

Research Paper:
LEADING CHANGE: REDUCING RESISTANCE THROUGH COUNSELING

PREAMBLE INTRODUCTION

Upon considering numerous materials that are available on the topic of leading change in a church or ministry, a key central issue is how to effectively preclude and reduce the resistance that naturally activates when change is attempted.¹ As a whole, the wide variety of materials distinctly and comprehensively addresses how to reduce resistance on a congregational or group level. But, should there also be focus on reducing resistance on a personal level, involving personal emotions and issues?²

Some authors recognize and acknowledge that there may be personal elements to the resistance to change, but only a few authors actually go into some details about it. Notably, parts in the book *11 Innovations In The Local Church* do present some content on this matter.³ But from a counseling ministry background and perspective, there is much more information on this matter that could be integrative-ly proposed and helpfully utilized in a new way.⁴ There seems to be a significant opportunity here to measurably reduce resistance to change through the use of counseling, which essentially is being overlooked.⁵ Within this paper is an effort to more extensively explore further improving effectiveness of reducing resistance to change by addressing personal elements through spiritual counseling, and to construct an additional theoretical strategy that could possibly and innovatively contribute to knowledge in this field.⁶ Hopefully, this strategy will prove to be practical and useful for leaders in ministry in reducing resistance to change.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

When people in a church or ministry react to a proposal for change, their reaction is nestled within a congregational or group environmental influence, but their thoughts and decision-making process are conducted within their own individual minds, allowing the potential for individualistic thinking to influence, alter, or even override the surrounding group influences.⁷ This individualistic thinking response can range anywhere from being natural or innocent or agreeable all the way to being intentional or rebellious or sinful.⁸ The focus for this paper is on the category of sinful responses to change because by definition their sinful characteristics make them contrary to God and thereby appropriate targets for ministering to spiritually.⁹

Church leaders would be wise to consider that many people in their congregation have issues, problems, hurts, and underlying issues which can exert adverse influence on their thinking, and by extension their willingness to change.¹⁰ These “church wounded” outwardly look like they are doing fine, but this façade hides their true inner pain, issues, and spiritual struggles.¹¹ These people need help to work through and deal with their psychological and emotional problems, and

¹ Buch-Wagler, 12.

² Ibid., 11.

³ Towns, 5.

⁴ Buch-Wagler, 8.

⁵ Adams, *Manual*, 172.

⁶ Lewis, 30.

⁷ Rendle, 6.

⁸ James 4:17 NIV; Adams, *Theology*, 172.

⁹ Rendle, 23.

¹⁰ Towns, 52, 60, 61; Buch-Wagler, 11.

¹¹ Towns, 58, 51, 61, 62.

the church has the means available to effectively improve or even cure these church wounded, particularly in relation to sin-based problems.¹²

DEFINING A SOLUTION

One of the general functions of the pastor and church leaders is to identify and address aspects of man's sinful condition by ministering with God-given wisdom through a variety of available ways.¹³ As Scriptures state in Colossians 1:28 NIV, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ." Now if the passage in Ephesians 4:22-24 NIV is added, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.", it becomes apparent that a form of ministering is to admonish and teach a person to stop thinking, reacting, and behaving in sinful ways and instead conduct themselves in godly ways. Thus, God endorses ministering in this fashion, which can take the form of counseling.

Counseling that is secular in nature attempts to resolve man's problems with man's words and man's endorsement.¹⁴ Thereby, secular counseling is essentially devoid of direct involvement by God and His supernatural power.¹⁵ If, however, God's Word is taught and applied to man's problems, then God is extensively involved in the counseling process because "the word of God is living and active" in setting man free from enslavement to sin.¹⁶ Therefore, a key element of the strategy to reduce resistance to change is to get the church's leaders ministering through biblical counseling with those in the church who have a sin problem which fuels their resistance to change.¹⁷

Doing biblical counseling effectively is a ministry function that not all church leaders may be comfortable, skilled, gifted enough, or available to engage in.¹⁸ One challenge then is to find the right person or persons to implement this ministry activity. Ideally, the leaders doing the biblical counseling should be Spirit-filled, mature believers who have a solid understanding of Scriptures and how to apply them to people's enslaving sin problems.¹⁹ Obviously, being gifted by God, academically trained, suitably experienced in biblical counseling, and committed to this counseling-for-change strategy are important prerequisites.²⁰ In small to mid-sized churches, usually the pastor is the person doing the counseling.²¹ However, if his workload is too full, then one or more other leaders will need to be recruited and trained to fill this ministering need.²² In a large church, there may already be a counseling department that can take on this additional ministry work.

GETTING STARTED - IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES

With the right person or persons equipped and ready to do the biblical counseling, the most important place to start is to individually counsel the church board members, those most critical

¹² Buch-Wagler, 11; Towns, 62.

¹³ Herrington, 106.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:14 NIV.

¹⁵ Adams, *Manual*, 9-10.

¹⁶ Hebrews 4:12 NIV; John 8:31-36 NIV.

¹⁷ Rendle, 144.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹ Edwards; Adams, *Competent*, 61.

²⁰ Herrington, 46.

²¹ Grabill.

²² Rachels; Wagner, 200.

for success.²³ Like advancing through concentric circles from the inside outward, next to be counseled hierarchically would be the ministry leaders, followed by group leaders, then teachers and key workers, until lastly the members and attenders within the congregation.²⁴ A key strategy priority is to start with those people who potentially will have the most impact and influence on accepting and implementing the desired changes, the formal and informal leaders and opinion-makers who have sway in convincing others.²⁵ There may not be enough manpower or time to feasibly proceed in counseling all the way down to all of those people who potentially have little overall influence on accepting the changes, so prioritizing would be prudent.²⁶

A sensible element of taking a counseling approach is to proactively initiate the counseling immediately as the change proposal is first being introduced.²⁷ Identifying and addressing resistance through counseling ideally should start and progress in conjunction with the change proposal as it is introduced to various leaders and groups within the church.²⁸ This will not only enable the counseling to keep up with any sprouting opposition, but may also serve to defuse some of the opposition early in the change process which may then contribute to building positive momentum towards change.²⁹ In a sense, this strategically-thinking early implementation of counseling is a pre-emptive way to thwart resistance before it has an opportunity to consolidate, harden, become entrenched, and spread.³⁰

When introducing the change proposal to a group, alertness, diligence, and tact should be exercised to identify specific potential opponents.³¹ Thus, the introduction process would have a subsurface objective of testing to determine who has seemingly unwarranted or sin-based opposition to the change proposal.³² Of course this will require patient and careful listening and discernment, encouraging people in the group to respond and voice their concerns freely.³³ Distinction will need to be made in regard to whether the opposition being voiced is specific to the person speaking it or is indicative of a corporate mindset.³⁴ A corporate sin-based mindset could be addressed in a group setting whereas an oppositional individual person should be addressed in a one-on-one counseling setting. Responding to the resistance during the introduction meeting should be constructed in a way to draw out whether the objections have a sinful basis to them or not.³⁵ The leader introducing the change may need to have another leader or counselor present in the meeting to assist in discerning, identifying, and noting who may have sin-based opposition and what the nature of that sin-based opposition may be.

Subsequent to the introduction meeting, alert monitoring should continue in order to identify other oppositional people who were in the meeting but did not voice their sin-based opposition openly.³⁶ The priority order is to deal with the openly oppositional first, followed by the silently oppositional next, and then those whose position is unknown.³⁷ Obviously, people who have a known past history of sin-based vocal or destructive opposition to change should be placed high

²³ Isgar, 13.

²⁴ Anderson, 177.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Towns, 62.

²⁷ Romero, 3.

²⁸ Rutland.

²⁹ Edwards.

³⁰ Ibid.; Walrath, 61.

³¹ Schaller, 103.

³² Buch-Wagler, 14.

³³ Kouzes, 253.

³⁴ Herrington, 106.

³⁵ Ibid., 90.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 91.

on the priority list, especially if they have a network of relatives or friends in the church.³⁸ Their behaviors in the past are a plausible predictor of how they will probably act again in similar situations.³⁹ In effect, discernment is activated to detect and categorize people in priority order and then following that order, conflict management and counseling skills are utilized to preemptively address their possible sin-based resistance.⁴⁰

THE PERSONAL COUNSELING PROCESS

Having identified a priority person with seemingly sin-based opposition, the counselor should meet one-on-one with the person. The counselor can start the meeting by stating that he wants to discuss and get feedback on the change proposal. Briefly summarizing the change proposal, the counselor can then ask the person for his (or her) reaction. Follow-up questions should be pursued to acquire more details as to the thinking of the person, particularly in regard to why he is opposed to the change.⁴¹ One of the goals here for the counselor is to elicit this information in a discuss-ive manner without provoking an argument or resorting to a sales pitch or lecture.⁴² As the person opens up about his inner thoughts and feelings, the counselor can begin to accumulate clues and details about the basis and the source for this person's sinful opposition.⁴³ Determining the nature and composition of the person's opposition is crucial for the counselor to devise an appropriate and effective treatment plan.⁴⁴

When the counselor judges that he has sufficient information about the person's sin problem, then he can find and apply Scriptures that correspond to the sin problem.⁴⁵ A good concordance or a Bible program with search capabilities can prove quite helpful for this. Reading the Scripture verse with the person, the counselor then should explain the verse and how it applies to the person, with the purpose of getting the person to agree with what God is saying in the verse and "submit...to God".⁴⁶ The counselor should then supplement the teaching of the verse by assigning the person practical ways to put the verse into action, putting off the old sinful ways and putting on the godly ways.⁴⁷ There may be variation or more that needs to occur in the counseling process, depending on the type of sin problem the person has.

Perhaps the most common and the most destructive type of sin problem that opposes change is the aftermath of past abuse.⁴⁸ For example, past church leaders who engaged in inappropriate behavior or gross sin violate and cause spiritual damage to people in the church because they have broken their sacred duty, violated the very teachings they have been promoting, and destroyed the devoted trust of the people. In their wake, these leaders leave a trail of hurt, angry, disillusioned, and hardened people in the congregation.⁴⁹ Consequently, the next pastor or church leader who innocently comes along may be viewed with covert suspicion, hostility, or contempt because of the abuse a previous pastor or church leader had done. Propelled by these strong negative reactionary emotions originating from the past abuse event, the person is

³⁸ Weems, 130.

³⁹ Anderson, 160.

⁴⁰ Wagner, 196; Herrington, 110.

⁴¹ Adams, *Manual*, 274.

⁴² Crabb, *Basic*, 108.

⁴³ Eisold.

⁴⁴ Rendle, 41.

⁴⁵ Barna, 181.

⁴⁶ James 4:17 NIV; Crabb, *Effective*, 183.

⁴⁷ Ephesians 4:22-24 NIV.

⁴⁸ Hicks, 174.

⁴⁹ Grabill.

extremely motivated and resolutely committed not to let this abuse happen again.⁵⁰ Hence, the person can easily become highly agitated, vocal, and entrenched in opposition to any proposal, situation, or change that potentially looks even remotely close to heading down the same path as the past abuse experience.⁵¹

Church people damaged from past church abuse need intervention and help because they are stuck and enslaved in this abused mindset.⁵² For whatever reasons, they do not have the ability to escape on their own.⁵³ Furthermore, their highly-charged emotional baggage from the past abuse blinds them to the relating problems they are now both experiencing and causing.⁵⁴ Therefore, for treating this kind of sin problem, the counselor must also talk about forgiveness, teaching and exhorting the person to forgive the past church abuser and not hold anything against the abuser anymore.⁵⁵ Removing this past abuse roadblock will now allow the person to clearly consider the current change proposal without emotional interference from the past abuse.⁵⁶ If the past church abuse happened to the congregation as a whole, then walking the entire congregation through this forgiveness process by means of a sermon series would probably be faster and just as effective as counseling one person at a time.⁵⁷

Fellow board members are especially vulnerable to abuse from previous church leaders because they may have personally dealt with the abuse, and been direct recipients or targets of the abuse.⁵⁸ Even spouses of board members can suffer collateral damage from abusive leaders. Past abusive interactions with board members can cause present dysfunction, distrust, inaccurate preconceptions, and hidden agendas on the board and with the current pastor and other leaders.⁵⁹ Because the emotions and accounts of the abusive interactions with board members can be so powerful and destructive due to their high positions of leadership in the church, a wise course of action seems to be to counsel each abused board member privately one at a time rather than as a group, being diligent in maintaining strict confidentiality and being precautionary in guarding that past conflict issues do not generate new fights or power struggles on the board.⁶⁰

Another sin problem to look for is the lack of or refusal to trust in God, to walk by faith when it is clear that is what God wants.⁶¹ Lack of or refusal to trust in God can take a number of different rational or irrational forms in varying degrees, such as: doubt, fear, distrust, worry, anxiety, suspicion, insecurity, second-guessing, hesitation or excessive cautiousness, quitting, false assumptions or generalizations, exaggerations, futility, indecision, depression, apathy, disinterest, divisiveness, antagonism, rebellion, worldliness, foolishness, disdain, unteach-ability, inflexibility, emotional paralysis, stubbornness, disequilibrium, and etc.⁶² Sorting out the person's thinking and distinguishing between reality, assumptions, and probable results can be quite helpful in treating this problem.⁶³ Then apply Scripture verses that relate to the person's sins and any underlying problems in his past. Another treatment option is to describe in word pictures as well as take concrete steps to help the person tangibly see what the change will look

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Buch-Wagler, 11.

⁵² 2 Timothy 2:25-26 NIV; Borden.

⁵³ 2 Timothy 2:25-26 NIV.

⁵⁴ Matthew 18:21-35 NIV; Dungy, 149.

⁵⁵ Ephesians 4:32 NIV.

⁵⁶ Dungy, 51.

⁵⁷ Malphurs.

⁵⁸ Grabill.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Buch-Wagler, 1.

⁶¹ Ibid., 11; 2 Corinthians 5:7 NIV.

⁶² Larson; Price, 63; Buch-Wagler, 12; Rendle, 9.

⁶³ Price, 63, 70, 152.

like.⁶⁴ But this option merely soothes the symptoms and does not treat the underlying cause of the problem in trusting God.⁶⁵

Some of the concerns and reservations the person has may be legitimate, valid, or warranted.⁶⁶ The leadership of the change proposal may have a track record or history that may call their competence into question.⁶⁷ The soundness or feasibility of the change plan may have significant design flaws.⁶⁸ These kinds of reasonings are not necessarily sinful, and therefore the counselor may not need to look for sinfulness but instead should properly consider and address these valid concerns.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the counselor should endeavor to strengthen the person's courage, patience, and faith.⁷⁰

This same dynamic of the counselor sifting through the objecting person's thinking to sort out valid concerns while looking for resistance that has a sinful basis is a process that should be used in other regards, such as expected loss, for example.⁷¹ Some expected losses are valid and appropriate concerns. The counselor, however, is looking for the expected losses that have a sin-basis, many of which typically have selfishness at their core. Selfish expected losses can be characterized by such negative qualities as self-indulged, self-consumed, self-focused, self-comfort, self-exaltation, selfish priorities, desire to control, desire for power, desire for reputation, or desire for status, all with little or no care for the well-being of others.⁷² Due to the potentially powerful nature of selfishness-driven opposition, extra gentleness and patience may be needed when confronting this kind of sin with Scriptures.⁷³

Basically, the counselor should be looking for and discerning "everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" each person from "[running] with perseverance the race marked out for [them]", as stated in Hebrews 12:1 NIV. Looking for hindering sin can be initiated proactively during the beginning introductory phase of the change process, but also could be continued reactively throughout the length of instituting the change process. Identified through ongoing alert monitoring, reactive counseling will extend the beneficial effects of addressing individual's sin-based opposition by putting out the flare-ups of resistance as they ignite but before they explode into infectious dissension.⁷⁴ Extraordinary Spirit-empowering of discernment and tact in counseling will be needed, however, for helping people pursue God's will, especially when it comes to moving out of their self-serving comfort zones into God's Kingdom-serving purposes and activities.⁷⁵

Confronting people's sinfulness will sooner or later incite some of them to complain or get riled up, especially if the counseling activities affect many people and extend in scope and duration beyond being proactive into being reactive as well.⁷⁶ Other people may object and view this counseling as a form of manipulation, in which the leadership is trying to push through their agenda. However, if the counseling stays focused on the sin-based reasons why each person is opposing the change, then the legitimacy of the counseling activity stands on a proper biblical

⁶⁴ Kouzes, 145.

⁶⁵ Buch-Wagler, 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Kanter.

⁶⁸ Weems, 129.

⁶⁹ Buch-Wagler, 14.

⁷⁰ Larson.

⁷¹ Rendle, 108.

⁷² Kanter.

⁷³ Rendle, 106.

⁷⁴ Herrington, 90; Buch-Wagler, 11.

⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 NIV; Rendle, 2; Inman, 6.

⁷⁶ Barna, 181.

foundation, for God's people are commanded in 1 Peter 1:16 NIV to "'Be holy, because I am holy.'" Nevertheless, a wise precaution would be to get the church board's authorization and support before engaging in pre-emptive and reactive counseling.⁷⁷ This approach to reducing resistance to change may be new to the board and regarded as risky.⁷⁸ But the board should be encouraged to assess the congregation, and perhaps informally poll some of the members to determine the overall level of receptivity or opposition to the change proposal.⁷⁹ With some additional discussion or teaching on the subject, maybe the board will see that it is better to take steps to remove obstacles to change rather than to do nothing and thereby let resistance sprout and grow.⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

There seems to be an opportunity to take church culture-shifting steps to reduce resistance to change by adding proactive and reactive individual (and in some situations group) counseling to the many other wise actions that can be implemented in leading change in ministries.⁸¹ Contentedness with the changes can be cultivated on a personal level through sin-based spiritual counseling, which should assist people in accepting and adjusting to the changes.⁸² Ministering and coaching them through counseling may be a God-pleasing way for people to obey and live out the divine command "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord." in Isaiah 1:18 NIV.⁸³ Being set free from their enslavement to sin, people in the congregation can then be unleashed to fulfill God's will in God's way.⁸⁴

OUTLINE

- I. Preamble introduction
 - A. Reducing resistance to change on a personal level
 - B. Available relating resource materials
 - C. Thesis proposal to utilize personal spiritual counseling
- II. Defining the problem
 - A. Focusing on sinful responses to change
 - B. Hurting people in the church need help with their issues
- III. Defining a solution
 - A. Church leaders ministering through counseling
 - B. Biblical counseling is empowered by God
 - C. Finding the right person to do the counseling
- IV. Getting started - identifying priorities
 - A. Identifying concentric circles of influential people
 - B. Initiate the counseling immediately
 - C. Identifying specific potential opponents
 - D. Prioritizing people with the potential for the most destruction
- V. The personal counseling process
 - A. Acquiring and analyzing the person's thinking

⁷⁷ Lewis, 91.

⁷⁸ Kouzes, 165.

⁷⁹ Herrington, 90.

⁸⁰ Kotter.

⁸¹ Lewis, xvii.

⁸² Rutland; Coulson-Thomas, 35.

⁸³ Grabill; Buch-Wagler, 11.

⁸⁴ Logan, xviii.

- B. Treatment - applying corresponding Scriptures
 - C. Addressing sins - arranged by general major categories
 - 1. Past abuse
 - a) Definition - the example of abuse by past church leaders
 - b) Special treatment - focusing on forgiveness
 - c) Special priority - board members
 - 2. Refusal to trust in God
 - a) Definition
 - b) Special treatment - focusing on distinguishing reality and validity
 - 3. Selfish expected losses - definition
 - 4. Reactively identifying other hindering sin
 - 5. Anticipating complaints
 - VI. Conclusion - summary closing statements
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