

Leading an Anxious Church

Adapted from the book, Canoeing the Mountains by
Todd Bolsinger

PART I

Leading an Anxious Church

Part 1: Effective Leaders are Self-Aware, Adaptive & Empathetic to Loss

Effective leadership during times of high anxiety involves the self-awareness of the leader and understanding how loss impacts the people they lead. When the speed of change exceeds the capacity of people to absorb change, emotions of anxiety and anger will manifest. With this, good decision-making is obstructed. To offset this, equipping people to make hard choices and creating a sense of appropriate urgency are two key responses to anxiety as a leader.

Compiled by Joe Tremblay
Parish Evangelization Director
Parish Life & Evangelization Team
Diocese of Green Bay, WI
(920) 268-2377 | jtremblay@gbdioc.org





Manage Your Anxiety

The real challenge of leadership is not tactical or strategic but emotional. Not only do we have to deal with the inner uncertainty which goes with leading into uncharted territory, but we also have to manage our own need to be liked, or to gain approval from others, or to be seen as a competent professional. Sometimes we get anxious that we are not going to measure up. For the leader, it is critical to monitor our own emotional reactivity when the anxiety within the church rises. The calm leader is self-aware, committed to the mission and focuses on his or her own self in any transition. The leader's own presence is the most powerful tool for furthering transition; this, especially, when the system begins to create heat for the pastor.

"The leader's
own
presence is
the most
powerful
tool for
furthering
transition."

Know the Impact of Loss on Others

When we are faced with limited resources and a new experiment that we cannot squeeze into the budget, a choice has to be made: either existing programs are going to lose some of their resources, or the new experiment will go unfunded. Keep in mind that people do not resist change, per se. People resist loss. You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of

a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see a promising future with clarity and passion, people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain.





Subtract at a Rate People can Absorb

In the past, churches solved problems through addition. If they wanted to address a need, they just added a new program, a new staff member, a new line in the item budget. But today churches do not have the money and personnel to do that. If truth be told - we do not have any experience of solving problems with subtraction. Yet, those who do have experience with solving problems with subtraction, tell us that we have to learn how to disappoint people at a rate they can absorb.

Equip People to Make Hard Choices

Transformational or transitional leadership, therefore, equips people to make hard choices regarding the values that keep them from the growth and transformation necessary to see in a new way; and discovering new interventions to address the challenge they are facing. We should be mindful that today's problems come from yesterday's solutions. This means that the program, ministry, staff person, principle, action or activity in danger of being lost was at one time of great value. Decision-making, therefore, can get difficult when the choice is between two valuable ideas.

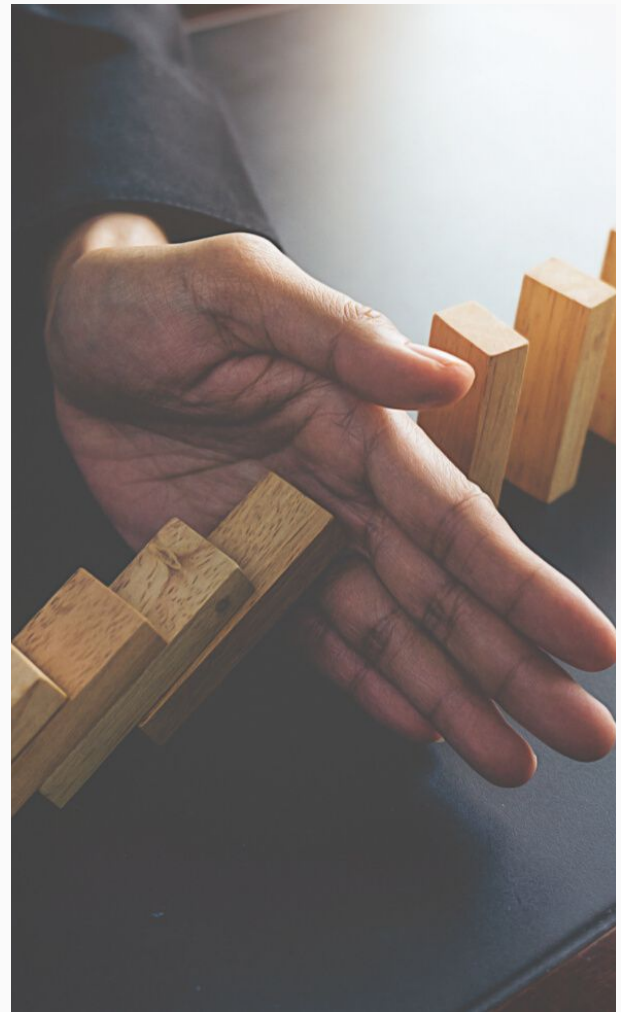
*"...for to men
wisdom is an
unfailing treasure;
those who gain this
treasure win the
friendship of God,
to whom the gifts
they have from
discipline commend
them."
(Proverbs 7:14)*



"Transformation or transitional leadership, therefore, equips people to make hard choices..."

Attend to Resistance

Amid change, we have to attend to the resistance and sometimes even resentment among our own people who are experiencing loss. The challenge of leadership, especially during uncertain times, is learning how to keep innovating and experimenting, while attending to and caring for the disappointment of the team. Communicating a message that they have to change, adapt, give up something for the greater good, work with those they do not like, or compromise on something they care about - they get mad. They get really mad. Mostly, they get mad at you and this is exactly the sign that transformation is beginning to happen.



Regulate the Heat

A leader's job is to regulate the heat. The leader is like the thermostat on the Crockpot - keeping enough heat in the system so things begin to change, but not enough that the individual parts get scorched. When we are all so calm that we are comfortable, we do not want to go anywhere. But if the sun is scorching, it saps all motivation for moving. This is where the two forms of bringing heat are important to know: urgency and anxiety.

Leading transition is creating a sense of urgency. This includes a gut-level determination to move...now! Among many failed organizational transitions, leaders did not create an appropriate sense of true urgency. Lack of urgency is often accompanied with a belief that "everything is just fine." Yet, there is such a thing as false urgency. This is where people in the system are frantically working on issues that are not contributing to the mission. True urgency is a heartfelt sense of the importance, opportunity, and necessity of the challenge in front of us.

