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Leading through Change: Leveraging Free Will

Change is one of the few predictable elements of life these days. We can be assured that over the next 10 years we will experience change coming at us even faster than ever before. The problem is that people find making changes difficult. The experience of change is a journey from the predictability and safety of status quo associated with the known to the unknown. Journeying into the unknown can be exciting, but it can also trigger anxiety. When change is required of us by a leader or organization, a common go-to option for a leader is to convince us how important it is to change. They may even go as far as highlighting benefits of the change or consequences if we don't change. On the surface this may seem effective, but for a change to be truly successful, one needs to identify their own motivation and exercise their free will.

To reinforce the importance of free will in change and that God has given us free will to live our lives, consider this example found in Mark 10:17-27 of the rich young ruler who asked Jesus "what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." In short, change how you live. Notice that Jesus answered his question, but did not force or require the change. To apply this concept of free will when leading others through change, leaders can learn and utilize the skills of motivational interviewing.

What is motivational interviewing?

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a communication method and a skill that can be learned with practice. Leaders can use this method with followers, and MI can also be utilized outside of work, such as with friends or family members. It is also a method that communicates respect for others, and encourages others to make their own arguments for change rather than adopting others. Oftentimes, people have not fully committed to change and remain in a state of ambivalence – MI addresses this. MI is not done to or on others, it is done for and with others.

A model of MI involves four sequential stages: 1) engage 2) focus 3) evoke and 4) plan. The first stage, engage, involves beginning the conversation, and establishing trust and respect. The second stage, focus, includes allowing the follower to choose a change goal or direction to pursue. It is important that this stage is not leader driven, but rather follower driven. The third stage, evoke, is the process of discovering the follower's motivations. Four critical activities in this stage include asking open-ended questions, affirming the follower's beliefs, providing reflections, and summarizing the follower's ideas. The final stage, planning, involves helping the follower create a definitive plan with specific goals to strive for. This four-stage process can take place in one conversation, or throughout many. While the model is designed to go step by step, it may be best to circle back to previous stages when required.

Quick tips on using MI

You should first begin a change conversation by asking permission from

the follower to have the conversation. Besides working through the model's stages, here are some quick tips to keep in mind:

- Focus on being a collaborative partner to the follower, rather than a leader.
- Do not express judgment.
- Exhibit support, rather than persuasion.
- Rather than focusing on why a person may not want to change, direct the conversation towards exploring what a person truly desires.
- Propose a discussion of the pros and cons of current behaviors, as well as a discussion about the benefits of possible changes.
- Attempt to focus on specific, reasonably difficult goals, rather than ambiguous ones.

In summary, change is difficult. As Mark Twain once stated, "The only person who

likes change is a wet baby." While short-term change can be exciting, in order to make the effects last one must decide to personally accept the change. When we are called to lead others through change, we must dance with them, rather than wrestle them over it. As a leader, utilizing the skills of MI can be a great way to start this journey. Although change is daunting, one can keep in mind this scripture: "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps" (Proverbs 16:9, NIV).

Discussion questions:

- Think about a time that you underwent a significant change. If you had free will in the change, how did it impact you? If you didn't, how might it have?
- Who is one person in your life who you would most want you to lead you through a change? Why him or her?
- How might you appropriately bring God into a change conversation?