How Good People Become Cynical:
Leadership and Credibility Issues
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While the Church was founded by Jesus Christ and manifests many characteristics of the divine, it is also finds itself in the secular world and is subject to the same proclivities as any other organization of humans. Just as the leaders of secular organizations have both strengths and weaknesses, so one finds the same situation in the Church. Some church leaders – whether priests, permanent deacons or parish lay leaders – may have great creativity and vision, while others lack these qualities. Some leaders easily communicate ideas and plans while others have to constantly remind themselves of the importance of good communication. Likewise, some "employees" – whether paid professionals or volunteers – want to be intimately involved in significant organizational decisions while others are content to follow the directives provided by the leaders.

Because of these dynamics, the Church can learn from good organizational principles and thus improve its effectiveness. This report examines important organizational issues and offers strategies for managing cynicism which can condemn to failure parish or diocesan efforts at consultation and strategic planning, or any other effort where the status quo is changed.

Skepticism and Cynicism. First, it is important to define some terms. Cynicism about change differs from skepticism. Skeptics doubt the likelihood of success but are still reasonably hopeful that positive change will occur. It also differs from resistance to change, which results from self interest, misunderstanding and inherent limited tolerance for change. Cynicism about change involves a real loss of faith in the leader of change and is a response to a history of attempts at consultation or planning that have not been entirely successful. In many ways, cynicism comes about in spite of the best intentions of an organization's leaders.

Cynicism about consultation and planning can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if cynics refuse to support change. Their lack of support may bring about failure or greatly limit success. Failure then reinforces cynical beliefs, which further inhibit the willingness to try again. Few changes can be mandated from the top and put into place without the need for considerable acceptance from those lower in the organizational structure. The success of many church innovations depends upon discretionary commitment and follow-through. Cynicism, then, is an important barrier to any positive change.

Why Cynicism is Persistent. Cynicism functions as a defense mechanism for people who perceive themselves to be powerless to affect change. Cynicism may simply help people make sense of puzzling events in their environment. For example, people may be confused when leaders announce changes with much fanfare, but with little authentic communication that explains why the changes are necessary. To provide themselves with a greater sense of understanding, people may conclude that the changes themselves are a sham, or that the leaders

making the changes don't know what they are doing. People invent information to help themselves make sense of a situation in which they do not have good information. This is a survival mechanism. By doing this, though, they feed their cynicism about change.

Cynicism about an organization may also serve a defensive role, protecting people from unpleasant thoughts, such as that the organization – the Church in this case – may be experiencing serious problems. Such thoughts open people up to feelings of vulnerability and loss of certainly about important matters of identity and fidelity.

People do not deliberately decide to become cynical, pessimistic, and blaming. Rather, these attitudes result from experience, and are sustained because they serve useful purposes. Cynicism persists because it is validated by an organization's mixed record of successful consultation and change, and by other people in the organization who hold and express similar views.

Ideas for Minimizing Cynicism about Consultation and Change. Some of the following suggestions are similar to suggestions for dealing with generalized resistance to change. Most of the following address issues of credibility and the relationship between "employees" (e.g., those lower in the organizational structure) and leaders (e.g., those higher in such a structure).

Keep Key People Involved in Making Decisions that Affect Them. Involvement means different things to different people, but key people must believe that their opinions have been heard and given careful and respectful consideration. More substantive forms of participation in decision making tend to be associated with higher commitment. This cannot be emphasized enough: people must believe their opinions have been heard.

Emphasize and Reward "Middle Management" for Their Efforts to Communicate. In parishes, the staff and key lay leaders often act as the spokespersons of the pastor in relationship to volunteers and the typical Catholic in the pew. A similar situation is found in the Diocesan structure, where department directors, vicars and deans act as the spokespersons of higher diocesan leaders in relationship to diocesan employees and priests. In both situations, these spokespersons assume the role of middle managers, and are frequently the main channel through which information does (or does not) flow. Consequently, those who foster effective two-way communication and good working relationships, and who show consideration and respect for their "clientele" can help minimize cynicism about organizational change.

Keep Surprises to a Minimum. It is best to avoid surprising anyone, but especially "middle managers." Those who feel more informed and involved are less likely to possess cynical attitudes. Routine notice about what is happening and why it is happening, prevents anyone's being caught off guard. If it is impossible to thoroughly lay the groundwork before announcing a change, extreme care should be taken at the time of the announcement to provide answers to questions.

Information and Timing. People need information most whenever they are likely to be surprised by events. A sudden announcement of a new diocesan program, for example, would catch most department directors, vicars, priests and parish leaders unaware. Among their questions: Why is the program necessary? Why this particular program? Why now? Whatever

happened to the last program that was supposed to address these issues? Similar dynamics would take place at the parish level if the pastor announced a new effort without providing a good rationale.

Enhance Credibility. Persuading people to adopt change involves providing new information that contradicts present understanding. Credibility is determined by the extent to which such new information is believed by its audience. Cynicism cannot be moderated or changed by timely information unless that information is believed. A message is more likely to be made believable by using the following techniques.

Use Credible Spokespersons. Those who are announcing changes will be more believable if they are generally well-liked, seen as knowledgeable about the subject matter, possessed of high power and status in the organization (parish or diocese) and trustworthy.

Use Positive Logical Appeals. Even when a spokesperson is not particularly well-liked or trusted, credibility is enhanced if he/she presents the message seriously and sincerely. A positive approach that emphasized benefits is preferred to a negative approach that emphasizes dire consequences. Logical appeals, rather than emotional appeals that play on fears or insecurities, are desirable. Consistency in words and deeds is important too.

Use Multiple Channels and Repetition. The use of a variety of channels (formal meetings, informal discussion, and printed material) helps ensure that everyone has a chance to receive information through his/her most preferred medium.

Deal with the Past. To regain credibility after past failures someone in a leadership position must first accept responsibility and admit that the mistakes were made. Leaders who fail to do this are more likely to be viewed as dishonest, especially by those who are already cynical. Admitting mistakes and then taking quick action to rectify negative consequences will enhance the credibility of leaders. If mistakes of the past caused hardships or bad feelings among "middle management" or "employees," a sincere apology by a high leader is also in order. People can be very forgiving when mistakes are admitted, apologies offered, and actions taken to correct or prevent further problems.

See Change from the Perspective of "Middle Managers." The problem in regaining credibility may also lie in understanding how consultation and change are viewed by parish staff and key lay leaders (at the parish level) or by department directors, vicars and deans (at the diocesan level). If leaders are unaware that a change created a hardship for others or are insensitive to that hardship, they may fail to understand that many may view the change as a partial success at best. Leadership which is unaware that an action created a hardship can hardly be expected to accept responsibility or apologize for it.

Provide Opportunities to Air Feelings. Strategies for managing cynicism must also give people opportunities to air their feelings publicly, receive validation about their feelings, and receive sincere reassurance that steps will be taken – or have already been taken – to alleviate their concerns. This approach requires two-way communication and cannot be accomplished via

memos or even by face-to-face meetings that do not include open, honest dialogue. Often an experienced facilitator is used to promote communication at public meetings.