

Implementing Associational Change -

In today's rapidly changing context, associational directors of missions (DoMs) are being forced to choose between leading like a missionary or serving as a curator and preserver of what has been. Effective DoMs who want to see results will choose to have a missionary mindset. They stand upon the eternal truths of scripture, but are ready to dump methods and paradigms that no longer give value to the association. DoMs who function as missionaries are open to change and adapt their ministry to the real need of member churches, not the churches of yesterday. Like the apostle Paul, they become all things to all people so that they might save some (1 Cor. 9:22).

On the other hand, DoMs with a curator mindset will value the past and resist change. They believe old methods and paradigms are worth protecting, even if they no longer work. They are afraid of innovation and slow to embrace needed change.



While change may be needed, it almost always leads to failure if there is no appreciation for the past. I'm not suggesting a preservation of the past at the expense of the future, but an acknowledgement of the past and its contribution to the association's current reality is important when leading change.

Associations that are effective and provide benefit to member churches will exercise flexibility, a willingness to try new things and the desire to make needed changes quickly. Associations today should regularly assess themselves and the need for change. Not every needed change will work, but don't be afraid of failure or innovation.

Here are four things to keep in mind as you lead your association through needed change. Hopefully these suggestions will allow your association to enjoy the benefits of implementing change without losing credibility, if things don't go exactly as planned.

1. **Use Experimentation Language** – words are important, so consider using “try” instead of “change” or “discussion” instead of “meeting”. Experiments provide you with wiggle room and people expect trial runs to need mid-course corrections. See compromise as a sign of wisdom, not a sign of weakness.
2. **Plan in Pencil** – nothing ever goes exactly as planned. A planned change or innovation is only a theory until implemented, and then it becomes a failure or a success. Think flexibility rather than certainty. Think in terms of this is what we'll do for now, rather than, this what we will do forever. The only thing certain is that the future will be different from what you expect. Keep as many options open as long as possible.

3. **Stay Away from Hype** – a big splash leaves little room for retreat. If you want long term success, be cautious of using hype to sell it. If we hype and it succeeds, all is well. But if we hype and it fails, there is a loss in future leadership. “Buy in” is helpful, but more importantly, we need permission to try something different. Permission is easier to get than “buy in”, and a lot easier to back away from if things don’t go well.

4. **Avoid Leadership ADHD** – ADHD leadership is very similar to innovative leadership. They both try lots of stuff. But non-ADHD leadership tries it in an experimental mode. Nothing is oversold. Everything is judged by its impact on the mission. However, ADHD leaders never slow down to experiment. Everything is always full speed ahead. When ADHD leadership is in charge, there is a constant stream of new initiatives and failed projects that numb everyone about the importance of the mission at hand.

If an association is going to be effective and valued by churches today, change and innovation are necessary. There must be the ability and permission to make changes as needed or the association will die. While change is needed in most of our Baptist associations, change at any cost will kill the association and render her of no value to member churches. As Larry Osborne has pointed out, “change is a lot like electricity. Handled well, it brings great blessings. Handled carelessly or without understanding, it can burn the house down.”

Blog post by Eric Allen, www.KYandBeyond.org, March 17, 2017