

Change in Christian Organizations by Kevin Scheid

“Change is inevitable – except from a vending machine.” *Robert C. Gallagher.*

Although many people do not like change, most have accepted that change will happen no matter how hard you resist. So how does change happen in Christian organizations and is it any different than change in secular organizations? To answer this question we examined the results of the Best Christian Workplace surveys over the last six years. This included responses from over 28,000 individual employees in 186 organizations. We looked at three factors from the survey to obtain some insight into changes in Christian organizations including: initial score on the employee survey; trend in scores of the employee survey over time; growth of the organization over time.

The score an organization receives the first time they take a survey is considered a measure of the match between the demands of top leadership positions with the skills and gifting of top leadership. The higher the score the better the match since leadership dramatically shapes the culture of an organization. The trend in scores over time is an indicator of change within the organization. Scores can either go up or down during over the course of these six years. Growth of the organization over time is another indicator of organizational change, either positive or negative.

Organizational growth would most likely be associated with change directly related to the primary mission of the organization.

The data shows some surprising results related to change in Christian organizations. We first hypothesized that a positive change in survey scores will result in a positive change in organizational growth. The data however did not

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confirm this hypothesis as the average growth for organizations with increasing survey scores was 18.89% compounded over the six years, while the average growth for organizations with decreasing survey scores was 23.91%. Other factors were likely at play which could not be isolated in this survey.

Our second hypothesis was the initial score on a survey would predict organizational growth and the third hypothesis was the initial score on a survey would predict improvement in the survey score. The data indicated both of these hypotheses were correct. Organizations with an initial score of

4.0 or better (out of a possible 5.0) grew on average 49.11% over the course of six years while organizations with scores of less than 4.0 grew on average of 15.79%. This data essentially confirms the second hypothesis and indicates a relationship of high survey scores to ministry growth.

Comparing the initial survey scores to the growth in survey scores, we find the data supports our third hypothesis. Organizations with an initial survey score greater than 4.0 shows an average improvement of 1.91% on the survey scores while organizations with a score below 4.0 initially, decreased their survey score on average -0.29%.

What the data tells us.

The data seems to confirm that having the right people in the right job supports positive organizational change. The data does not rule out people improving if they start out with a low score, but it does indicate that organizations which are run well with engaged and committed employees are more likely to improve both in growing the ministry and making the organization into an even better-run organization.

Although this analysis did not effectively isolate external factors, the differences cannot be accounted for by external factors since the correlation between positive improvement and initial scores is

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significant. This fact leads us to believe that either positive or negative change in Christian organizations come from internal factors and the fit of the people in the organization is an important factor in determining if the change is positive or negative. This finding certainly coincides with the biblical directive for people to serve in their area of giftedness.

The Importance of Change

Next to leadership, change may be the most studied issue in the management and organizational development arenas. The study of managing change in organizations is extensive. In fact an entire magazine, "The Journal of Organizational Change Management", has been around for nearly 30 years and is dedicated entirely to scholarly research on managing organizational change. Further, the study of leadership is merging with the study of change as can be attested to the acceptance of the model of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994) as the premier model of leadership. The marriage between leadership and organizational change is further strengthened by Clawson's work (2007) which defines leadership as managing change.

So change is upon us, it is important, and it is widely recognized as intimately related to leadership. But is change really important to Christian organizations? Since

Christianity has one eternal source of truth, the Bible, as our reference point, and an unchanging God, maybe Christian organizations really don't need change. Certainly Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew was good enough for Peter and Paul, so why are modern Christians so special as to need their own language? However, one can argue that Christian organizations, more than other organizations, need change. Christianity changes the world when it follows Jesus' commands of spreading the Gospel, loving one another and loving God. Following these commands changes people, changes countries and changes the world for the better. Clearly, Christianity is all about change. We know the importance changing the world is to Christianity because it dies to its purpose when it is not changing hearts, people, organizations, societies and the world. A Christian organization that does not change people is an organization not fulfilling its purpose. Christianity is about change.

This need for change in Christian organizations is contrasted with the corporate world which is driven by profit. The corporate world will change in reaction to external stimulus in order to survive and continue making a profit. It might change the world, but only as a byproduct of producing a profit. The efforts of Microsoft or Apple are examples of how our world has been

changed due to these corporations efforts to turn a profit. Therefore, since the purpose of Christian organizations is to change the world to follow Christ, while corporations are all about profit, we can conclude that change plays a bigger role and is more important with Christian organizations.

Change, however, is not a one way process. As Clawson (2007) asserts:

"If you want to change the world around you, recognize that the way you have dealt with the world in the past has produced the world you now experience. If you want to change it, you're going to have to change yourself first. If you are unwilling or unable to change the way you do things, the odds are that the world around you will continue the way it is." (p287)

From Clawson we can gather that since the main mission of Christian organizations is to change the world, Christian organizations have a need to change themselves as well as changing the world. Indeed, leaders in Christian organizations also have a mandate for personal change in order to be effective at changing the world. This assertion can be further supported by many of the recent missional church writings asserting that the church is a movement more

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than an organization. A movement is all about change. Therefore, Christian organizations are tools to change the world, but in the process must be open to change themselves. It is important here to not confuse changing theology with mundane tasks or rituals. The organization change referred to has nothing to do with changing theology and faith and everything to do with changing mundane tasks and rituals. Some of the changes needed include how Christian organizations organize, manage and lead.

Why Change in Christian Organizations is more difficult

Knowing that change is important to Christian organizations, there is anecdotal evidence that Christian organizations tend to resist change. Some common wisdom related to change in Christian churches is that "Churches are willing to make any change to ensure things stay the same" (unknown source). So, churches may recognize the need for change and even go through the ritual to look like they are open to change, but in the end they do not want to change.

To better understand the dynamics of change in Christian organizations, it may be helpful to examine some of the academic research on the topic and see how it fits with the special situation of Christian organizations.

According to Clawson (2007)

organizational change comes from either external or internal motivation. External motivation would include regulation changes, technology improvements, changes in the marketplace or cultural shifts in the organization's environment. Internally motivated change comes from organizational leadership initiating a change. External change can have a profound impact on corporate organizations and extend beyond a manufacturer of products destined for obsolescence, but includes the way customers and employees are treated and communicated with bringing new technologies on board. Businesses refusing to recognize these external changes risk reduced profits and the possibility of going out of business.

Because many Christian organizations rely on donations for most, if not all, of their income, and many of their direct customers or ministry recipients receive their services for free, there is a disconnect between organizational survival and mission effectiveness. In other words, the ability to attract and retain donors determines the survival of a Christian mission and not the satisfaction of the ministry recipients. Thus, the changing external environment, one of the greatest external imperatives for organizational change is directed at the ministry's interaction with its donors and not the ministry's main mission. Lacking this external environment to motivate change in

the main functional area of Christian organizations, more motivation for change must come from internal sources or initiatives.

Additionally, since donors are generally not recipients of the ministry's mission, donor loyalty is to the missionary or ministry and not to a product or service. This loyalty is thus not challenged by low price or quality of service comparisons. Indeed, donor loyalty may discourage substantive change for want of keeping the ministry consistent with the culture of the ministry of times past. An example of this type of loyalty might be the loyalty of congregants in a church may have to the music and Sunday service ritual. Changing the music or the way service is done may drive away some of the members attached to the older ways of doing things. Thus, donors may actually be an impediment to changing many aspects of Christian ministries.

Organizational change is an important component in any organization and since Christian organizations are in the business of world change, organizational change is even a more important component. However, as we have established, organizational change has more barriers to change than for-profit organizations. The question remains of how Christian organizations change.

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Summary

We have established the importance of organizational change to Christian organizations. Christian organizations will likely have little world changing impact if they are unable to keep up with the changing world. Moreover, Christian organizations have less external imperative for change and to some extent, have an existential imperative from donors to stay the same. These ideas coincide with the data that shows change in Christian organizations is largely related to the quality of the fit between the job requirements and the people in those jobs, especially senior leadership. Motivated and gifted leaders cause organizations to grow while increasing the commitment and engagement of employees. The wrong leaders will do just the opposite.

Although an overriding prerequisite for positive organizational change is having the right people in leadership position, there are critical aspects of managing change which when understood, allows the change to be more effective and less disruptive. In future articles we will examine the best of these theories and see how they can be effectively applied to your organization.

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