

# How do I lead a change process?

By Rick James

It is odd - how supposedly powerful leaders frequently feel powerless to change their own organisation. Their efforts to communicate a new way of working seem to result in nothing new. Their position and power seemingly count for nothing as people in their organisations successfully resist change. Many leaders ask the difficult question: *How do I lead a change process?*

We find some fascinating practical insight into this question in two case studies of leadership inspired change processes which have already been presented in this learning group - 'Spiritual leadership - bringing inside-out change' the story of process in a large Christian NGO in Africa and 'Finding Identity and Forgiveness' a description of Swedish Mission Council's own change process. Looking at these two stories I learn eight important insights to the question of how to lead change:

1. Start with the sense of urgency
2. Realise it is not all about you
3. Listen to and trust God
4. Listen to your staff and trust them
5. Start with your leadership team
6. Get some quick wins
7. Admit failure and ask for forgiveness
8. Be courageous and determined

## **1. Start with the sense of urgency**

Both positive change processes started with a sense of urgency. Because people knew that there were problems, they were open to change. In the case of SMC, the need for change was obvious: 'Relations with members were deteriorating; we were in conflict with the Swedish Council of Churches (SCC); internally we were deeply divided and stressed. Added to that Sida was aware of our problems and was drastically cutting our funding by \$8 million. Our very existence was under threat.' Similarly with Mzima it was in crisis. Fear, division and apathy were endemic - petty kingdoms had developed. Staff were demoralised and demotivated. They had lost trust in the previous leadership. It had degenerated into 'us' and 'them' battles. They felt victimised and intimidated.

It is clearly easier to lead change when most people believe there is a need for change as in these two examples. If this need is not obvious, the leader's role is to make people more aware of the situation. This is not about manufacturing a need to change, but about making the need more obvious. Sometimes it is about using numbers to show how serious things have got. At other times it is about using symbols. I was hearing about a change process in a church in Africa just last week where the image was that change is needed because 'we have outgrown our old shoes'. It can be very powerful to constantly remind people, with visual symbols like a pair of small shoes, why there is the need to endure this difficult process of change.

## **2. Realise it is not all about you**

The two stories also show leaders who realised it was not all about them. Leading change in an organisation is never an individual effort or crusade. It can only be done with the support of others. In the SMC case, the leader had the full support of the board throughout the change process and the visible presence of the Chair at the critical moments. Indeed they said "she embodied a spirit of renewal". The SMC leader also sought and found good outside support from two OD consultants. These facilitators understood organisations and change, had excellent listening and facilitation skills to involve people and were committed enough to the client to be honest and open with the leadership. In the Mzima example, the leader developed allies amongst the key staff and they worked completely together as a team to guide the wider organisational change.

### **3. Listen to and trust God**

Both positive examples of change demonstrate the importance of bringing in the spiritual dimension. Indeed both leaders provided spiritual leadership to the change process. The Mzima leader set the tone when he arrived. For his first day in the office, he called for a full day of prayer and fasting to confront the organisational challenges with prayer. He joined the small group of staff who were already meeting on a daily basis to pray for the organisation. He also organised spiritual retreats as part of the leadership team's development process.

The SMC example reveals that 'change is also a spiritual struggle. We were intentional about our spirituality. Both the board and the General Secretary provided spiritual leadership'. They also chose facilitators who would explicitly integrate a spiritual dimension. Staff said: "The consultants made time for us to pray. They encouraged us to ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit and to look for God's hand in the process. They told us this over and over and over again. I can now see how unwilling I was. Only later on did it become clear. Without the Holy Spirit it would have gone nowhere. This was the decisive thing." As one SMC staff concluded: "Our faith brought us hope in midst of the depressing moments, when we felt so useless it could have killed us; when we were crawling along the floor. In such dark times, God really did bring us a sense of hope - a realisation we were a small part of his bigger plan. If you consider the work as God's work, then you realise you cannot solve problems without God's help."

### **4. Listen to your staff and trust them**

In both situations, the leaders made time to actively listen to staff; to see the organisation through their eyes, before leaping into any change process. As the SMC story says: 'The new leader was keen to start listening to staff. He said: "I have to listen to be able to join the people"'. They initiated a participatory change process founded on an assumption of trust, not blame. The leadership chose to believe that people genuinely wanted the best for SMC and that staff had the knowledge and skills to be part of the solution to the crisis. Similarly with Mzima, despite the problems, the new leader started working with the people he had inherited, and in particular the leadership team. They actively invited and created opportunities throughout the process for staff to ask difficult questions and give challenging feedback.

### **5. Start with your leadership team**

The Mzima example demonstrates the value of working closely with the leadership team. The new leader did not try and change the whole organisation at once. Instead he started with those closest to him. He believed if he could get the leadership team working well together first then this example could permeate throughout the organisation. So initially the leadership team met weekly, often for a whole day; starting with an hour of prayer, praise and worship. These long meetings were not popular at the start, as people said: "We have so much work to do at our desk. We discuss issues that don't even apply to my work." However, soon the members realised that this time enabled people to stop seeing themselves as leaders of teams but instead *the* leadership team for the organisation. This built trust, accountability and team cohesion. This only happened through a deliberate policy of consultation and joint decision-making, combined with relentless openness.

### **6. Look for 'quick wins'**

Any change process needs encouraging. People need to feel they are making progress. Some of the most fundamental challenges will be deep-rooted and long term and so leaders need to identify milestones towards these or areas of the change process that can show quick progress. The SMC example shows the value of being able to show progress in developing new systems for work. They positively respond to Sida's extremely negative audit by coming up with eight areas of response and implemented visible changes in these areas in just six months.

### **7. Admit failure and ask for forgiveness**

Both change processes had admission of failure right at their heart. This was not the start of the change, but a pivotal moment during the process. When the Mzima leader arrived he described to staff his previous work in Mozambique. To their surprise he honestly related some of the things that had not gone so well. When asking the leadership team to become more open with each other through honest feedback he admitted: "I do not know how to do this. Let's start with me." As Albert Schweitzer said: 'Example is not the main thing in leading others. It is the only thing'.

Later on, when faced by a difficult conflict the team asked each other: "What have we done to offend you?" People began to open up about events of the past, on-going grievances and lack of respect between departments. It was all very raw. But as the team members reflected on what was said, something startling happened. They began to confess to one another and ask forgiveness on behalf of themselves and their teams. Team leaders were reconciled with each other.

But they were left with an important question - how were they to pass this repentance and reconciliation to the rest of the organisation? At the subsequent annual staff meeting, all the leadership team took the stage together. They described the tension and division in the office and began to confess again to each other in public. Tears and forgiveness flowed amongst leaders and staff. The impact of this on staff was equally profound. They said: "You truly led by example here, now we know we can do it in our departments and in the project areas we work in."

The SMC example also shows the importance of the symbolic act of letting go and receiving forgiveness. After a pastor had spoken about the subject at a staff retreat, the leader suggested staff write down on a piece of paper all their frustrations and sorrows - the things they wanted to leave behind. They put their papers into a basket. The leader lifted up the basket and prayed asking God for forgiveness, asking for his help as they continued in their change process and thanking God for taking them so far in the process. It was a short, but intense ceremony that proved to be: "the decisive moment. It was such a relief to leave behind those things. The burden is now gone."

### **8. Be courageous and determined**

The two stories also show that a leader needs courage to lead a change process. It is likely to be painful and tough for the leader. As the SMC leader said: "The next couple of years were the toughest time in my life. But also looking back, the best time of my life." It also requires courage to make difficult decisions. In SMC the change process involved removing the post of deputy General Secretary. Many change processes will have seemingly 'negative' consequences for some individuals. It is all too easy in Christian organisations to remain misguidedly loyal to individuals and therefore let the whole organisation suffer. Sometimes for the good of the organisation and indeed for the ultimate good of the individuals people need to be moved on.

Courage is also needed to persevere. In any change process there will be setbacks. Things will not always appear to go well. It is at these times that leaders need the courage and determination to keep going. I like the quote from Dag Hammarskjöld the former UN General Secretary: 'When the morning's freshness has been replaced by the weariness of midday, when leg muscles quiver under the strain, the climb seems endless and suddenly nothing will you quite as you wish... it is then you must not hesitate'.