Lyle E. Schaller

The Change Agent's Checklist

The past eight decades have confronted residents of the United States with an unprecedented series of changes. In addition, these changes have arrived at a faster pace than ever before. Examples can be found in agriculture, mining, transportation, communication, manufacturing, entertainment, recreation, the delivery of health care, education, marriage, financial services, retail trade, and American foreign policy.

Therefore it is not surprising that the most effective "way to do church in America in the twenty-first century" also has been transformed. One example is the erosion of inherited religious loyalties. A second is the replacement of the small neighborhood congregation with the large regional church. A third is the new focus on learning that is replacing the old system called "Christian education." A fourth is the rise of the nondenominational megachurch. A fifth is the unprecedented competition for the charitable dollar.

One consequence of these rapid changes: religious leaders, in both congregations and denominational systems, are now expected to be effective agents of planned change, initiated from within an organization. *What are some of the most effective tactics in a strategy for planned change?*

1. Do not surprise people! The normal, natural, and predictable response to a new idea when it is first proposed is rejection. One reason for appointing an ad hoc study committee is to affirm that the time has arrived to consider change; and thus, help people anticipate specific recommendations for change. A common example is most American women receive several months' advance warning before delivering their first baby. That gives them time to prepare to fulfill a new role.

2. Do not accept an initial rejection as final! View that as a normal response to a new idea, and give people time to talk themselves into an openness to change. It is not uncommon for six-to-twenty months to pass before a series of negative responses turns into a "YES!"

3. Life is relational! During the past half century the old focus on titles, functions, and tasks has been replaced by a greater recognition of the power of interpersonal rela-

tionships. One example is the new emphasis on teams. A second is that in the majority of Protestant congregations in America, seven long-tenured, widely respected, and influential persons hold the balance of power. If all seven agree to oppose a proposed change, it probably will not happen. If all seven favor it, that usually generates approval. Thus the effective agent of change always places a high priority on winning allies.

4. Build alliances! Effective alliance-builders often find it is helpful to enlist one group of allies as the initiating group, plus one or more supporting groups of allies.

5. Complacency often is a barrier to initiating change from within any organization. One expression of this is denial. Today it is easy to find congregations of all sizes, as well as denominational systems, in which denial appears to be an insurmountable barrier to change. One effective response to denial can be to flood the system with relevant

GULP! I FORGOT THAT EVERY CHANGE AGENT NEEDS ALLIES, TIME, AND A THICK SKIN !

And also place high on your checklist the need for a loving attitude and patience !

---FRIAR TUCK.

and documented information. When denial produces a rejection of information, one alternative is to appoint a "Blue Ribbon" task force of respected individuals who support their diagnosis and recommendations with their prestige, relationships, and publicity.

The operational translation of that paragraph: The change agent may have to feed the fires of discontent with the status quo. Frequently that requires enlisting allies who will function as a support group for spreading discontent with the status quo.

6. Earned respect has replaced the old deference-pyramid based on position, titles, education, and other credentials. This means that a top priority for the recently arrived pastor or denominational executive is to earn the confidence, trust, and respect of the constituents before creating that alliance to initiate change.

7. If you are convinced that changes are necessary, do not offer people the choice of "yes or no." A better approach is to offer a choice between change and the probable negative consequences of no changes.

8. Picture change as continuity with the past priorities and values. In the vast majority of situations in which planned change is initiated from within an organization, wise leaders identify, affirm, and reinforce points of continuity with the past that can make change more acceptable.

One example is the widely respected and beloved returning pastor who continues in a limited role as the part-time minister of pastoral care. A second example is to renovate and/or construct an addition to that old building rather than completely replace it. A third example is to add a second worship service to the schedule rather than redesigning that traditional service. A fourth example: rather than relocating the meeting place, choose to become a multisite church. A fifth example: when expenditures exceed receipts, add one or two new income streams rather than reducing ministries or completely scraping the current system for raising money.

The BIG exception is when everyone agrees "This is a crisis!" A genuine crisis makes the old rulebook on change completely obsolete and opens the door to radical change.

Recognize that one common, negative response of some people is to perceive the crisis as marking the end of all widely valued continuity with that congregation or organization's past. Therefore, in a major crisis, many people feel it is a good time for them to leave.

Two examples of that type of negative-reaction syndrome to what many people perceive as a crisis: (a) The response to the pedophilia crisis in the Roman Catholic Church in America. (b) The impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast in 2005 and 2006, as many people decided on permanent departures.

9. If at all possible, first design and secure adoption of a comprehensive five- or seven-year ministry plan that includes specific, attainable, and measurable goals. Focus the discussion on a specific recommended change and why that change is necessary for implementation of that larger plan. The context for the debate should be on that ministry plan, not on the changes needed to accomplish it.

Without that larger context, some people are tempted to focus on personalities and choose up sides "us against them." The higher the quality of that long-term ministry plan and the broader the support base for its implementation, the less likely divisive conflicts over interpersonal relationships will surface. In the ideal world of denominational systems, the ministry plan adopted by each congregation will be compatible with and supportive of that larger denominational strategy.

10. A neutral approach to planned change does not exist! Do you want to bias the process in favor of change or against change? The strategies you use determine a great percentage of peoples' responses.

Six ways to bias people *against* change:
1. Ask for a vote at the same time you introduce the proposed change.
2. Give each vote equal weight. (Some church members have more influential opinions than others.)
3. Articulate the choice as between change and perpetuating the status quo.
4. Suggest that change should be by subtraction from, not addition to, ministries we are already doing.
5. Present every proposal in the context of a scarcity of resources rather than as one component of the larger ministry of this congregation.
6. Rush the process.

Five ways to bias people *in favor of* change:
1. Articulate the options as a choice between Change A and Change B.
2. Open the door to amendments and revisions of the original proposal.
3. Give people sufficient weeks or months to talk themselves into affirming a new idea.
4. Spell out in detail the probable negative consequences of rejecting change.
5. Perhaps most critical of all, whenever possible, present every proposed change in the larger context of a continuing effort to improve the quality of, to reinforce the relevance of, and to expand the total ministry of this congregation.