible states, 'He has made everything beautiful in its time' (Eccles. 3:11). This is true of God's transforming influence on Christians. God's perfection is linked to his beauty, so as sin and its influence diminish, his beauty is manifested, though imperfectly, in us. God's creativity resulted in the making of not only new things but beautiful things. In similar fashion, as we become more like God, we become not only innovative or creative, but we develop a love for beauty and a desire to multiply it.⁵

³ James S. Steward, *The Gates of New Life* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), pp. 245-246.

⁴ Larry Hall, *No Longer I* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1998), p. 127.

⁵ Luder G. Whitlock, Jr., *The Spiritual Quest* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 148-149.

The biblical doctrine of grace elevates without inflating; it humbles without degrading. We can repair and renovate, we can make things *like* new, but only God can make things new.

The Necessity of Change

Change and innovation are integral components of both biological and spiritual growth. The Scriptures focus more on process than on product, because all believers are in a process (whether we resist it or not) of becoming the people God meant us to be. Without change, growth is impossible. Abram learned the truth that it is impossible to stay where you are and go with God at the same time:

The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and our father’s household and go to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Abram was well established in Ur of the Chaldeans when God called him to leave his homeland. After he had settled for some time in Haran, his father Terah died, and the Lord once again instructed Abram to uproot himself, this time at the age of 75. Since the flood, God had been working with the nations in general, but now he was selecting a man whose descendants would constitute a new people who would be set apart for him. The Abrahamic covenant became the vehicle through which God would bless “all peoples on earth,” since the Messiah would come from the seed of Abram.

Abram experienced immense change through his encounters with God. This is no mere shifting of external elements in his life, not simply an adjustment of activity or schedule. God asked for a complete overhaul of Abram’s career, dreams, destiny. God even changed his name from Abram to Abraham to signify the depth of this change. But there is a huge gap between

when the promise comes and when it is fulfilled. Weeks turn into months turn into years turn into decades – and still Abraham and Sarah have no child.

How could Abram respond? Very simply, “Abraham believed the Lord...” (Genesis 15:6). Abraham trusted God in spite of the evidence to the contrary. He continued to walk in obedience and faith. Then, when it seemed completely impossible and Abraham acknowledged his inability to provide an heir for himself, God provided.

When God calls a person, it requires trust and obedience to follow him. It is not simply a call to a new *way* of life; it is a call to a new *kind* of life. This level of uprooting and total change can generate great stress. It is threatening, scary and difficult. Change of this magnitude must be deeply rooted in a solid core of values.

When leaders contemplate change, their first consideration must be the anchors that provide stability in a changing environment. Abraham believed in the Lord, and that security allowed him to pursue revolutionary change. Similarly, the Christian life is an ongoing process of change and internal revolution, grounded in the belief that this process is reforming us to become more Christlike.

This process should not be thought of as “pain free.” God invites us to do something counter-intuitive: go through the pain and not around it. God often uses the painful experiences of life to shape us and aid the transformation process. Jim McGuiggan writes:

When we say suffering and death can be redemptive, we’re not saying they’re not hateful or excruciating; we’re not saying the sufferers aren’t in agony. No! We’re speaking our faith that God will not allow us to face *anything* without the privilege of his working it for good – if we will but say yes to his offer. He will not allow suffering to be meaningless but will, with our permission, force it to be the soil out of which things like compassion, sympathy, courage, and service grow.⁶

⁶ Jim McGuiggan, *The God of the Towel* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1997), p. 178.

To take the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” and weave them into a beautiful tapestry, this takes imagination, creativity, innovation of the highest level. This is our Creator-God who promises to redeem our pain and refine us in the process.

Imagine the opportunity that is available to us – to spend all of eternity in unbroken fellowship with this level of innovation! Heaven will not be static. Nothing can remain the same in his presence. God is always full of wonderful surprises. The variety we observe on earth and in the cosmos is a mere shadow of what things will be like in heaven. Whatever adventures this life allows us, whatever joys and excitements we feel here will pale in comparison to heaven.

So God invites us to go through his refining process and promises us that he will be on the other end of it. He will receive us and welcome us to a place beyond our wildest imagination. The Apostle Paul knew this well and wrote, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Managing Change

Change is part of God’s plan for us, but it’s hard. Change is tough enough when we’re the only ones involved. But the role of a leader is to bring about change in others and/or in an organization. Now that’s *really* tough! God modeled some powerful principles of organizational change when he urged the exclusively Jewish church in Jerusalem to embrace Gentiles. Acts 10 tells the story:

About noon the following day as [Cornelius’ servants] were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at his gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.... I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

Acts 10:9-28, 34-35

Change is inherent in leadership. The enormous reversal described in this passage shows how God led Peter from being an opponent of change to becoming its champion. Notice seven principles from the passage:

1. God started where Peter was. He addressed Peter’s values and convictions (vv. 9-16). The wise innovator takes time to understand the people who must adapt to the change and demonstrates that it will not violate their values and convictions (v. 15).
2. God allowed Peter to challenge the idea (vv. 14-15). If people’s objections aren’t dealt with in a forthright and honest manner, the leader can begin to perceive their concerns as antagonism.

3. God gave Peter time to work through his resistance (vv. 16-17). Adaptation to change takes time, and the wise leader allows people the needed time to work through their reservations.
4. God permitted Peter to observe change in a limited situation before suggesting wholesale change. He allowed Peter to “try on” the change under controlled circumstances. Effective leaders allow their people to experiment with the process of change in order for them to begin to anticipate its effects.
5. The change proposal was well prepared (vv. 1-7, 19-23, 30-33). God anticipated Peter’s questions and had evidence ready to support his answers. When introducing change, wise leaders will be prepared to answer questions that might arise.
6. God didn’t ask Peter to “change”; he invited him to participate in improving what Peter loved. Peter quickly saw the advantage of the new over the old (v. 34). Early in the process, God demonstrated the benefits that the “new” would produce (vv. 44-46). Abandoning the comfort of the status quo can be threatening, and understanding leaders will help their followers to recognize the improvements the change will bring about.
7. God convinced a key leader and allowed that leader himself to champion the change (Acts 11:1-18). Individuals are easier to work with than a group. Some changes need the support of a few key leaders who will then help others to reconcile themselves to the new circumstances.

Changing and Staying the Same – At the Same Time?

Change is important. But it’s also important to cling to core values. Peter experienced that tension, and God helped him facilitate change while not abandoning his core values. James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras help us to understand the importance of both change and core values to a leader. In their excellent book *Built to Last*, they note that once a visionary company identifies its core ideology, it preserves it almost religiously – changing it seldom, if ever. They conclude:

[C]ore values in a visionary company form a rock-solid foundation and do not drift with the trends and fashions of the day. In some cases, the core values have remained intact for well over one hundred years.... Yet, while keeping their core ideologies tightly fixed, visionary companies display a

powerful desire for progress that enables them to change and adapt without compromising their cherished core ideals.⁷

Collins and Porras effectively make the point that capable leaders, who recognize their core values, can change practices and procedures to enable their organization to move forward.

Acts 16 is a record of Paul's missionary travels. He was not one to be haphazard in his planning, but he remained open to the leadership of his Lord:

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him. "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Acts 16:6-10

Paul had his itinerary and his maps. "Bithynia or Bust" was written on the side of his donkey. But God changed this to "Macedonia or Bust!" Change – new direction. But Paul's core value was not Bithynia. It was fulfilling God's desire to expand his kingdom. Because he didn't confuse his desire (to go to Bithynia) with his core value (to follow God's call), Paul enthusiastically "sailed straight for Samothrace" (v. 11). Like Paul, all godly leaders need the ability to hold to core values while making those changes necessary to advance their cause.

Leonard Sweet is the dean of the Theological School and vice president at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. He has written extensively to church leaders about the need to distinguish between content and containers. In his book *AquaChurch*, he writes,

Water is a liquid that fills the shape of any receptacle. As long as we trust the water and don't tamper with the recipe – don't dilute it, thicken it, or separate its ingredients – the content can remain the same while containers change.... I am a virtual fundamentalist about content. I am a virtual libertarian about containers. Only in Jesus the Christ did the container and

⁷ James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), pp. 8-9.

content become one. Jesus' comments about new wine in old wineskins reminds us that we cannot make an idolatry of any form or container. We must not elevate an ecclesial form to the level of authority or primacy that belongs only to the content.... The mystery of the gospel is this: It is always the same (content), and it is always changing (containers). In fact, for the gospel to remain the same, it has to change.... In fact, one of the ways you know the old, old truths are true is their ability to assume amazing and unfamiliar shapes while remaining themselves and without compromising their integrity.⁸

One of the great hymns of the church says, "God is the Fountain whence ten thousand blessings flow." God is a fountain. St. Gregory of Nyssa used this imagery when he wrote:

If anyone happened to be near the fountain which Scripture says rose from the earth at the beginning of creation...he would approach it marveling at the endless stream of water gushing forth and bubbling out. Never could he say that he had seen all the water.... In the same way, the person looking at the divine, invisible beauty will always discover it anew since he will see it as something newer and more wondrous in comparison to what he had already comprehended.⁹

A fountain is still, yet it moves, constant and ever-changing, quiet and savage. It welcomes and warns. It goes up and down, in and out all at the same time. It's water, but not the way most of us normally think of water. Innovative and faithful simultaneously, just like God, just like godly leaders.

⁸ Leonard Sweet, *AquaChurch* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1999), pp. 28-30.

⁹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), p. 201.