

LCWR 2023 Annual Assembly Breakout Session
Managing Change: Leaders as Change Agents
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1. What were some of the practical learnings or helpful guidelines that participants were left with?

Leaders are called to be agents of transformation. Not all change is transformational. Transformation involves deep change and challenges the thinking that underlies current structures, policies, and practices. Groups move through the stages of change in a non-linear cyclical way. Some issues move at a different pace. We noted the importance of letting choices sink in. We see the value of intentional change. It's an organic process, never static, usually messy but also aspirational. Risk-taking is needed.

We discussed three types of change (Heifetz and Linsky's work):

1. Technical Change – Although this change is important, the processes and solutions to this type of change can usually be managed internally or by hiring a consultant with the needed expertise.
2. Adaptive Change – Requires an experience of loss and change on a very deep level. It challenges a leader's sense of competence; can create ongoing conflict and anxiety because it draws attention to underlying deep issues; it evokes resistance because the familiar (behaviors, habits, and beliefs) are challenged; and it's important to realize adaptive change leaves some people behind.
3. Transformational Change – transformation requires a shift in patterns and practices and the structures that support those patterns and practices. Transformation is a shift in perspective or in consciousness, a change so significant that it can evoke a new narrative.

2. What tools, skills or "hands on" resources were offered that participants can share with their members?

We were provided with three helpful resources for leaders as they deal with change.

1. Research tells us that no matter what change we are talking about, in any group there will be four types of responses and that the usual ratio of who falls into what category has been pretty significantly stable across a wide spectrum of groups. How people deal with change:
 - Early innovators - 5%
 - Early adopters - 40%
 - Late adopters - 50%
 - Non-adopters - 5%

As you go about a process of change, any leader starts with about 45% support while 55% of the people are skeptical, resistant, or opposed to this change. The tendency for congregations is to slow down or make changes to the proposed change so that the late adopters can "get on board." That is the opposite of what they need. What a late adopter needs is to see the changes occur and see that their worst predictions have not come true. To stop the process or slow it down does not give these resisters and doubters what they need.

2. Heifetz and Linsky offer that when you are going through a change process, as we are in religious life, there are some things that leaders can do to support people and the process.

This includes paying attention to the “holding environment.” During times of change is the time that the relationship that you have with the sisters and the relationship among the sisters matters the most. As a change agent it is important to foster that holding environment so members’ attention can be focused on the change process to feel supported as they are going through it. Asking people to leave behind something they have lived with for years or even generations can be painful. Sometimes leaders do not appreciate the sacrifice that they are asking of others. It is important for leaders to acknowledge the losses. It’s not enough to point to a hopeful future.

The second thing is to pay attention to the pace. Leaders need to watch the reactions people have to the changes and try to address their fears and challenges in as timely a manner as possible so that people can participate in this change effort to the degree they are able to do so—this is not about stopping—this is about being in very close touch with the people who are experiencing this effort and pacing the change, if possible, in tolerable increments.

The third thing is to control “the temperature.” Unless the temperature/pressure/attention is high enough, people do not pay attention to the need for change, but there comes a point if you raise the temperature too much people shut down. Keeping the temperature high enough so that people cannot lose sight of the need to change is a fine art and one to be cultivated.

One more thing from Heifetz and Linsky is how important it is to pay attention to one’s self as a change agent. They talk about “knowing your hungers” and being able to tell when one or more of your hungers is getting in the way of being an effective change agent. Areas to check yourself on include wanting control, needing to be central to all of your congregation’s efforts, taking on more than you could possibly do, and wanting/needing to be liked and approved of. None of these are bad things. They are human things. It’s important to be aware of your own triggers. If you get triggered and your “hunger” becomes the center piece of the effort you are leading, you need to course correct.

3. Nancy presented six stages of transformational change that a group experiences, based on the work of Angel Carlton. Although developed to help people with personal transformation, it has lots to offer our consideration of organizational change. Angel notes that a leader might be experiencing one or more of these 6 stages at any given time as it is rare for a leader to be managing one change process at a time. She also comments that movement through each stage gets you closer to the next level of understanding. New perspectives and unexpected opportunities to grow meet us at every stage.
 - Realization (the aha moment- things cannot go on as they are) Nancy commented, “Make every effort to ensure that your congregation’s members share in these aha moments.”

- Release (Beginning to let go of external components that no longer serve one's purposes) Nancy shared that many religious communities are inching into discernment about releasing or letting go of some of what no longer serves their purpose as women religious. They have not yet let go of everything, but are letting go of some things.
- Rebound (Taking the time to integrate the changes in one's life and let them sink in) We are invited to contemplate: What do these changes tell us about ourselves and our role in this world? In her explanation, Angel says that this stage is necessary to "nurture the mind, body and spirit" by allowing time to process recent changes—with the goal of integrating them—not re-litigating them or wallowing in them.
- Reinvention (making new choices that align with one's new self-understanding) This stage of adopting new practices and new ways of doing things often leads to a felt sense of joy and freedom.
- Resurrection (rising above that which held me/us back and looking at one's life differently)
- Response (asking what can I contribute now?)

Nancy shred, "The transformation journey lies more in how you walk the journey than in the goal you achieve. It's less about something in the future than it is about the purpose we claim for our lives. While a transformative action is something that is distinct from the past, ... what marks it is responding to an ongoing sense of call or returning to the compelling reasons for making change happen."

3. What questions was the group left with that could provide opportunity for further exploration with members?

What is the right question? Consider engaging the emotional "why" question rather than the philosophical (who, what, when, where) questions. How can we ask the "who we are" mission and identity questions while also dealing with the concrete steps of transition?

4. What insights were gained that contribute to the emergence of religious life into the future?

Groups move through the stages in any change process in a non-linear cyclical way. Some issues move at a different pace. The group was especially intrigued with the concept of rebound which emphasizes the importance of taking the time to integrate the changes in one's life or one's congregation's life and letting choices sink in.

Regarding the "late adopters" it was noted that sometimes they can't let go until we have a glimmer of a vision. We need to recognize that as we move through the process of transformation not all the members will be onboard with the proposed changes at the same time. It is important to keep moving for the common good and so that those with fears can see that the change won't be as problematic as they were anticipating. This takes courage on the part of the leader to keep going.

US-founded communities have a different experience than international communities. In situations where the US members are decreasing, sometimes the intercultural differences

and international opportunities can lead to a proactive decision that might not have been made in the past.

5. What does LCWR need to be attentive to as religious life evolves into the future?

Attend to the deep questions, especially around mission/identity/purpose, that might lead to insights about a new vision for religious life. The purpose of our religious life must be at the center of our change. We need to keep moving beyond structural changes to look at what is emerging/what the new needs are.