

A CASE HISTORY: RESISTANCE TO CHANGE MODELS

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the literature on resistance to change by applying the literature to a case history that emerges out of my own experience. This exploration intends to prepare me (and others) for future change situations by analyzing and more fully understanding the issues resident in this particular case history.

A CASE HISTORY: RESISTANCE TO CHANGE MODELS

Joy laid down the gauntlet playfully at the local pizza parlor where her Sunday school class gathered following the evening service on my first Sunday as her pastor. "You should know that I don't adjust well to change," she explained. Over the next five years, I discovered the serious caution that lurked behind the statement's apparent playfulness.

The dilemma I inherited as Joy's pastor is suggested by the question that I was asked to address in two oral interviews: "How do you feel about pastoring a church with a debt load so large that there is nothing left for ministry once the mortgage has been paid?" Having outlined the agenda I would implement, I interpreted the question as an informative description of the congregation's current situation, receiving the description as a partial definition of my task when the pastoral invitation was extended. This understanding was reinforced when parishioners, including Joy, regularly asked, "How long will it be before we can operate in the black instead of the red?"

A contradictory message was expressed less forthrightly: "Fix it, but don't change anything." This introduced me to Farson's (1996) "fundamental paradox: Clients come to therapy seemingly wanting to change but then spend most of their time resisting it" (p.

101). This confused me and became frustrating, in significant part, because I failed to understand the emotional power of a “feeling-prompted bias” (Fineman, 1993, p. 59). Unlike a “rational self [that] is cost-conscious,” Fineman says, the “‘pure’ emotional self is oblivious to the cost” (pp. 59-60).

Joy’s Profile

Joy routinely resisted change, using 21 of the 33 resistance tactics outlined by O’Toole (1995, pp. 161-164). Fear, habit, and the despotism of custom were the tactics she most commonly used. Fear and her proclivity for habit produced a strong desire for predictability that made her resistant even to continuous change (Isaacson, 2002, p. 3). She resisted my cognitive arguments with cognitions of her own.

[She truly believed], based on [her] best information and accumulated experience, that the desired future state is misdirected and that the current state or other alternatives are better.... [Additionally, she] also resist[ed] change for ideological reasons, believing the change violates an important principle or commitment that the organization must stand by. (Morris & Raben, 1995, p. 48)

Joy resisted overtly and covertly, actively and passively, subversively and with a firm belief that she was holding the well intentioned high ground (Umiker, 1997, paragraph 41).

Joy preferred the “known” because it appeared predictable and she was not "confident enough to explore new experiences" (Isaacson, 2002, p. 3; Marris, 1986, p. ix). A bit like “Miss Faversham, the jilted bride in *Great Expectations*, sit[ting] forever in her wedding gown at the ruins of her marriage feast” (Marris, p. 28), her life seemed frozen at a point in time when life seemed manageable. Indeed, her behavior often reminded me of someone who, afraid of snakes, wants to execute a retreat halfway

through a hike. Reasoning that they haven't seen any snakes on the trail already covered, they conclude that no snakes exist on the first half of the hike and decide that retreat is a safer option than progress.

Joy was a connoisseur of the "conservative impulse" (Marris, 1986, p. 4). The need we all have to "assimilate new experiences by placing them in the context of the familiar" (p. 6) became excessive. Her ability to adapt to new circumstances was swallowed by the desire for undisturbed continuity. The sources of this impulse are unclear to me. I know her sister experienced severe mental illness and her relationship with her parents included a painful breach that remained unresolved at the time of our pastoral relationship. Marris' (1986) theoretical template, if applied, may suggest that Joy experienced enough disruption that she sought continuity (Isaacson, 2002, pp. 4, 6) as a compensation for unresolved grief. Emerging from fear, her need for continuity may have stimulated the need to control as an attempt to reconstruct meaning (Marris, p. 16).

Joy's resistance was routinely punctuated with references to a golden age that she remembered as predictable and stable (Fineman, 1993, p. 130). She also selectively reinvented her perceptions (p. 121), insisting that worship and ministry approaches be aligned with her nostalgic expectations. "In its acute forms," Fineman says, "nostalgia amounts to a total inability to accept the present and a morbid determination to literally live in the past" (p. 120). This analysis describes Joy.

Joy's fear caused her to try to press the rest of the world into her own rhythm. Threatened whenever her basic assumptions and emotional attachments were challenged, she refused many of life's opportunities and sought to avoid life's inevitabilities in order

to occupy protected space (Marris, 1986, p. 10). Complicated by “parochial self-interest” (Isaacson, 2002, p. 38), Joy’s resistance may have produced a sense of safety; it did not produce happiness (p. 1; Hubbard, 1994).

Joy sought to prevent disruption by resisting anything that threatened to “invalidate [her] conceptual structures” (Marris, 1986, p. 10), not just in her personal situation but also at church. She sought to apply the mantra “No change, no growth” (Isaacson, 2002, p. 47; Hultman, 1979) in order that she would continue to feel safe and protected at church.

My assessment is that most of Joy’s adult life had been lived in Bridge’s (1980) neutral zone (Isaacson, 2002, p. 47). In the 30 or more years of her adult life, she never traversed the important space between some past unresolved ending and a new beginning. This proposes the discouraging question: After 30 years, does a hopeful prognosis for effective transition exist? Jellison (1993) challenges the pessimistic assumption inherent in this question, arguing that “each person, rather than being locked into some stereotyped pattern, is richly complex, and capable of a wide repertoire of actions” (p. 14).

Leadership became a frustrating exercise for me, not because of Joy’s fear or her need for continuity; rather, because she never, in my experience, engaged in introspection as an avenue to self-awareness. I can recall no instance, for example, in which she asked the question, “Could I be a part of the problem?” Instead, she projected blame to others and, in particular, to her leaders. Further, she did not evidence the work group or total

organization skills described by Woodward and Buchholz (1987; Isaacson, 2002, p. 18).

Consequently, she exhibited the following qualities.

Disidentification. Always fearful that the worst would happen, Joy catastrophized every change, “attach[ing] to the past” and feeling “frustrated, hurt, or betrayed” by any deviation from the forms and structures in which she took refuge (Isaacson, 2002, p. 32).

Disorientation. Using the past as her “only way to understand the present and the future” (Isaacson, 2002, p. 33), Joy asked questions, not to understand but to argue and to postpone change. Refusing to talk about the substance of an issue, she substituted peripheral concerns and feigned misunderstanding (p. 38; Hubbard, 1994). Her stalling techniques (Jellison, 1993, p. 126) accomplished this important function: They protected her emotional need for continuity from the threat of rationality (Fineman, 1993, p. 60).

Disenchantment. This often expressed itself as sabotage (Isaacson, 2002, p. 34; Woodward & Buchholz, 1987).

It seems conceivable that Joy’s “low tolerance for change” (Isaacson, 2002, p. 39; Hubbard, 1994) was rooted in an attachment to the past that interpreted all anticipated changes as a “slap in the face” (p. 40). Thus, withdrawing from any change formulation, Joy’s low readiness for change presented itself as a high resistance to change (p. 48). She was, in a word, entrenched (p. 44; Noer, 1997). Her attachment to the past made her, in my experience, resistant to change itself, not merely to uncertainty (Isaacson, p. 36; Hubbard).

Through five years of pastoral association with Joy, I sought to be empathetic and dialogued often with her. I find myself still tempted to ask the question that prompted my persistent and unproductive interaction with Joy: “Could a more empathetic response from me—i.e., a more aggressive pastoral intrusion, as an ally, into her protected personal space—have facilitated a reconstitution of meaning?” Sadly, I think not. Joy’s entrenchment was inviolable because she protected her personal, painful space from invasion by others. Further, she did not comprehend that her “descriptive beliefs” were subjective. Instead, she posited them as “evaluative beliefs”, declaring her values good and every divergent value bad. Additionally, her values were enduring; i.e., they were so much a part of her personality that she would not consider changing them. Her values may also qualify as bogus, since she was not averse to brandishing them about to protect her self-concept from anything thought to be threatening (Isaacson, 2002, pp. 51-53; Hultman, 1979).

Carl’s Profile

Joy’s husband expressed my leadership dilemma on two separate occasions. Inferring that I should follow his lead, he once explained, "I don't agree with two-thirds of what my wife says but I go along in order to keep peace in the family." On another occasion, he critiqued my ministry accurately, saying: “You want to pastor the church you dream will be; we want you to pastor the church that is here.”

My dream was to expand the scope of ministry. However, the persistent question, “When can we operate in the black?”, created a sense of urgency that seemed to

legitimize the pragmatism of this dream. Nevertheless, reflecting on Conger's (1994) description of Havel as a "meaning maker more than an action taker" (p. 41), I wonder whether Joy, and perhaps others, were looking for meaning rather than activity.

I now believe, after a decade of reflection, that my persistent attempt to empathize with Joy became a leadership flaw. I failed to free myself from the need to "educate" her, even after I discerned her stalling tactics. She demanded my surrender to the congregation's status quo and, at the same time, demanded leadership in order to exorcise the church from its difficult fiscal situation (Briskin, 1996, p. 67). I could not do both at the same time because the fiscal issues I had inherited simply could not be solved without invoking change.

My lack of success in bringing Joy alongside demoralized me personally and my pathological need to "convince her" of the agenda's necessary validity paralyzed my ministry. My response, if Jellison (1993) is correct, was precisely the response Joy desired but my unintended compliance with her tactics did not make her happy. Perhaps she wanted me to see things the logic of her position as desperately as I wanted her to see the logic of mine.

The question is worth asking, To what extent was my need to implement my agenda without interruption related to my own needs? That is, to what extent did my compulsive need to secure Joy's understanding reflect a search for meaning that may have been rooted too deeply in the approval and affirmation of others?

A recitation of the traditional methods for reducing resistance affirms my ministry approach to Joy (Hubbard, 1994; Isaacson, 2002, pp. 41-42). I tried each of the following

approaches: education and communication; participation and involvement; facilitation and support, probably to excess, as already discussed; and negotiation. Again, my over-active attempts to negotiate, permitting Joy to resist the necessary changes via argument, were probably counterproductive.

Being effectively limited to micro-changes when macro-needs existed created negative margin for me (Isaacson, 2002, p. 88; Swenson, 1992). Unable to establish and maintain emotional distance, I absorbed stress every time Joy emitted signals of discomfort or generated “relational charge[s]” with which I had to deal (Fineman, 1993, p. 60). My ability to pass the stress back to Joy (and others) was impaired because I over-personalized the need to lead the church out of its dilemma as a condition of my own self-identity. “Emotional labor” resulted, ultimately estranging and alienating me from myself (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7).

Synthesis

The question seems important: How does the leader balance the needs of the individual with the needs of the organization? In my situation, Joy's expressed desire to operate in the black created a clear conflict between her need for fiscal resolution and her simultaneous need for uninterrupted continuity. Unfortunately, the urgency of the inherited fiscal situation provided little opportunity for a "moratorium on other business" (Isaacson, 2002, p. 7).

In trying to unravel this conflict, I found myself handicapped by Joy's protection of her personal space. The pastor has limited permission to prompt the assumption or resumption of a parishoner's bereavement (Isaacson, 2002, p. 9; Marris, 1986, p. vii).

In the attempt to assess the source of Joy's resistance, I utilized the principle of introspection excessively and, therefore, perhaps inappropriately (Isaacson, 2002, p. 53; Hultman, 1979). Joy saw my introspection as weakness. Indeed, she saw it, when voiced aloud, as evidence that I was aware of inherent flaws in the change initiative. Considering herself a "Have" in the congregational subculture (Isaacson, p. 77; O'Toole, 1995), she viewed me as a revolutionary even though I was functioning as a progressive. Perceiving herself part of a coalition with the necessary votes to pose danger to her pastor, she regarded me increasingly as a "target of blame" (Morris & Raben, 1995, p. 48).

I am intrigued by the possibility that Joy may have preferred "therapeutic fiction" (Ciulla, 1996) because the church's fiscal reality was too threatening; i.e., it demanded fundamental changes. I, on the other hand, sought to invoke authentic empowerment, complete with its demand for honesty, rather than bogus empowerment. However, authentic empowerment, with its "specific practical and moral obligations" (paragraph 48), threatened continuity by changing the "rights, responsibilities, and duties of leaders as well as followers" (paragraph 60). Joy, however, may have preferred that I relieve the unacceptable, frightening, stress in order to make her happier, even if this required therapeutic fiction (paragraph 16).

In the end, this intersection of social change became a bit like the love story that Marris (1986) references. If I played the part of the bride and Joy played the part of the

bride's mother, Joy wept at the wedding. The love story meant opportunity for me; it meant bereavement for Joy (p. 42).

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