

## Conversation #7

# WHAT ARE WE ACTUALLY WILLING TO CHANGE?

I saved the most difficult conversation until last. You can have every conversation listed in the previous chapters, but if you're not willing to change, you've wasted your time and your breath. The honest truth is, most churches, people, and organizations struggle with change.

Change is hard because by default, we cling to the status quo. Typically, people change when the pain associated with the status quo becomes greater than the pain associated with change. In many churches, as long as the bills are being paid and people are still showing up, the motivation to change remains too low to really push ahead on the issues discussed in this book and the other issues facing the church. The motivation to change is even lower if you are experiencing momentum. Many leaders in growing organizations don't want to jeopardize success. As a result, the greatest threat to your future success in leadership is often your current success.

I'm writing this chapter because I'm hoping your church will be different. The majority of the conversations in this book focus on changes that are happening outside the church in the wider culture. If the change inside the church isn't equal to or greater than the change outside our walls, greater irrelevance is inevitable.

While that thought can be somewhat depressing, think of the flip side. History belongs to the innovators. It belongs to the leaders who dared to dream, to try things no one else was trying, to experiment, to push the boundaries of what everyone else believed was possible. As Henry Ford famously said, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." Or as Steve Jobs put it, "A lot of the time people don't know what they want until you show it to them."<sup>41</sup> If you are prepared to tackle change with a fully engaged heart, you can help not only your church but maybe even *the* church better accomplish the mission before us.

Perhaps that reminder is all some of you need: just a reminder to be bold and to accomplish what you have been called to accomplish. For many leaders, though, change is a frightening prospect. So in this chapter, I'll share some insights from two church leaders who have led change effectively in fairly resistant settings. I'll also offer some practical strategies you can use if your church seems resistant to change. I will conclude the chapter by offering some practical advice to leaders who want to lead change but who themselves are not senior leaders—a situation that requires skill to navigate.<sup>42</sup>

While there is much to be said about change, let's begin with some insights gleaned from Ron Edmondson and Dom Ruso, two pastors who have led established churches through change with considerable effectiveness.

## HOW TO NAVIGATE CHANGE IN A TRADITIONAL CHURCH: RON EDMONDSON'S STORY

How do you navigate change when your context is traditional—really traditional? Sometimes the very idea can seem impossible. That was the challenge facing Ron Edmondson, whom I interviewed in

episode 10 of my leadership podcast.<sup>43</sup> Ron assumed leadership of 105-year-old Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington, Kentucky, a church that had plateaued at around 1,000 attenders and had been at that level for years. In addition, the average age of the congregation was considerably older than the community. In his first three years of leadership, weekend attendance grew from 1,000 to more than 2,400, and the church experienced an influx of young families.

A few things helped Ron establish the groundwork for change. First, Ron and the leadership at Immanuel established a very clear understanding of what Ron's mandate as pastor would be. In Ron's words, their understanding was that "this was a church that had seen better days and wanted to see better days again, so that's why I'm here." To do that, Ron looked for connection points with the past: "I've tried to be very intentional about embracing the culture that's here without erasing it. I'm embracing the history and the success of this church and reminding them that they've been through tremendous change in the last hundred years that has shaped who this church is today, and that's what we're doing again."

Next, Ron and his staff made some Sunday morning shifts that made their ministry more effective. "We had a contemporary service that was early and a more blended service later. I don't understand why they did that. The people you're trying to reach early don't get up early. And we switched those, which was a small change in my mind. It was a monumental change around here, but it was probably the single greatest thing in allowing us to grow with young families again."

Ron also refocused the church's language as he encouraged people to talk about what was happening outside of the church walls rather than only what was happening inside the congregation. He focused the language around their vision to make it more memorable. "We put some strategy words around it: gather, grow, and serve. And we have talked about those continually. In fact, I don't think you could find somebody who's been here longer than two or three weeks who doesn't know we talk about gather, grow, and serve."

With those simple changes, the church doubled in a year. Ron said the growth has been primarily unchurched families, which is their goal. They also met their budget and saw leadership gaps filled.

A few other things helped Ron and the team find momentum as well. They became more visible in the community through outreach, which gave the church more of a profile than it used to have. Ron also changed the congregation's language around outreach from "invite a friend" to "bring a friend" (something they learned from another church). Ron notes it's changing "how [people are] viewing their workplace and how they're viewing their neighborhoods, and what their role is in leading people to Jesus and nurturing them in their faith." In line with what Kara Powell suggests in *Sticky Faith*, the congregation has been looking for ways to bridge the gap between the seniors and the young families, who make up most of their growth. Bridging these two worlds can help turn potential division into potential unity.

Ron also faced his share of challenges in this role. Leading change on this scale is not for the faint of heart. Candidly, Ron admitted that despite the growth they experienced, he still received more criticism than praise. "It's just the way it was, and I think you've got to know that if you're coming into this, that that's going to be part of it. And then I have a church with very little filter, when it comes to that, among some of the people. So knowing that coming in, that that was a real possibility."

So how has Ron dealt with the opposition? "You just keep going back to the calling and the same way, hopefully, you do with the positives. You don't store them up and say, 'Look what I've done.' You don't store up the criticism and say, 'Look what I've done wrong.' And I think it's the exact same approach. It's recognizing, asking yourself, 'Is this true? Is there something here I need to learn from?'"

Is this representative? Is it larger?’ Seek affirmation among the people God sent you to minister to, not the people who weren’t going to ‘get it’ anyway.”

Ron had to come to terms with the fact that the pace of change in a traditional setting would be slower than in a church plant. “I have to adapt the change to the environment that I have here, which is gonna be slower, which is gonna mean that I have to communicate more often, I have to bring more people along, I have to have more meetings before the meetings, that sort of thing. It’s labor-some,” he said.

While change will be hard, Ron’s story also shows it’s worth it, and that much is possible even in a short window of time in a traditional setting. Dom Ruso in Sarnia, Ontario, discovered the same thing.

## **HOW TO TURN AROUND A DECLINING CHURCH WITHOUT BLOWING IT APART: DOM RUSO’S STORY**

Dom Ruso is another pastor who accepted the invitation to help an established church move out of decline. Unlike Ron Edmondson, Dom was not a church planter. He’d been in a teaching pastor role and felt God leading him to a church-transitioning context. Like Ron, he saw significant growth in the first three years of his leadership—attendance grew from 400 to more than 800 in a city of fewer than 100,000 people. (Dom tells his whole story in episode 15 of my leadership podcast.<sup>44</sup>)

Dom realized that when it came to change, he had to learn from the past but not live in it. Like Ron Edmondson, Dom saw that the congregation had embraced change in the past, even if it had forgotten that for a season. Rather brilliantly, Dom sat down with the man who planted the church seventy-five years ago (yes, he was still alive). He brought a video crew and asked the founding pastor what his original vision was. Dom surprised the congregation with the video during their seventy-fifth anniversary, which took place months after Dom became their lead pastor: “I surprised the church and the leadership with that interview that I had with Dr. W. Hal McBain.” Dr. McBain shared stories of challenges and encouraged Dom to take the church where God was calling them. “What’s beautiful about Dr. McBain is his leadership and even his wisdom just constantly stayed away from the dangers of living in the past.” Sharing the founder’s story and vision with the congregation built trust for Dom.

Despite the growth, Dom also had to navigate pushback. Within a year of becoming the senior pastor, Dom faced the closure of a Christian school long associated with the church. While it was perhaps the right decision for the church, it was by no means universally popular. Dom realized that one key to leading change in that highly divisive situation was understanding that he had to pastor both “groups” equally (those for and those against), no matter what his personal opinion was. “I intentionally just prayed for them to be able to see that myself and our elders were doing everything we could to have the church’s best interest in mind regularly.”

Dom also came to terms with the fact that opposition to change is inevitable and unavoidable. “One of the things that I was learning is that as the church grew, the pushback came because people needed to grieve the fact that their old church was gone.” Dom said he listened and acknowledged their grief, letting them know it’s okay to grieve. He also decided to preach on change, drawing parallels between his congregation and the first-century church: “The church from its inception had to work through changes that caused this type of tension.”

Finally, Dom realized he had to keep his eye on accomplishing the mission, not simply on the

growth or success of the church. “I think the breakthrough is that God is doing something in you as the leader and something in your people on the journey toward breakthrough. If breakthrough is the goal, then you just force your way to get to the breakthrough because that’s the goal.”

While many leaders think change in a traditional context isn’t possible, clearly it is. Change is more than possible, even if it’s difficult.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN PEOPLE WANT A CHURCH TO GROW ... BUT NOT CHANGE

As you position your church for future impact, your team will face numerous tensions. One problem many leaders who want to see change encounter is this: people who say (in as many words): *I want our church to grow. I just don’t want it to change.* On the one hand, that’s completely understandable. We all wish we could lose ten pounds while eating cheeseburgers, but life (and our bodies) simply doesn’t work that way. Part of your job as a leader is realizing how absurd that line of thinking is, even if it is seductive. While it’s difficult to know what to do when people want your church to grow but not change, the best place to start is with honest conversation. As you lead that conversation, here are six things to keep in mind:

### 1. Tell the truth.

Usually we hire trainers, coaches, counselors, and consultants to tell us the truth we can’t see or, often, already know but won’t face. That’s my job and your job as the leader of an organization: we need to help people see the truth. Our job is to communicate the truth in love. Most church leaders will tilt toward love and compromise truth. In leadership, it’s a mistake to compromise either. You must lead a truthful dialogue.

So what’s the truth about wanting to grow but not wanting to change? It’s quite simple. *Your patterns, habits, and level of effectiveness as a church got you to where you are now.* If you want your current level of effectiveness, keep doing what you’re doing right now. If you don’t want your current level of effectiveness, *change.* It actually isn’t much more complicated than that. Sometimes great leadership is as simple as pointing out the truth that nobody else wants to talk about. So above all, keep the dialogue honest.

### 2. Plot trajectory.

Learning how to plot trajectory is one of the best skills a leader can bring to the table. Plotting trajectory is simply mapping out the probable course or path an organization, person, or object is on. This is critical because usually, when it comes to people and organizations, we’re not sure where we’re headed.

To plot trajectory, ask two questions: If we continue doing what we’re doing today, where will we be one year, two years, and five years from now? If we change, where will we be one year, two years, and five years from now? You may not know for sure where you’ll end up, but if you start asking the question, you’ll be amazed at what you discover. Try it.

### 3. Ban delusional talk.

This is related to keeping the conversation honest, but it takes it a level deeper. Those of us who resist change are often delusional. *I can continue to be rude to my spouse and our marriage will get*

*better. I can slack off at work and get a better performance review. I can get abs of steel in a workout that lasts sixty seconds.* Most of us become crazy people when we're fighting change. So, as a leader, ban delusional talk around your table. Call it out. In love, let people see how crazy their thinking really is.

*I understand you think your program is amazing, but it has an attendance of three. What do you suggest we do about that?*

*I know you love Southern Gospel music, but most of the teens we want to reach don't.*

*I realize you love our organization just the way it is, but the average age of our attenders is sixty-five, and we're missing the younger families we're called to reach.*

*I know you think a new building will solve all our problems, but why can't we solve them in our current, halfempty facility?*

Don't let your leaders be delusional. Refuse to allow people to divorce themselves from reality.

#### **4. Get an outside view.**

Familiarity breeds contempt and distorts perspective. If your team doesn't immediately respond healthily to a call for change, you might be ripe for an outside voice to help you arrive at a new place. This would be the perfect time to read a book together (or more broadly share a chapter of this one), attend a conference, or hire a consultant. If the future is at stake, it's not a bad investment to spend the money on an outside perspective.

#### **5. Offer constant feedback.**

As you move through these conversations, keep people honest. It will be hard. But you need to do this. Continue to point the group back to the truth. Honestly, gracefully, but truthfully. Just keep snapping people back to reality. I say this because it will require Herculean effort to ensure you don't end up hoping for a diet-pill-and-cupcake solution. When it comes to change, there is little gain without significant pain.

#### **6. Draw a line and call it what it is.**

At some point you have to stop talking and start doing. Here's my suggestion. If you've been in an honest dialogue for six months and are not making progress (that is, you haven't made a plan for change you are ready to act on), you have come to a moment of truth. At some point, you just need to tell everyone where you have landed:

*So our plan for change is to implement X, Y, and Z by this date. Let's do it!*

Or

*So essentially we have decided that we will not grow. We are content with the status quo. We will not change. And we will live with the consequences of stagnation, decline, and decay.*

Guess what? Ninety-nine percent of leaders will never utter the second statement. And that's why they're stuck. That's why they're perpetually frustrated. But that second statement is exactly what you need to say if that's your reality. And then—are you ready?—you need to decide whether you still want to lead that organization. Many leaders stay on, hoping for change without any realistic plan for change and without facing the hard reality that change probably isn't going to happen. That's a recipe for frustration, cynicism, and even burnout. Conversely, you might decide you are not called to lead a church that wants to change, in which case the fit will be fine. But drawing a line and calling things what they are is critical to obtaining clarity. At least you then know what you're dealing with.

## HOW TO GET ALIGNMENT AROUND THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO MAKE

People always ask me, “What's the key to leading change?” (as if there were *one* secret that made change happen every time). Of course, there is no “one secret” to change. If it were simple, there would be far more stories of widespread change in churches—and even in organizations—than there are.

And yet, personally speaking, there is *one* thing that has helped me more than anything else in almost twenty years of leading change. This one thing has not only helped me immensely in leading others through change; it's helped me stay motivated in seasons where I've felt like packing it in as I've led change in traditional and nontraditional settings.

So what is this one thing? It's this: focusing on the *why*, not on the *how* and *what*.

If you think about it, there are really only three issues that come up around any leadership table: what, how, and why.

What are we going to do?

How are we going to do it?

Why are we doing it?

Most leaders intuitively focus on the *what* and the *how*, neglecting the *why*. That's the mistake. And here's why that's a bad idea.

*What* and *how* are inherently divisive.

*Why*, on the other hand, unites people.

Let's break that down a little further. Spend any time in leadership and it won't take you long to see that people usually disagree on *what*. One person likes a certain style of music. Someone else likes another. One person wants to paint a room gray; someone else likes taupe. One demographic prefers earlier services; another likes late morning best. Your team thinks you should spend the money. The other team disagrees. *What* is inherently divisive.

*How* is often just as divisive. Even when people agree on *what*, as soon as the discussion goes further, people start asking: *So, exactly how are we going to pay for this? How will we get people on board? How can you be certain this is going to work? How long will all of this take?* Great dreams

can easily end up dashed on the rocks over details as small as timing and budget.

So what do you do when your vision for the future begins to disintegrate as the discussion moves to *what* and *how*? You do one thing: you refocus the conversation on *why*. When people begin to dispute the changes, redirect the conversation by saying something like: *Let's think about why we're doing this in the first place. It's to reach our community, and I'm confident we can make an impact if we all pull together.* Feel the mood in the room shift?

Here are some other phrases that can steer a conversation back to the why:

*Because we imagine a church that our kids and grandkids want to come to.*

*Because we want to be a church our friends love to attend.*

*Because we want to be a place where people who don't feel welcome today feel welcome tomorrow.*

*Because we love Christ and the world for which he died.*

*Because we have a passion for those who don't yet know Christ.*

*Because our current methods aren't optimally helping us accomplish our mission.*

It's hard to disagree with statements like these, isn't it? That's because *why* appeals to the best in people. Consequently, when you focus on why, you often find people rallying to a cause that's bigger than themselves, that's truthfully bigger than all of us. And that only makes sense. Most people are actually a part of your church because at some point, they decided to give their lives to Christ and become part of a higher cause. Your job is to remind them (and yourself) of this daily.

Leaders who relentlessly refocus on the *why* are always the most effective leaders.

If the entire group stays focused on the *why*, the *what* and the *how* have a way of working themselves out far more easily because *why* motivates.

When people agree on the why, the conversation starts to sound more like this:

*Well, I might not like it personally, but it is the most sensible approach. Let's go for it.*

*We'll find the money somewhere.*

*Let's give it a try. I'll put my objections aside.*

*I feel like there's a future again!*

Will you get some opposition? You bet. But if a few people leave ... let them go. They can always find another church to attend. The people you'll reach will likely far outnumber the people you lose.<sup>45</sup>

## **HOW TO LEAD CHANGE WHEN YOU'RE NOT THE SENIOR LEADER**

One more thing before we close this conversation on change—this time for any of you reading this

book who are not senior leaders. You may be at the point where you realize you face the formidable task of trying to convince a resistant senior leader or leadership team that it's time to change. My guess is if you've read this far as the lone wolf on your team, you're now depressed. You have all this energy and excitement about change, but it's accompanied by a sinking feeling that no one in your church is going to buy in. Sadly, this happens far more than it ought to.

What do you do if you want to see change and you're not a senior leader? It's easy to think you're powerless or to try to work around a leader you disagree with. But neither is a great strategy. So how do you "lead up" without being subversive or ineffective?

### **Think Like a Senior Leader**

Effecting change when you're not the senior leader begins with you imagining how you would feel if you *were* the senior leader. Try to get in that head space, even if it feels like a stretch. Imagine the pressures and unique challenges facing your senior leader. I promise you there are many: the reality of reporting to a governing board, to the staff, and perhaps to the congregation; budget restraints; the challenges of balancing all the needs of the church's various ministries and groups; and the pastor's own personal views, convictions, and opinions on the issue. Once you've started to identify the issues he or she is facing, you can approach the conversation empathetically. Show him or her that you understand that they're in a sensitive position and that you're willing to be open and even flexible on some points.

As a senior leader, let me disclose a bias here. When someone on my team comes to me with any idea and I realize they have thought it through cross-organizationally (that is, they've thought through how it impacts the *entire* organization), I am far more open to it than otherwise. Why? Because

they're thinking about more than just themselves;

they did their homework;

they helped me do my homework;

they showed me they're leading at the next level.

I always try to be open to new ideas, but here's the truth. Often before the person is done with their presentation or we're done with the discussion, I've already thought through fifteen implications of their idea. If they show me they thought through the fifteen implications before they got to my office, I tend to be more impressed and, as a result, more open. I'm not saying that's a good thing; I'm just saying it's a true thing. And I think it's true of most senior leaders. When you think like a senior leader, you're more likely to persuade a senior leader.

Once you've determined an appropriate approach, here are some other factors to remember.

### **Express Desires, Not Demands**

No one likes a demanding person. In fact, when someone demands something, there's something inside most of us that wants to *not* give them what they asked for. Leaders don't always follow that impulse, but expressing demands damages relationships. Instead, talk about what you *desire*. Show respect and tell your leader how *you* feel—don't tell your leader how you think *he* should feel. And above all, don't be demanding.



## **Explain the Why Behind the What**

As we've seen above and as Simon Sinek has so rightly pointed out, people don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it.<sup>46</sup> Your best argument is not the *what* ("we need to completely transform our church") or the *how* ("here's how you should do it"). It's the *why* ("I think I've discovered a more effective way to reach families in our community and help parents win at home ... can I talk to you about that?"). The more you explain the *why*, the more people will be open to the *what* and the *how*.

## **Stay Publicly Loyal**

Andy Stanley phrases it this way: public loyalty buys you private leverage. It's true. If you start complaining to others about how resistant your senior leader is, that not only compromises your personal integrity, but also your senior leader's not clueless. He'll probably hear about it and he will lose respect for you. In my mind as a senior leader, the team members who conduct themselves like a cohesive team always have the greatest private influence. Your public loyalty will buy you private leverage.

## **Be a Part of the Solution**

If you're discontent, it's not that difficult to drift into the category of critic. Unless, that is, you decide to be part of the solution. Offer help. Don't end-run your leader; run *with* your leader on the project.

Be the most helpful you can be.

Offer to do the legwork.

Bring your best ideas to the table every day.

Ask yourself this: What can *I* change? You're in charge of something. Change it. You might argue that you don't have permission to change anything. Sure, you do. You can change your attitude. To some extent, you can change the culture of whatever you're in charge of. Think about it: if you're in charge of a volunteer team of five, make them the five best-loved people in the church or organization. Create a super-healthy team. Accomplish all you can accomplish. Do everything you're capable of doing. Others might sit up and take notice, realizing everyone would be better off if they did what you're doing.

And even if no one notices, the five people you work with will notice. And they'll be thankful for it.

If you won't be part of the solution, you'll eventually become part of the problem. So be part of the solution.

## **Change Yourself**

You're human. You'll be tempted to focus only on the changes you'd like to see in others. But the best leaders also see a great opportunity in a stalemate. As I hinted earlier, great leaders focus on changing themselves. A stalemate is a chance to grow in character and skill. If you become the healthiest, most self-aware member of the team, people will be attracted to you and what you have to say. And you won't be as busy trying to change them. Which might be a nice turn of events in some cases.

## **CHANGE IS DIFFICULT, BUT WORTH IT**

Given the massive shift happening in our culture, the ability to navigate change is sure to emerge as one of the key leadership skills required over the next few decades. Church teams that want to see a better future will not only be committed to changing things; they will become students of how to navigate change.

Mastering the art of leading change is an essential skill for any leader motivated by even a single leadership objective discussed in this book; without change, there is no point. So before you put this book down, decide what you want to change, and then begin to discuss how you will go about changing it. As difficult as that is, the mission is too important to do otherwise.

## Conversation #7

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Talk About It

1. Does your church easily embrace change? If so, why? If not, why not? What keeps you from seeing change as a friend rather than an enemy?
2. As you read through Ron Edmondson's and Dom Ruso's stories, what encourages you? Does anything frighten you about the pace of change adopted by both leaders?
3. Of all the things associated with change, which frightens you the most?
4. Has your church ever tolerated "delusional talk"? What makes you tolerate it?
5. What's the trajectory of your church within five years if you don't change? What is it if you do change? Ask the same questions again but use a ten-year timeline.
6. In your conversations about change, do you tend to focus on the *why*, or more on the *what* or the *how*? Are your conversations working for you or against you as a result?
7. If you're reading this book and you're not the senior leader, what was the biggest insight you read that can help you lead change more effectively within your organization?

### Get Practical

Work through this list of six things a leader can do when people want their church to grow but not change. Create an honest assessment of how your church is doing in each area. Some of the things listed below describe a culture and some are action steps, but each should give you a gauge of where your church truly is when it comes to having an honest conversation and action plan around change.

1. *Tell the truth.*
2. *Plot trajectory.*
3. *Ban delusional talk.*
4. *Get an outside view.*
5. *Offer constant feedback.*
6. *Draw a line and call it what it is.*

## **Make It Happen**

Identify the single biggest obstacle to change in your church. Once you've identified it, create a six-month plan to remove it.

In addition, identify two to five other key obstacles to change. Now design a one- to two-year plan to address each of the obstacles.

For further information on leading change, see my book *Leading Change Without Losing It: Five Strategies That Can Revolutionize How You Lead Change When Facing Opposition* (reThink, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Leadership is so demanding that many leaders only give passing thought to the broader issues facing the church. If you've made it this far in the conversation, clearly you're not that kind of leader. For that I'm incredibly grateful.

We need a generation of church leaders who are committed to taking on the challenges before us, not just to working in the daily tasks of ministry. And that takes, among other things, courage, time, and stamina. It's energy well invested though. While many leaders would say they don't have time for the kinds of conversations contemplated by a book like this, I often find that leaders who take the time to process the bigger issues tend to have growing churches. There's some kind of correlation between leaders who take the time to think through big issues and leaders who lead effective ministries.

If you find yourself on the front end of that process (maybe this is the first time you've ever sat down as a team to discuss any bigger issues), be encouraged. I believe the time you've invested will pay off in some beautiful ways moving forward. It has paid for me and many other leaders I know.

Although we find ourselves in challenging days, I believe the best years of the church are ahead of us. Every time there is a change in history, there's potential to gain and potential to lose. I believe the potential to gain is greater than the potential to lose. Why? As despairing or as cynical as some might be (sometimes understandably) over the church's future, we have to remind ourselves that the church was Jesus' idea, not ours. It will survive our missteps and whatever cultural trends happen around us. We certainly don't always get things right, but Christ has an incredible history of pulling together Christians in every generation to share his love for a broken world. As a result—to paraphrase Mark Twain—the reports of the church's death are greatly exaggerated. The best is yet to come, and you have the potential to play a meaningful part in that amazing story.