



Making a case for change

TN121 Training Notes series: Communication

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These notes assume you need to present a case for change to win over a possibly hard-to-convince group of people. This covers the initial pitch more than the ongoing process. This is an issue of putting a launch message across so that it is received and evaluated rather than immediately rejected.

Examples include:

- a new Minister setting out a church vision at a congregational meeting six months or so into their appointment;
- a Youth Action Group coming to a trustee body with a paper setting out an idea for a new staff appointment;
- an Administrator explaining to a budget committee why it would be worth investing in expensive new equipment or software to streamline the work of the office;
- a leadership team putting a case for church planting or a major building project to a congregation using both a printed brochure and a personal presentation;
- a new Music Director proposing a change in musical genre for the monthly all-age service to a long-established choir.

Making a compelling case for change is one of the most critical actions in a process of developing support for any new initiative. Church leaders and staff need, today, to be change agents. Yet few are given any practical advice on how to go about this. These notes are designed to help.

Get a few basic communication principles right and you have a much greater chance that your listeners will support you. Get it wrong at this stage and their opposition may sink the idea for good.

So here are three areas to focus on as you prepare.

- 1 You need to be crystal clear as to ***your concept*** that you are trying to put across.
- 2 You should be ready for ***their concerns*** so you are not surprised by them.
- 3 You can then plan ***the concert***, a richly varied and creative feast for communicating your message.

There are six points under each of these three headings. In any particular pitch some will apply more than others but between them they set out actions to follow to give your proposal the best chance of success.

No mention of prayer? Well, it gets a bit tedious to say that for each of 18 points but from my point of view it's an absolute given.

You are praying that people will grasp the concept, have their concerns allayed, and get excited at the concert you present. You might be praying too that you will be sensitive enough to understand where people are coming from, humble enough to see improvements on your ideas when suggested by others, and creative enough to take people with you.

And of course you will not have got to this point without praying for wisdom and discernment to know God's will and to see what you are proposing as his plan for the church you serve, in whatever capacity that happens to be.

YOUR CONCEPT: it needs to be crystal clear

You should yourself know exactly what you are trying to put across and why, and be able to explain it in a memorable way in words or visual images. You need a clear concept so you can communicate with confidence so everyone will understand what you are talking about and there are no crossed wires. Best to test this out on some trusted colleagues before you go public.

1 Clarify the heart of the idea

It's crystal clear to you if you have been pondering it for months, but what you are proposing may not be anything like so clear to others on a first hearing. So sum up the idea in one memorable phrase or picture. Get to the heart of it at the start, rather than circling round with no one quite sure where you are going to land. Avoid getting into detail at this point. Define your message in a brief, easy-to-understand way.

2 Headline the needs to be met

Next, and very importantly, define the present needs for change. Show the weaknesses of the present set-up but choose ones that most people can see are not right rather than ones chosen by you simply because of personal preference. Aim to induce dissatisfaction with the present if it is not there already. Give evidence for each point you make (so this may require some research). Getting the 'why' of change must come well before the 'how'.

3 List the benefits of the change

Demonstrate the benefits of your proposal, especially if it is going to cost to get there. Three bullet points (whether print or speech) will be better than a piece of prose. Give rational not emotional reasons why the new position will be so much better than the present – but make it believable, not like those politicians who promise the moon without any idea of how to reach it.

4 **Produce evidence for what you say**

Show clear evidence for the benefits you are predicting if you can: from other churches, for example. Use case studies to show this works elsewhere. Seek factual background to show this does not have to be no more than a pilot scheme. What you are proposing and the benefits it will give must come across as wise and workable.

5 **Give alternatives to compare**

Show that you have considered other possible solutions (including 'do nothing') and show why you are opting for yours. But try to be fair to each alternative, rather than putting them in a poor light before you discard them. Show people that you have done your homework. Be aware of what has been attempted in the past (possibly, before your time) or you can look foolish.

6 **Don't minimise the costs**

It is normally better to be up-front about the costs and risks: financial or comfort disturbance, physical or emotional. If you don't, either people will think you are hiding them or they will pull the idea to pieces later in the process. Don't give opportunity for suspicion. In any case, some rise to a challenge.

THEIR CONCERNS: you need to be prepared

But your enthusiasm is unlikely to be matched by their first reactions to this idea. You cannot afford to be surprised by them: work out how you might feel in their shoes and be ready for the likely objections to be levelled at your idea. Don't be caught out by their first salvo!

1 **Identify the likely opposition**

Work out who are likely to support and who are likely to oppose. You may need to do some work with your likely opposers in advance, but it is worth at this point knowing who they are likely to be so you can put yourself in their shoes.

2 **Understand their viewpoint**

But now work out where these people may be coming from. Some will have an emotional response but more may have a rational viewpoint. If you were placed where they are, you might be seeking to oppose this too. So address their likely issues in your presentation.

3 **Define the likely questions**

Express in words what people may ask. Be ready for the five (say) main questions you can think of. Listen when people ask, then answer their real issues, not what you think they ought to have asked. Be ready to give way on unimportant detail, or to hear improvements to your ideas. Others may have much to contribute.

4 **Be prepared for legwork**

For particularly major issues you may need to work one-to-one with some people at some point, even visiting them at home to show them you care about their views and want to talk it all through with them. Be ready for this, even though it takes time.

5 **Take it slowly**

When it is possible, give people time to mull over what you are proposing. Don't rush them into a decision when the idea is new – try to come across as quite relaxed at this stage. Some need time to sleep on it. Let them talk to each other: it's often your rational supporters who will win over your rational opposers, not you.

6 **Build good relationships**

Success will depend to a large extent on relationships already developed. Aim not for popularity but for respect – people then want to support your ideas. If you have lost relationship with many people, a tough change proposal may only make that worse. But keep relationship during your presentation too: eye contact, not just reading a script (for a spoken presentation), wording that is personal (for print).

THE CONCERT: aim for a creative, varied approach

The presentation itself should be like a concert: plenty of instruments, different sounds, a variety of approaches, a richness of tone. So don't stick with one idea and one style such as just a dull slide presentation or an academic paper with long paragraphs. Aim for something rather more creative.

1 **Select the right media**

Spoken words can communicate passion more than print is able to do, but print can put across detail more clearly than presentation. Get these the right way round. You probably need to put the case in different ways in a variety of media if you want to communicate it well to a diverse church congregation. See other ideas below.

2 **Enable their ownership**

Keep your part shorter than you think you need and use 'we/us/our' language to build ownership. Then let people discuss it or mull it over and ask questions. Show that you are listening to them and hearing them. If they think you are deaf to any ideas other than your own, you will lose them. Your aim is to get to a point where people thought this was their good idea, not yours. Don't correct them if you do get to this point!

3 **Use lists**

Aim to make a number of distinct points for each part of your presentation. Use a bullet-point and possibly note-form approach in print with clear headings rather than prose. Use numbered points and a clear structure in an oral presentation. Many PowerPoint presentations are dreadful – keep the slides to visuals or short summary lists in large print without too much detail if you want to use it.

4 **Tell stories**

The use of story-format is one of the most powerful means of communicating something that people may not want to hear. A real case study from another church, a teasing parable approach or a future scenario if there is no change, all create interest, play to emotion and win people over. But ensure people can identify with the story.

5 Use witnesses

As one style of story, ask someone else to describe what they have seen regarding a similar change in another setting. Or identify a small group of influencers in your church and encourage them to explain why they are backing this idea. You do not want emotional enthusiasts who can put people off, but respected people whose judgement people trust.

6 Be memorable

People remember an illustration or a visual aid more easily than a rational argument. Be yourself but try to make the presentation memorable through visual aids or imaginative turns of phrase. Practise beforehand, especially if you are not used to giving presentations. Get friends to help you. Or if this does not sound like you, ask someone better able to do the presentation.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN121 See also Articles A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, and A44, *Making things happen*, plus Training Notes TN12, *Twenty ideas to help people change*, TN59, *Don't you dare change anything!*, TN70, *Do's and don'ts for a new leader*, TN81, *Changing the scenery*, and TN125, *How to take major decisions*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN121 under Communication (with a link to Planning).

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