

(CHAPTER 5)

How to Change a Church in 8 Steps

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(Adapted by the author from his upcoming book with Mark DeYmaz, *reMix: Transitioning Your Church to Living Color*; Abingdon Press, 2017).

So, what steps are required to transition a church? Just 8 actually.

John Kotter is a renowned and respected change coach who perfected eight steps for organizational change that have been applied successfully to thousands of organizational transitions.ⁱ Harvard Business Review said, “Perhaps nobody understands the anatomy of organizational change better than retired Harvard Business School professor John P. Kotter.”ⁱⁱ

I have consulted or mentored hundreds of church transitions. And, I have found Kotter’s eight stages to be reliable, valid and important steps for a healthy church transition to living color.

Here are the key phases for implementing the principles and procedures of a church revitalization..

8 Steps to Transforming Your Churchⁱⁱⁱ

1. “Establishing a Sense of Urgency.”

- a. It is important to begin with a period of time where you acquaint the congregants with the need and Biblical mandate for transitioning to a church living color. Because of the urgent situation, many church leaders will be tempted to ignore this step and launch headlong into transition. Yet, in my consulting work I have found that this step is critical. Pray, study, research and dialogue on the importance of a church transition first.
- b. Share the urgency in multiple venues. Don’t just use sermons, but let this be the topic of Bible studies, discussion groups, prayer groups, small groups and Sunday School classes.
- c. Remember, urgency is a key. Congregants must understand that we are today at the point where changes in communities across North America requires churches to stand up for Biblical principles of growth and change.

2. “Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition.”

- a. The second step which you must successfully navigate is the development of an influential and guiding coalition. Even though you might think you know

the situation the best, due to history, education or background: a church is a communal organization and leadership works best when there is a communal leadership. Find those that resonate with the transition and help them take the vision to the rest of the congregation.

- b. Look for “persons of peace.” When Jesus told his disciples to spread out and take their message to the byways and villages of the Israel, he suggested they rely upon persons of “peace” they might encounter (*Luke 10:6*). The Greek word for peace is derived from the word “to join” and it literally means a person who helps people from divergent viewpoints and even warring convictions to join together in unity whereby oneness, peace, quietness and rest result.^{iv} So, enlist people who are “peacemakers” who have demonstrated they can bring warring and opposing parties together.
- c. Listen to the naysayers, even though they may not be part of your guiding coalition, your coalition should hear them out. This is a step that if overlooked will usually splinter the congregation. This is because research has shown that unless you go to the naysayers and listen to them, they will feel left out of the consultative process and eventually fight the change.^v So go to those who will most affected or displaced and listen to them. Hearing them out has been shown to create new networks of dialogue that can prevent polarization. But, you must go to them early in the vision creating process.

3. “*Creating a Vision.*”

- a. People must see the future before they can work toward it. The goal is to have an easy to read, clear vision statement in no more than a paragraph.
- b. Get all of the members of your guiding coalition to help you draft, refine and edit your vision.
- c. Many times church leaders rely solely on a written statement of vision. While this is helpful (if drawn up with input from your guiding coalition, see above) you must create a vision with the following “communication elements” too.

4. “*Communicating the Vision.*”

- a. Use all communication vehicles available to you: written, vocal, electronic, narrative, arts, mixed-media, etc.
- b. Experience it first-hand by taking your leaders and congregants to places where turnaround ministry is being done. In these locales congregants can see first hand, ask questions and experience the heart of a ministry that is being revitalized. Vision can be communicated best by picturing something rather than just writing out a paragraph of technical terms.
- c. Use stories to help people picture change. Scott Wilcher while studying change found that successful change is more than twice as likely to occur if you attach a story to depict the change.^{vi} In the Bible you can find dozens of Biblical stories

that depict change. Attach these stories to the vision to make the vision “come to life in a story” (after all that is what Jesus did with his compelling use of parables).

5. *“Empowering Others to Act on the Vision.”*

- a. Delegate your power to others. Too many times passionate church leaders are tempted to go it alone. One pastor said, “Jesus had to do it alone.” And atonement and redemption were definitely things that only the Son of God could accomplish. But remember, he rounded-up and delegated to his disciples his ministry (*Matthew 10, Mark 6, Luke 9, 10*). You too must delegate to those you have mentored.
- b. Create accountability. Because the Good News (*Matt. 28:19-20*) is so essential, it requires that evaluation and accountability be central too. Have regular checkup discussions with clear objectives.
- c. Remember, because change can be polarizing, oversight and accountability for progress are essential.

6. *“Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins.”*

- a. This is the key step most overlooked. Kotter discovered, and we have confirmed in our church consulting, that short-term wins help people see the validity and direction of a new vision.
- b. Short-term wins are projects, programs and processes that can be undertaken quickly and temporarily. They usually won’t change the long-term outcomes (yet). But they demonstrate the validity of the transition in a quick, temporary way. Thus, they pave the way for long-term wins.
- c. Many short-term wins will convince reticent constituents of long-term legitimacy of the new direction.
- d. Use temporary “task forces” instead of semi-permanent committees to investigate and launch new directions in ministries. Then as task forces prove their effectiveness they can be transitioned into more permanent committees.

7. *“Using increased credibility to change systems, structures, and policies that don’t fit the vision.”*

- a. As noted above, wins even in the short-term can give the leadership coalition the social capital to make structural changes.
- b. Don’t start with structural changes. You haven’t got enough buy-in from hesitant members and/or most of the congregation.
- c. Only after your short-term wins validate your approach will you be able to change systems, structures and policies.

8. *“Institutionalizing New Approaches.”*

- a. As your church moves in the exciting direction of revitalized ministry, encourage an organizational structure that promotes this in the future.
- b. Institutionalizing principles of church transformation will allow you to reach out to new people and cultures as they develop in your community.
- c. Finally for long-term health and viability, the revitalized church of must acquire a personality and reputation as a church of consistency in theology but change in Godly methodology.

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ John Kotter, *Leading Change*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), John Kotter, *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, Harvard Business Review (Boston, Harvard Business Publishing, 2007), retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2007/01/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail/ar/1>

ⁱⁱ Editor's note to John Kotter, *ibid.* Harvard Business Review.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Kotter, *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, Harvard Business Review (Boston, Harvard Business Publishing, 2007), retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2007/01/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail/ar/1>

^{iv} James Strong *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Carol Stream, IL: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 1515.

^v Bob Whitesel, *Staying Power: Why People Leave the Church Over Change and What You Can Do About It* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) and *Preparing for Change Reaction: How to Introduce Change in Your Church* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2008).

^{vi} Scott Wilcher, *MetaSpeak: Secrets of Regenerative Leadership to Transform your Workplace*, Ph.D. dissertation (Nashville: Turnaround 2020 Conference, 2013).