

Carey Nieuwhof: Welcome to this month's Monthly Team Training, and in this unit and in the next, I'm going to talk about the art of leading change. This is an excerpt from my brand new course called The Art of Leading Change. If you're in the Art of Leadership Academy, it's included with your membership. If you're viewing this through Leader Circle, well, there's an entire course about this that's available to you through The Art of Leadership Academy.

In the meantime, in this session this month, I want to talk about the three responses to change and why it's so important not to be a frozen leader, not to be a hesitant leader, but to be an agile leadership, those are the three basic responses when it comes to change. And in this session, you'll figure out where you and your organization are.

So you ready? The first approach to change is leaders who freeze when culture changes. I call them frozen leaders. Sadly, I've seen this reaction too many times. Some leaders, they're not ready for disruption, they're not ready for change, and when their methods, the way they do their work, gets challenged, they freeze, they just don't know what to do.

When churches' physical locations, for example, got shut down during the pandemic and restaurants were ordered closed and industries were shuttered, frozen leaders tend to call it a day before the day is even over, they don't know what to do. For some leaders, a threat to the method kills the mission and there's not even much of a fight.

Now, I'm not trying to be unsympathetic here, change is hard for everyone, but frozen leaders are usually leaders who mistake the method for the mission. The way we do church, in other words, is church. The way we do business is our business. Frozen leaders can't see that the mission is food but the method was a restaurant. They also can't see that the mission is sharing the gospel, the method was in-person gatherings. What felt so frightening in the early days of the pandemic was that the methods we've used for decades, or perhaps centuries, collapsed before our eyes. But what some leaders forgot is that the mission didn't.

Now, how do you know whether you're a frozen leader? The thought bubble of a frozen leader sounds like this. You would say to yourself, or perhaps out loud in a group, "I can't believe this is happening," or "The world and marketplace are out of my control. I have no control over this at all." Or you might say, "Let's stick to the old methods. They worked before, I'm sure they're going to work again." Or you might say, "Everyone else in my field is affected by the changing culture in the same way, there's actually nothing I can do." Or perhaps you'd say, "Organizations and leaders with more resources can handle this, we can't, we just don't have what it takes." Or you say things like, "Nobody prepared me for this," or "We're so far behind we can't possibly catch up."

Now, when you drill down on it, frozen leaders focus on what they can't control, not on what they can control. And the hardest news, it's almost a guarantee that frozen leaders will not thrive in the future, they'll be the first to stall out, the first to go under, they can't adapt, and as a result, they're highly unlikely to survive.

Failing organizations are often led by frozen leaders. Failing organizations are led by leaders who are inflexible, leaders who cling to their methods and ignore the mission, leaders who react and will not lead, leaders who can't pivot, won't pivot, and expect everything to go back to the way it was, and who see the future and uncertainty as the enemy. So that's frozen leaders.

There's a second kind of leader, and I call them hesitant leader. Hesitant leaders aren't frozen leaders, but they haven't got all the characteristics of an agile leader, which we'll look at in a moment. Hesitant leaders change but they're more likely to change only as little as they have to. On the one hand, they don't want to stay frozen, they get it, they know the world is changing, they're kind of ready to adapt but their adaptation has limits. As a result, hesitant leaders try to make as few changes as possible. They likely had a model or approach that worked just fine before any disruption or before the culture changed, and while they realized that it's broken, they're anxious to get back into a predictable system as soon as possible.

The challenge in a crisis is that predictable is often, well, suboptimal, right? When things change daily in an uncertain world but your approach doesn't, static and predictable methods don't advance your mission, they undermine it. Years ago your methods may have had a five-year shelf life, but in a rapidly changing world, your methods can expire in days or months, which is the problem with hesitant leaders. See, a hesitant leader will say, "No, listen, I'm open to change," but they're usually only anxious to tweak a few things, and when it comes to real change, they hesitate.

So what does the thought bubble of a hesitant leader sound like? Sounds like this. They say things like, "Well, when will things go back to normal?" or "We've already made a bunch of changes so let's lock in for a little while." Or they might say, "Do we have to pivot again? Really?" or "Can't we just do this for a little bit longer?" Or they might say, "Look, I know that idea might be a good one, but let's just keep things the way they are now, we need some stability." Or finally, they might say, "The results we're getting now are good enough. We're surviving, others aren't, let's cut our losses and just move forward."

You see some hesitant leaders make it into the future, but they won't thrive. The downside of inflexibility is that refusal to change now triggers the necessity for even deeper change later. Suboptimal responses today can lead to even more serious problems months or years down the road. So hesitant leaders sometimes lead organizations that fail, but most often they survive but barely.

And here are some characteristics of organizations that survive. Organizations that survive, adapt but not fully, they spend a lot of their energy on recreating what they used to do, in other words, "Hey, remember when that happened? Let's try to do it again," they make their old defaults their new defaults, they're likely to focus on maintenance, not just mission, they see further change as an obstacle, not as an opportunity, they make the method subordinate to the mission, and often when they find a new pattern, they freeze it. It's like, "Okay, this was enough to get us through, let's just freeze it, we're adaptable enough to survive but not nearly adaptable enough to thrive."

Worst of all, leaders who hesitate to make deep change now will have far more to recover from later, which leads us to the final kind of leadership, an approach I'm hoping you've either already embraced or will embrace by the time you're done with this course. I call this agile leadership.

The best kind of leadership in a rapidly changing world is agile leadership. Agile leaders are flexible leaders, they have the ability to pivot and change not just once but as often as changing conditions warrant. In an era of instability and rapid change, agility is ability. Flexibility is a superpower. The reason agility is so important in an unstable world is that there are no clear answers and there's no predictable path in sight. Agile leaders realize that this isn't a problem, instability produces opportunities to innovate and even grow.

So what does the thought bubble of an agile leader look like? Well, it kind of sounds like this. They say things like, "Our mission is too important to let all the change around us kill it." "Okay, guys, the method isn't working so let's try a new one." Or they say, "We've done that for a few weeks, what if we tried it this way to see if it's even more effective?" Or they'll say things like, "Things have changed again, what does this make possible?" Or they'll ask you, they'll say, "Anyone have another perspective that can help move us forward," or "What are other people in our field doing that's making a difference?" Or perhaps, "What are people in other fields doing that are making a difference and how can we learn from them?" And they'll finally ask, "How can we move into the future stronger and better? Well, whatever it takes, let's do that then."

Notice that the agile leader doesn't have all the answers, she or he is simply committed to continually asking questions. The frozen leader makes statements. The hesitant leader asks a few questions and then stops. But in many ways, the agile leader is the opposite of a frozen leader. Agile leaders focus on what they can control, not on what they can't, which is why the future belongs to them.

Agile leaders, you'll discover, often lead thriving and growing organizations, and thriving organizations spend a lot of their energy focused on what they can do, not on what they can't, they're always ready to try new things, they realize that new methods give new life to the mission, they simplify their model and their methods so all their energy can go into the mission, they evaluate, they take

time to assess, to ideate, and to implement, and they also create 30, 60, and 90-day strategies, depending on conditions. We'll show you exactly how to do that in an upcoming session,

Agile leadership is flexible leadership, it carries with it the ability to pivot and change not just once, but as often as changing conditions warrant. Agile leaders and thriving organizations are always ready to change the method so that they can advance their mission.

You'll see this is a repeating theme in this course, but the thing you're always navigating in leadership is the mission and the methods. Your mission never changes. Maybe you sell jewelry or produce custom art or sell investments or, as a church, you try to reach people with the gospel. See, that never changes. Every era has had artists and entrepreneurs and preachers and people who help others with their finances.

The mission stays the same, but the methods keep changing. Brick and mortar stores will give way to or get supplemented by online businesses. Gold became cash, fintech becomes crypto, and so money evolves. And small churches can give birth to megachurches and metachurches and even online services. So you see that the methods keep changing but the mission stays the same. Leaders though, who refuse to change their methods, eventually lose the mission.

Here's the truth, the same conditions that killed some organizations, led others to thrive, the conditions that bankrupted some organizations, also spawn double or triple-digit growth in others. Too many leaders sacrifice the mission in the name of sticking to the methods that no longer work.

So here's the reality, agile leaders win again and again because the real winners are not just those who pivot once but those who keep evaluating, ideating, and implementing.

Well, there's a lot more inside the Team Application Guide so have a look at that and spend some time figuring out how you can become a more agile leader and lead a more agile organization.