



## REFLECTIONS ON THE CHANGE JOURNEY

*Change.* It's a word that causes even experienced ministry leaders to shudder. They know the cost and dangers that are often part of the change journey. But they also know that not leading change – accepting the status quo – means that their church or ministry or non-profit will gradually drift into irrelevance.

In the twenty years that I've been leading seminars on this subject, I've used the analogy that organizational change is like riding in a sports car on a winding mountain road. It's a thrill when you're in the driver's seat, but it can be terrifying for the passenger. Lately, I've realized that this analogy is too simplistic.

### Considering All the Seats

The thrills and dangers of a mountain road may be an appropriate way to think about change, but the analogy needs to include more than two seats in the car. When leading organizational change, consider all of the following seats:

- *Driver's seat.* The driver has the best view of the road that's ahead and generally knows to slow down in order to navigate a turn or step on the gas to go up a hill. Because of this, the driver feels in control, which reduces his or her anxiety. After all, the driver never thinks, "I'm going to drive so recklessly that we'll plunge off the cliff."
- *Passenger's seat.* The passenger also has a clear view of what's ahead, but has no control. Because of this, the passenger often feels much more anxious than the driver. The same turn that gives the driver a boost of adrenaline gives the passenger a white-knuckled shot of anxiety. One thing that works in the passenger's favor is a clear line of communication with the driver. They're sitting next to each other, and the passenger can say, "Would you please slow down."
- *Back seat.* The passengers in the back seat share one thing in common with the one in front – they have no direct control over how the car is driven. But those in back are at a significant disadvantage. Their view of the road ahead is obstructed, which makes it much more difficult for them to anticipate turns and changes in speed. As a result, they are much more prone to the nauseous feeling of carsickness. In addition, it is not as easy for them to communicate with the driver. They may have more trouble hearing him or being heard.

This image may have already given you some insights into the leadership challenges that you are currently facing. What you may not realize is that many of the people in your ministry are not in any of those three seats. Instead, they find themselves riding in:

- *The "way back" seat.* When I was a kid, we owned the classic American family car – the station wagon. In those days, the third row was a rear-facing seat that we called the "way back" seat. Many people in your organization may feel like they're riding in this position. They spend most of their time looking at what's behind, with an occasional turn of their head to see what's ahead. In this seat, the driver has to yell to be heard over the road noise and the talking of others.
- *The luggage rack.* On top of the car was the carrier in which we placed luggage so that we had more room on the inside. No one ever rode in the luggage rack, even though I'm sure that my sisters would have liked to have put me there on more than one occasion.



Unfortunately, we often put people in this position while leading change in our ministries. They are blind to what is happening, feel neglected and mistreated, and will react in anger if they get a chance.

### **“Driver’s Education”**

If you’re in a first chair role, you realize that you don’t have as much control as the driver of the car. Your leadership role will never give you exclusive and unilateral control over the direction of your organization (nor should it). In the best cases, the leadership is shared, like a navigator who helps the driver in unfamiliar territory. In the worst cases, a struggle for leadership emerges, like two people having a tug-of-war for the steering wheel. This scenario – whether in a ministry or on a mountain road – is guaranteed to end in a crash.

You may be thinking, isn’t God in the driver’s seat? (Depending on your musical tastes, you may even be humming “Jesus Take the Wheel.”) I believe it’s more appropriate to think of God as the one who made the mountains and the road on which you’re traveling. As the driver, you still make the choice whether to go fast or slow to go, or even whether to stay on the road.

If you are the driver (or one of the drivers) in your organization’s change journey, the burden is on you to consider the different seats. You may think of a number of implications from this analogy. My top four are:

- *Communicate with the passengers.* Remember that those in the rear don’t have a clear view of what’s coming. Their ride will be much more enjoyable, and they will be less likely to object, if they feel included through effective communication.
- *Listen and be willing to adjust.* If the passenger in your car said, “I’m going to be sick if you don’t slow down,” you’d pay attention. In a similar way, you should listen to the feedback you’re getting about organizational change. It doesn’t change the destination that God has given you, but it could cause you to adjust the pace or even consider an alternate route.
- *Upgrade the vehicle.* Today’s family vehicles – minivans and SUV’s – hold the same number of passengers as our old station wagon, but the back row faces forward. If people in your organization are in the dark, you need to develop better ways to communicate and include them in the process before starting the change journey.
- *Don’t put anyone in the luggage rack.* This one is obvious, but pause and reflect on whether you’ve ever done this. You may have done so to deal with a “difficult” person or simply because you were too busy. Just realize that they will eventually get out, and when they do, you’ll suffer the consequences.

What other implications apply in your leadership context? How can you keep your “car” moving up that mountain road in the best way possible? Just stepping on the gas may not be the right answer.

### **When the Road Gets Bumpy**

Understanding and addressing the different seats on the change journey is certain to make for a better trip. But it’s not certain to make for an easy trip. Every journey, and every church or ministry, is different. One person enjoys a drive on the mountain road on a beautiful summer day with little traffic. Another drives the same road with gritted teeth in a blinding snowstorm with avalanche warnings. Some organizations know that change is needed and respond positively. Others seem to set their sights on getting into the hall of fame for “change resistance.”



So how should a pastor or ministry leader respond when change is hard? Every situation is different, but the following steps are applicable across a variety of circumstances:

- *Pray, pray, pray.* Leading a congregation or ministry, and especially leading a transformation effort, must be anchored in prayer. Pray for wisdom in how to lead. Pray for change agents to come alongside you. Pray that God will soften the hearts of those who are most resistant.
- *Look for bright spots and soft hearts.* It's rare for the leader to encounter universal resistance. Even though the situation may be difficult, look for spots where God is doing something that points the way toward the future. Similarly, look for people who, despite a negative exterior, may be more open to the stirrings of the Spirit. These are the places and people where you should invest your time and energy.
- *Point back to Scripture.* At its root, resistance to change is often a spiritual issue. When people are focused more on what they want rather than on what God wants, resistance will be high. C.S. Lewis is quoted as saying, "The church is the only organization that exists for non-members." Unfortunately, many members don't act that way. We all need to be reminded regularly to pray to God, "Thy will be done."
- *Be patient.* When the resistance is high, change will take time. Leaders need to acknowledge this and be patient. Occasionally you can use a wrecking ball to remove the resistance and start afresh, but usually that wrecking ball will end up swinging back and hitting you.
- *Examine yourself.* Leaders need to consider whether they have contributed to the resistance by being heavy-handed or manipulative or impatient or unclear. If so, the first change that is needed is in your approach and attitude.

These five recommendations are not a guarantee, but they will often help move the church or ministry forward. Unfortunately, the challenges can wear a leader down before he or she ever turns that corner. When a leader is down, his or her behavior can take a turn for the worse. Here are three things to *avoid*, even if you feel like you're constantly pushing the proverbial boulder uphill. **Don't ...**

- *Vilify the resisters.* They may be difficult, and perhaps they've even acted in ungodly ways, but don't think of them as "the enemy." If you do, you will forget that God loves them as well. You will lose the ability to minister to them or to reconcile with them in the future. And even if you "win" the "battle" of change, you may lose the bigger "war" of doing God-honoring work. ("Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Matt. 5:44)
- *Allow yourself to become isolated.* An isolated leader is a dangerous leader. This is true in any context, but especially in the midst of a difficult season of change. You need to be around people who will encourage you, who will help ease your burden, and who will speak the truth if you're heading down a dangerous path. ("Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." Prov. 15:22)
- *Give up on God.* Resistance from sinful human beings doesn't mean that God has abandoned you. It's simply not biblical to expect that every leadership journey will be smooth or that there will always be a "happy" ending (as the world defines it). In the midst of struggles, a leader's prayer life and reliance on God needs to double, not wane. ("The Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you." Deut. 31:6)



Despite your best efforts, you may not accomplish the desired change. Resisters may not be converted into rejoicers. You don't have control over the final outcome. But you do have control over how you respond when change is hard.

I've heard people say, "If I had known that leading change would be this hard, I wouldn't have signed up for this role." Perhaps that is true, but consider the way that Robert Quinn frames the choice:

Why, then, would anyone be willing to accept the pain that accompanies acts of transformational leadership? I suspect that such people have discovered that the pain of leadership is exceeded only by the pain of lost potential. They understand that excellence is punished, but they have developed a value system that provides no acceptable alternatives. (*Deep Change*, p. 177)

Change leadership is hard, intense work. It's not for the faint of heart. Despite this, if God has called you into a role as a change leader, the cost of not following may be even great. Rather than walking away, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Heb. 12:3), and press ahead on the change journey.