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HOW TO LEAD WELL WHEN LEADING IS HARD

Agents of change in a resistant culture BY GARY NELSON

“I know things need to change, but they should wait until I die.” That’s what my 92-year-old mother says to me, with a smile. I have seen the same attitude, sadly, in Christian organizations. There are always some people willing to allow an organization or church to die rather than change. Entire organizations will resist change with the same premise.

The challenge of the 21st century for the Church, Christian organizations and their leaders is to change before they die.

Living in the age of the unthinkable

My wife Carla and I visited the former headquarters of Kodak in Rochester, N.Y., one summer. It was a fascinating immersion in the story of a corporation, its leadership and resistance to change. Once the giant of the photography industry, the building is now an empty shell. Some would say it was their inability to anticipate the seismic shifts taking place in soci-

ety and adjust quickly to the innovations of digital imaging.

Kodak actually was at the front end of digital imaging, but refused to anticipate its possibilities. They became insignificant and irrelevant in just a few decades.

Leadership is one of the issues at the core of this problem.

My views on leadership have been shaped from pastoral leadership that took me from Canada to California and back again, from serving on a staff ministry team to serving as a lead pastor. I also founded and directed a postgraduate ministry formation program that sought to develop leadership for the changing urban environment in North America and around the world.

After 12 years in a pastoral role that called for innovation and renewal of a downtown congregation, I moved into a leadership role focused on revitalizing my denomination’s mission organization. Over the last seven years I have served at Tyndale University College & Seminary situated in Toronto,

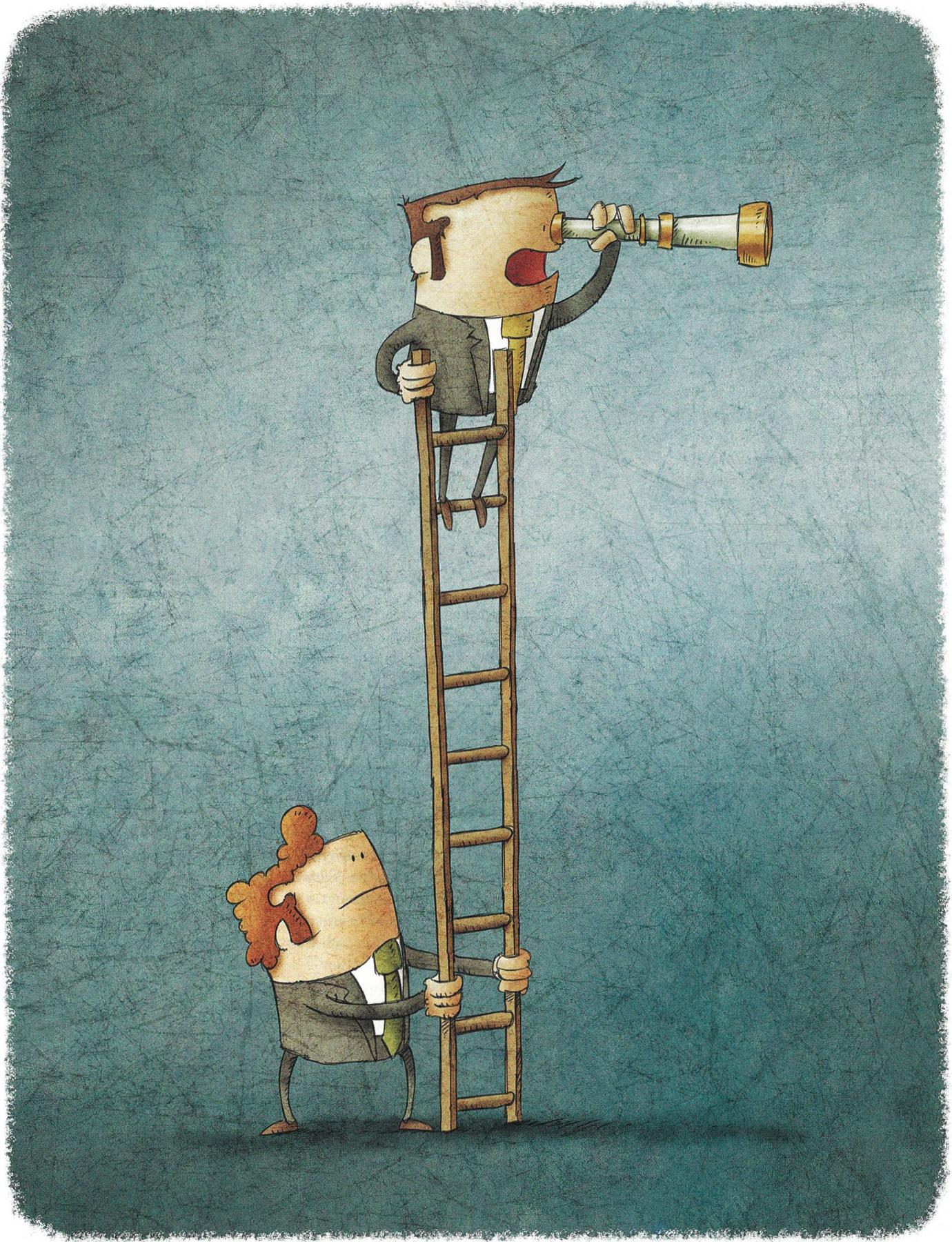
one of the most multicultural cities in the world.

Faster than ever

Shifts are taking place faster than ever. Author Joshua Cooper Ramo of Kissinger Associates calls these times “the age of the unthinkable.” He points out that nations no longer dominate in the ways they used to. “New actors” emerge seemingly from nowhere, shaking the world’s balance and safety. A small band of terrorists abducts 200 girls from a school in Nigeria. World powers posture and even devise well-intentioned but meaningless Internet statements, but fail to make any dent in launching a rescue. This and so many other examples flaunt the impotence of former methodologies developed in much simpler times.

These vast shifts are impacting churches and Christian institutions, often at the same time as we are still adjusting to the previous shifts.

The danger for institutions such as the one I serve, or churches seeking to engage the community with a missional agenda, is that the



old assumptions just don't work anymore. The illusion of stability is a reality of the past.

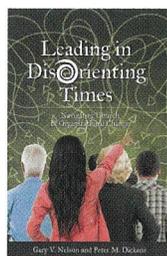
Today's options are endless. They almost paralyze us. How do I choose? How do I live with others who have not chosen similarly? When tolerance is no longer tolerant, what do we do? As a person of faith, how do I hold to the biblical truths so critical and essential to life in Christ, and yet engage a world continuing to move further from me?

The automatic response is to entrench. Holding on to what you comfortably know. Fearful to engage as people of faith, we stick our heads in the sand hoping it will just go away. So what does leadership look like in times like this?

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast." My colleague and coauthor Peter Dickens told me this constantly. We were writing our book *Leading in Disorienting Times* and this was one of his prophetic mantras. It's a phrase often linked to Peter Drucker and other management gurus, and is profound in its insight. You can have the best new plans, reworked policies or developed missional intent, but without the right culture, nothing different will take place. Unexamined assumptions and entrenched culture will always trump change.

It makes sense. I have passionately focused on the revitalization of the urban Church in Canada. Much of my studies and reading centred around organizational renewal and the missional Church. I have seen the reality of culture eating strategy for breakfast. Well-intentioned leadership implements a vision, which on paper sounds reasonable and exciting, but instead is met with conflicts and roadblocks.

I have witnessed pastors and leaders sacrificed at the altar of resistance. Congregations and organizations can be unbelievably destructive in their entrenchment.



LEADING IN DISORIENTING TIMES: NAVIGATING CHURCH AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE BY GARY V. NELSON AND PETER M. DICKENS (CHALICE PRESS, 2015)

Peter taught me to ask a series of three questions to eke out the congregational feelings about change:

- The first question is: *Do you believe in continually asking the question, "Can we do this better?"* Usually the majority of participants respond affirmatively.
- Then we ask whether or not the participants believe the first question *has implications for them and their church*. Although the look is often one of confusion, most will again respond affirmatively.
- And now, the third question: *Do you believe improvement can happen without change?* This is where the fun begins. Many of the participants feel they have been backed into a corner, especially if they have been resistant to change. Eventually they answer yes, but generally with great reluctance.

The need to change is the elephant in the room. Everyone agrees

transformation needs to happen, but most people would like the change to look strangely like the way it is now. As one member of a congregation once said, "Why should I change? I have been here for 48 years. If they want to come to this church, then they can make the adjustments."

Can organizations change?

Can an existing organization actually change? The answer is a clear, resounding maybe.

Most of us will not have the luxury or even the opportunity to work from a clear, clean whiteboard of organizational beginnings. Instead we will find ourselves in organizations and churches desperately in need of some kind of organizational renewal or remissioning. Leadership will require courage to nurture organizations or churches into a process of reinventing themselves in such a way they will exist dynamically in the present.

It takes time and requires an ability to live in the "not yet" while moving toward the "what can be."

New structures will eventually emerge, but quick and radical change typically only occurs when an organization or congregation has come to a place near death. Leadership that is more about cultural change and less about vision casting is the catalyst that allows the culture to be open to change.

Real vision happens when a new culture is shaped.

The leader as a culture changer

Culture change requires a very painful first step – unlearning. It is the intentional questioning of all our assumptions and models, nurtured of a mindset that considers nothing as sacred. It's a mindset willing to admit the assumptions that drove and shaped the organization to this point may indeed be wanting in the present and the future.

Unchallenged assumptions are often shaped by sentimentality and deep emotion. They may not be inherently wrong. They simply do not work anymore. Neither do they reflect the type of responses necessary for the times we are in. Traditions are important, but over time, if unexamined, their significance and impact are weakened.

When organizational leaders sentimentally hold to these deep assumptions without examining their meaning, they lose the ability to ask, "Do they work anymore?" Within Christian organizations these old assumptions take on a sense of biblical imperative, and to challenge them is to challenge faith itself. The more deeply held they are for meaning, the more difficult it may be to question them.

I am convinced churches and Christian organizations paddling the whitewater of disorienting times can thrive. They may have to lay aside the search for the magic program that will answer all their challenges – it doesn't exist. Neither will they be able to get away

with a business-as-usual mindset.

There is an art and attitude to courageous leadership that encourages others to join in the cultural transformation. Such leaders lead with elevation. They have an ability to view patterns as if on a balcony. If they find themselves too focused on the field of action, they are unable to see the patterns that would allow innovation. They nurture a sense of urgency about shaping the future, but at the same time give those with whom they work a strong connection to the history of the organization and what was good about their past.

Exceptional athletes are often used as examples of this kind of leader. Think of how they used to describe Wayne Gretzky or now Sydney Crosby. Each of these athletes has the ability to play hard while keeping the whole game in mind. It was as if they stood in a press box above the field of play while at the same time entering the fray. It is a new skill for some leaders, but is absolutely essential in the complex world we find ourselves in today.

The complexity and speed in which shifts take place means there is no escaping the implications. Leaders will struggle if they are stuck or insecure when it comes to change and adaptation. They have to balance a healthy sense of urgency with a deep and unsettling realization that ultimately the only control they have is over themselves.

Those who have led their organizations into new ways of organizing often say the most important change was what occurred within them. They also realize that nothing would have changed in their organization if they had not been open to change themselves.

So before you ask others, ask yourself, Are you willing to change? /FT

 Gary Nelson is president of Tyndale University College & Seminary. This article is an adapted excerpt from *Leading in Disorienting Times: Navigating Church and Organizational Change* (Chalice Press, 2015).

CHANGE MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

- Asking, "Why not?"
- Intentionally listening to everyone in your organization, especially the millennials or the edgier people wanting deeper change. It may not be where you end up, but it could be showing the direction you need to go.
- Asking why we do the things we do on Sundays and during the week, and evaluating how critical and non-negotiable those things are.
- Seeing other churches in your city or neighbourhood not as competition, but as God's Kingdom plan.
- Mission organizations working together on particular projects overseas and telling the story of these collaborative partnerships back home in Canada.
- A church intentionally connecting with people in their community they don't already know by attending community activities.
- A church discovering what their neighbours feel are the pressing needs of the community. –GN

