**The Role of the Business Meeting
in a Healthy Change Process**

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During my nearly thirty years of ministry experience, I have often encountered various opinions concerning the value of business meetings in the local church. Unfortunately, some of my early experiences with business meetings were not positive ones. In one church where I served as a youth minister, I saw a heated discussion which resulted in five families leaving the church. In the next church where I also served on staff, the pastor was voted out. Although did not have a direct impact upon me, these events did make me wonder what I would confront when I became the pastor. Thankfully, through the years I have been blessed by an overwhelmingly positive experience with business meetings.

Due to some perceived negatives, a number of churches have moved away from the traditional "monthly business meeting." This is particularly true among new church starts in recent years. Other larger churches have moved to quarterly meetings that are more informational than volitional. Is this a healthy trend? Are Southern Baptists better off without the traditional monthly business meeting? On the other hand, does having a business session ensure that the church will be mobilized in unity toward fulfilling its mission? Misperceptions can occur either way. Before discarding the business meeting or considering it to be the pathway to

harmonious progression, church leaders should consider the following issues regarding the role of these meetings for healthy change process.

The Business Meeting and the Stages of Change

Ken Gangel reflected an image problem with business meetings when he stated, "Herein lies the central problem of business meetings in the church: we have viewed them not as essential service for Jesus Christ, but as a necessary evil to be dispensed with as quickly and painlessly as possible so that service can commence."[1] One way to alleviate this troublesome perspective is to view the business meeting as part of a healthy change process.

Change has always been an inescapable part of life, but in some ways it has been particularly intense in recent years. In his widely heralded work, *Leading Change*, John Kotter wrote, "By any objective measure, the amount of significant, often traumatic, change in organizations has grown tremendously over the past two decades."[2] The church is not exempt from the rapidly moving currents of change and in many ways is in the middle of it. Leith Anderson observed how mega trends such as globalization, ethnic diversification, pluralism, time stresses, gender roles, and other factors have invaded the church. He argued, "Everyone is in motion. Each church member is changing while the church is changing while society is changing. Change is not the choice. How we handle it is."[3]

The business meeting can play a key role in the change process. The importance of the leader's understanding of the change process was underscored by Michael Fullan when he stated,

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[1]Ken Gangel, *Feeding and Leading: A Practical Handbook on Administration in Churches and Christian Organizations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 273.

[2]John Kotter, *Leading Change (*Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 3.

[3]Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1990), 11.

"Moral purpose without an understanding of change will lead to moral martyrdom."[4] Regretfully, church leaders have often learned this lesson the hard way. To understand how healthy change occurs, it is necessary to explore the process of change itself.

Various means to describe change as a process have been attempted. One model that has been influential for a number of decades is the force field theory of Kurt Lewin. Lewin saw change as occurring through two actions. One method is to increase the force that is exerting itself for change while another is to lower the resistance against change. Ideally, both should be employed when attempting to bring change to an organization. Lewin also maintained that in the change process, organizations go through three stages: unfreezing, changing, and freezing.[5] The implications of his theory are rather simple. There must first be preparatory work before an organization can be open to change. When the thaw occurs, there is an opportunity for change, but one must be very cautious because fluidity results in instability. Lastly, no institution can remain in flux and must stabilize once again into some manner of institutional form.

Although the analysis of Lewin is helpful, I have found that in looking at the change process of churches there is a need to be more specific. Thus, I prefer a five-stage model which lends itself to understanding the role of the business meeting. The stages of this model are: constructive dissatisfaction, formation of an initiating group, development of a supporting group, implementation by consensus, and the feedback loop. The business meeting of a church with congregational polity can be viewed with a connection to each one of these.

The first of these, constructive dissatisfaction, refers to the development of a willingness to change. This process brings constituents from complacency to a desire for action. Constructive

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[4]Michael Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 5.

[5]Kurt Lewin, "Group Decision and Social Change," in *Readings in Social Psychology*, ed.. E. E. Macoby, T. M. Newcomb, and E. L. Hartley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), 197-211.

dissatisfaction is distinguished from just "keeping the griping down." For certain, effective transactional leadership is needed to deal with the myriads of detail that are necessary to keep an organization running. Yet, as Kennon L. Callahan warned, if too much energy is given to this effort alone, then the organization will not have an opportunity to move to the more important matters that lead to a higher level of satisfaction.[6] However, for an organization to improve, something else must happen. People must want to change.

The importance of this stage is evident to anyone who has ever been at a business meeting when something was brought up and the members were not ready to change. Usually, the person or committee bringing the motion miscalculated by thinking that the matter was not significant enough to evoke any opposition. The results create a harsh reaction that could have been avoided if the proper sequence had been initiated.

Ministers, particularly pastors, have a great opportunity to see constructive dissatisfaction develop through the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures. By relating from the Bible a picture of what it means to be the people of God, church members can be inspired to change if they can see the connection to kingdom work. This is why the business meeting can be an important check on church leaders to make sure that the proposed change is related to the biblical mission of the church. When this connection is made, leaders can be assured that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of all believers to bring them into unity with regard to the decisions that are made in obedience to the biblical mission. In constructive dissatisfaction, there is not a blame game against anyone as to why the church is not what it should be, but rather a collective conviction and willingness to do whatever it takes to move toward the ideals of the mission of the church.

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[6]Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983), xiv.

A second step in a healthy change process in the church is to form an initiating group. The writer of Proverbs declared that "without consultation plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed" (Proverbs 15:22, NAS). In congregational polity, one is reminded that there are influencers that are outside the formal lines of power. Anyone is free to speak in an open business meeting. Although it is important to go through the established structures of authority, it is equally vital to get a cross-section of viewpoints prior to the business meeting. This procedure can reveal opinions otherwise unknown. When teaching students to work through this model, I advise them to seek out the spiritually mature in the initial stages of developing an idea. This could include influencers who have formal positions as well as those who do not. Once again, the knowledge that there is a business meeting to which particular matters must be brought is a great incentive to work through this process.

The third stage is the development of a supporting group. Lyle Schaller described an effective supporting group as one that has "the capability to legitimatize a proposed change."[7] In most church business meetings, recommendations from formal committees have a certain sense of legitimacy from the outset. The fact that a motion from a committee does not require a second is a recognition that this is a concern of more than one person and is worthy of discussion. Ideally, a recommendation from a committee should promote a sense of trust that a thorough investigation of the matter has occurred. This has the potential to instill confidence in the voting congregational body.

The fourth stage is to implement the change through consensus. If leaders attempt to implement change without consensus, there is a higher chance of resistance, either formal or informal. Even if the leadership has the right to implement change according to the polity of a particular congregation, legitimization occurs by obtaining the consent of others. A business

meeting is a great opportunity for an affirmation, and this far outweighs the risk of negative

reaction. Any negative response given in a business meeting was likely to have surfaced sooner

or later, but the positive responses are not always as vocal.

Finally, the change process must include a feedback loop. Even after the matter is voted

on, it does not mean that it is the end of the change process. One cannot assess predictions, only

implementations. Unforeseen complications require adjustment. The key is that communication

remains open. Business meetings have the potential for fostering a climate of openness.

Organizations are affected by perceptions. If church leaders are receptive to feedback in the

congregational business meeting, then other avenues of feedback will likely be encouraged.

However, an opposite atmosphere that is not conducive to open communication can have a

detrimental effect.

Business Meetings as Positive Preemption

Michael Fullan observed that "change is a double-edged sword."[8] He noted, "If you ask

people to brainstorm words to describe change, they come up with a mixture of negative and

positive terms. On the one side, *fear, anxiety, loss, danger, panic*; on the other, *exhilaration,*

risk-taking, excitement, improvements, energizing. For better or for worse, change arouses

emotions."[9] Although change is obviously necessary for a church to move forward, it can be

threatening and is often fiercely resisted. As a result, there are some potential conditions that can

derail the change process. The business meeting can be part of a proactive prevention strategy.

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[7]Lyle E. Schaller, *The Change Agent (*Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 104

[8]Fullan, 7.

[9]Ibid.

One aspect is in regard to compliance versus commitment. As Gary Yukl observed, compliance can influence "the target person's behavior but not the person's attitude."[10] On the other hand, a person who has commitment "makes a great effort to carry out the request or implement the decision effectively."[11] Leaders who desire to lead churches to a great vision must have more than compliance. Compliance alone will not release the creativity necessary in order to achieve great goals. Nor will an attitude of mere compliance suffice when the inevitable crises occur. Churches that fulfill great visions have great commitment. The business meeting can be an important step in building a consensus that leads to commitment. The business sessions says, "We have agreed to do this." Good leaders know how to employ such affirmation to energize the membership for the mobilization and the implementation of proposed action. Obviously not every matter that is brought to a congregation business meeting is of monumental importance for the mission of the church. Some issues may seem inane. Yet, the patience required to endure in such matters can pay big dividends when it comes to mobilizing the energy of the congregation toward major initiatives.

Another area that the business meeting can be helpful is in the prevention of misinformation. It is has been said that people do not tend "to be down on what they are up on." The challenge of accurately communicating is huge. John Kotter argued that organizations tend to underestimate the need for communication by a factor of ten and sometimes even more.[12] Even when there is every effort to communicate, there are many barriers. Hamilton and Parker have noted a study that found that when a message was relayed in verbal form five times, it only

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[10]Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998), 176.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Kotter, 9.

retained 20% of its original intention. Apart from deliberate distortion and embellishing, there is the loss of details, the highlighting of certain aspects of the message, and ultimately filtering the message through one's own unique perspective.[13] Indeed, communication is a daunting task, especially in a volunteer organization like the church. Therefore, the wise leader wants to use every means available to ensure good communication. The business meeting is another vehicle in effectively disseminating information to the congregation because individuals are permitted to respond in dialogue. Such exchanges can reveal if the message is accurately communicated.

Chris Argyris warned that organizations whose leaders are not open to feedback could be victims of what he labeled as "skilled incompetence."[14] Essentially, Argyris defined skilled incompetence as when the followers of an organization become very competent at hiding reality from their leaders. Basically, the followers tell the bosses what they want to hear. Because the bosses want to hear it, they tend not to press the issue. Unfortunately, it is often the case that when the truth finally comes out, the damage is irreversible. Leaders must be proactive in preventing this problem. Any signal that the leader is not open to feedback can immediately set the process of skilled incompetence into motion.

Skilled incompetence seems to be standard operating procedure in many churches. The pastor preaches on Sunday morning and parishioners say nice things as they go out the door. No one tells him that there is an undercurrent. The results are often shocking. On more than one occasion, I have had a minister tell me that he had absolutely no idea that he was about to be terminated. I conversed with one who said that even as he was called into a meeting with key leaders he was confident that he would be told that he was getting a raise.

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[13]Cheryl Hamilton with Cordell Parker*, Communicating for Results: A Guide for Business and the Professions* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1997), 11.

[14]Chris Argyris, "Skilled Incompetence," *Harvard Business Review (*1986 September-October): 74-79.

Business meetings regularly conducted in an atmosphere of openness can be a key aspect

in the prevention of the erection of walls that foster skilled incompetence. On the other hand,

when business meetings are not conducted or they are held infrequently, an attitude of "we really

don't care what you think because we have already made the decision" is communicated. In such

a setting, there is a higher risk that the members will adopt the attitude that "if you do not care to

hear our opinion we will not tell you what we know." Leadership that is cut off from the flow of

information in regard to what is actually going on is likely to make serious miscalculations with

the potential for disastrous results.

The Limitations of the Business Meeting in the Change Process

Although the business meeting aids in helping church leaders promote a healthy change

process, these events do have limitations. When a conflicted church is examined, it is not unusual

to hear something like this, "I don't understand why we have had so much turmoil over this

issue. We voted on the matter and there was no opposition. Why did they not say something

when it was brought up"? The following are some reasons that this happens.

For one thing, church business meetings should not be the initiation of the change

process. If the stages of constructive dissatisfaction, initiating group, supporting group,

implementation by consensus, and feedback are circumvented, then even the most effective

business meetings cannot make up for the loss. A key aspect of whether a healthy change process

will occur is the environment. Hugh F. Halverstadt observed the importance of a systemic

assessment of the relational and contextual environment in managing church conflict.[15]

Depending on how it is conducted, the business meeting may indicate the true opinion of those

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[15]Hugh F. Halverstadt, *Managing Church Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 60-69.

present. Yet, it is not likely that it will reveal all the reasons behind the feelings. The business meeting alone cannot do such a task.

The earlier stages of the five-step model give time for people to process ideas and also serve as tools for assessing the current state of opinion. Often church leaders simply lack the patience to go through the process. However, the time supposedly saved by not going through certain steps will often be small in comparison to the time later invested in resolving a multitude of negative results. In fact, many a stormy business meeting could likely have been avoided if church leaders had worked with the congregation through the process.

Just as the church business meeting is not the beginning of a healthy change process, neither is it the end. Churches often make decisions or approve initiatives that are never actually implemented. In one church I served, there was a need to address retirement benefits for church staff. In researching the issue, it was discovered that a number of years earlier the church had actually voted to begin paying a retirement benefit. However, apparently, because of some passive resistance, the benefit was never initiated. On other occasions, I have observed congregations approve and implement a certain initiative, only to rescind the action at a later business meeting due to unpopularity of the change. Hopefully, such instances would be the exception rather than the rule. Yet, they do illustrate the limitations of a congregational vote.

Maximizing the Potential of the Business Meeting

We have noted how the business meeting has good potential in promoting a healthy change process. Yet, what specific ways can church leaders enhance the effectiveness of the business meeting for this purpose?

First, have regular business meetings. The ideal frequency for business meetings is impossible to determine. The variance from church to church is significant. However, whether

quarterly or monthly, a regular business meeting gives a sense of accountability as well stability

in the flow of decision making within the church. For instance, the commitment to a standard

time enables committees to know when to meet in order to formulate recommendations. This

becomes an aid in good planning and preparation. When committees are prepared in their

presentations, obviously trust can grow in the congregation.

Second, conduct the business meetings in accordance with established

parliamentary procedure, keeping in mind key general principles. Parliamentary

procedure is intended to assist organizations to conduct their affairs in an orderly and fair

manner**.** Parliamentary rules should never be used to suppress dissent or to ram through

recommendations. C. Barry McCarty has gained national recognition and has served as a

parliamentary procedure advisor at the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting. In his

book, *A Parliamentary Guide for Church Leaders*, he gave the following six important general

principles:

(1) Group decisions should be made in an orderly fashion.

(2) The majority rules.

(3) The minority must not be suppressed.

(4) Every member has the right to be heard and to hear what other members have to

say.

(5) All members have equal rights, privileges, and responsibilities.

(6) Members have the right to know what is going on.[16]

When these simple guidelines are practiced, the atmosphere is more conducive to a healthy

change process.

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[16]C. Barry McCarty, *A Parliamentary Guide for Church Leaders* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 19-24.

Third, promote attendance for business meetings. If the business meeting is considered a positive tool for a healthy change process, then it follows that an effort should be made to have maximum participation. Considering the time for the business meeting is an important factor. Many churches have their business meetings on Wednesday evenings. In churches that I have been the pastor, I have seen the attendance vary from less than ten percent to more than one-third of the number of adults present in the Sunday morning worship service. In addition to the issue of congregational involvement, many churches have specific guidelines as to what constitutes a quorum. As a matter of integrity, churches should not conduct business without the required quorum.

Some simple actions can help increase attendance. Although the interruption of the dynamic of the prime times for worship, evangelism, discipleship, and other ministries is undesirable, the business meeting should not be scheduled at a time would is prohibitive for most of the membership to participate. One suggestion is to refrain from scheduling other meetings, such as choir or small groups, at the same time. Another helpful suggestion is to combine the business meeting with worshipful elements such as a time of singing, Bible study, and prayer. Not only does this combination draw people who would not come if the only activity was a business meeting, it also aids in setting the proper context of the meeting and its close connections to some main functions of the church. Lastly, a periodic promotion by church leaders of the importance of the business meeting and the need for a broad involvement of the congregation can make a crucial difference in improving attendance.

Fourth, connect the administrative process with the mission and vision of the church. Churches should seek to clarify which issues should be brought for congregational approval. A clear description of the responsibilities of administrative teams/committees is

essential. Over time, church leaders should eliminate any overlap in the administrative functions and make a maximum effort to communicate the specific tasks of each group. In general, the congregation should act on matters of policy, the approval of all ministry personnel (both paid and voluntary), and major budget and facility matters. The scope of what is to be brought to the congregation will vary from church to church. Keeping a balance between the value of congregational participation and affirmation with not being overloaded with minutiae requires constant diligence.

Fifth, be thorough in preparation for the meeting. Thoroughness and preparation are critically essential for successful business meetings. An agenda that lists the order of the business meeting and a printed version of the recommendations that will be given should be available. Be sure to include any supportive materials in the packet that the members receive. Be certain that a designated member of the committees presenting motions are in attendance and are prepared to answer questions. These steps may seem incidental, but attention to such small details creates a healthier atmosphere for the business meeting to be an affirmation of a healthy change process.

Sixth, model and encourage a kind and gracious spirit. When change occurs, emotions can explode. I served as pastor where a very difficult decision resulting in a church staff termination had created some bitterness among a few members. As a result, in a business meeting a member exploded for several minutes with caustic comments laced with a number of untruths. I was moderating the meeting and many of his comments were directed at me. When he finished, he expected me to retaliate. Instead, God gave me a special sense of His calming presence. In a very gentle voice, I thanked him for sharing his opinion and recognized the next person to speak. There was a pause, and at that moment it was if all of the steam was let out of the opposition. I learned the truth of the Scripture text, "A gentle answer turns away wrath"

(Proverbs 15:1). That business meeting was crucial in establishing my credibility as a leader. The church worked through the crisis and became reunited in fulfilling its vision. I learned that the most difficult moments in business meetings may also be a prime opportunity to model what we preach.

Seventh, present matters in terms of the church vision. One of the most effective ways of church budget presentations is to relate items to their ministry connections. In the same way, items for consideration should always be in the context of ministry. Facility issues, program costs, personnel provisions, as well as other matters can all be directly connected to ministry. Failure to do so could allow factionalism to flourish. On the other hand, getting positive affirmation of a matter that is effectively communicated in its relationship to the overall church vision is a means of continually affirming that vision. Presenting matters in terms of the overall church vision is one way to keep the main thing as the main thing.

Conclusion

Twelve years ago, Daryl R. Conner wrote, "In the future, the world you consider now to be so disorganized, irregular, and convoluted will appear by comparison relatively stable. Whether the time horizon you envision is five years or five generations from now, change-related crises will be more frequent and more complex than today"[17] What Conner predicted has come to pass and will only intensify. Churches cannot avoid this challenge. In the midst of coping with present changes and anticipating the ones to come, a business meeting has the potential to bring some measure of stability and thereby enhance the health of the local church. Such an asset should not be discarded without regard to what may be lost.

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[17]Daryl R. Conner, *Managing at the Speed of Change: How Resilient Managers Succeed and Prosper Where Others Fail* (New York: Villard, 1992), 265.