

Four Questions that Can Change Your Church

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Many churches are so desperate for a creative idea that they will implement anything, from anyone, at any time. This is a mistake. If the creative idea creates stress or fails, it will become much harder for the church to risk new ideas.

Get in the habit of asking four basic questions whenever anyone has any creative idea ... big or small. Ask these questions consistently in every aspect of church life ... from property maintenance, to outreach, to small group development, and even to worship. Ask these questions of even the smallest suggestion, and then ask these same questions for even the boldest suggestion. Consistency is everything. You are embedding a decision-making habit that should run throughout the entire church. Asking these questions should be as natural as breathing.

- Does it emerge from the personal and spiritual growth of the team leader or true team?
- Is it within the boundaries of organizational core values and beliefs?
- Is it aligned with overall organizational vision and mission?
- And if all that is true, how can management equip the team to be as successful as they can possibly be?

Does this creative idea emerge from your spiritual growth?

Every creative idea ought to emerge from prayer, Bible reflection, and intentional listening to the public. It's surprising how often ideas do not. Instead, they emerge because somebody saw something done in a church in Florida or Arizona when they were on vacation and thought it was nice. Or somebody saw the idea in a magazine, or on Oprah's recent talk show, or they read it in one of the multitude of "best practices" books denominations love to market. Ideas emerge from all kinds of directions ... except from prayer, Bible reflection, and intentional listening to the public.

No matter what the idea is ... small or big ... you want to guarantee your constituency that it has merged from the personal spiritual growth of an individual. This gives the idea credibility it would not otherwise have. Even if the idea is weird, and even if the idea fails, church people will give it a second chance or suffer negative consequences if they are convinced God was in it.

Is the idea within the boundaries of our core values and beliefs ... and aligned with our congregational vision and mission?

Every creative idea ought to be consistent with the core values, beliefs, vision, and mission which is the consensus of our church and our foundation of trust. Of course, if a church is unclear about this foundation of trust it is impossible to ask the question. Be assured, however, that if the idea is really creative somebody will eventually ask if it is allowed. If you can't guarantee that the idea is consistent with what you value, believe, strive for, and stake everything to achieve, it will be mighty hard to defend it against the personal opinions of intimidating people.

Every idea ... small or big ... needs to be consistent with our consensus about trust. It is a matter of integrity. Churches need to understand that the biggest anxiety is not that the creative idea might fail, but that it might succeed. If it does succeed ... and sidetracks the church away from its values, beliefs, vision, and mission ... it will be all the more difficult to focus on Christian mission in the future.

Do you have a team?

Every creative idea should be implemented by a team. It would be nice if the originator of the idea could lead the team, but at least they should be a participant. If the idea really has emerged from their spiritual

growth, they will want to participate even if they do not have the skills to lead. Too often creative ideas are suggested under the assumption that the pastor should do it, the staff should do it, or almost anyone other than the originator of the idea should do it. The deeper issue, however, is that no one person should ever do it. It should be a team.

The team can then use the new idea as the affinity of a small group. The small group can be organized around spiritual disciplines for prayer, intimate sharing, and learning. The creative idea will not only lead to beneficial things for others, but it will become another opportunity for peer accountability and personal growth. Moreover, acting as a team will reduce the potential for burnout, and provide opportunity for apprenticing new leaders.

How can we equip the team to be as successful as possible?

Every creative idea, no matter how simple, requires some basic training. It may be training to align the idea to the larger congregational vision; or training that equips those who do the idea to model values and beliefs in their behavior; or training to implement the idea as effectively as possible; or training to work together as a team. Big or small, every idea requires training.

If a church wants to encourage creative ideas, they need to build a capital pool for volunteer training. Too many churches provide no support and accept whatever mediocrity an individual can offer. This demeans the volunteer, increases the probability of failure, and discourages future creativity. Equipping can take the form of basic training, or ongoing coaching, but a church cannot really evaluate what they have not trained. Whether volunteers succeed or fail, at least they will be encouraged that they have done their best.

These four simple questions can transform your church. Staff, ministry area leaders, and board should ask these questions all the time, for every idea, and in every strategic plan. These questions will help you prioritize resources and evaluate success. If you keep it up, you will see creative thinking become bolder and bolder. The self-esteem of church members, the confidence of church leaders, and the respect of the public will all increase.