

## That Floundering Ministry Can Flourish

### **The Introduction**

Have you ever been a part of a ministry program that seemed hopelessly stuck in a maze of mediocrity? You wished you could do something to enhance the ministry, but you didn't know where to start. Well, all Christian leaders in the church have been there, multiple times for some! In the hypothetical, but true-to-life, case study below, we will explore some steps leaders can take to enhance the struggling ministry program they may lead. While the case study focuses on the children's ministry of a local church, the practical steps can be applied to most any ministry program in the church.

### **The Problem**

It is 9:05 on Sunday morning and the worship service started five minutes ago. A parent of both an infant and a five year old approaches me, the lead pastor, while I am worshipping in the front pew. She is wondering why there are no adult volunteers available in the locations where her children are usually served during the 9:00 service. I am wondering too. My heart aches because this family is fairly new to our church and I am certain they will not be returning after this fiasco. Frustration is bubbling in me because this is not an unusual occurrence for our children's ministries. Volunteers will often show up late or not show up at all when they are scheduled. This may be tolerable for other ministries, but not for those that serve children. Parents want to know that their kids are being taken care of by reliable, creative, and dedicated volunteers. The tardiness and absence of those who serve their children leads parents to the conclusion that children's ministries are unreliable. What can be done to help this floundering children's ministry flourish?

### **The Strategy**

Many churches try top-down approaches to overcoming ineffectiveness. The staff develops some policy, but it doesn't alleviate the problems. We can talk to our children's ministry directors about the importance of motivating and holding their volunteers accountable to show up prepared and on time. But most ministry directors are either too timid or too abrasive for this approach, an approach that entails both forthrightness and tact in equal measure. While these attempts may provide a band-aid to stop the bleeding for a short time, none of them will likely solve the problem. It is clear that a new way of orchestrating the kinds of changes that will increase the overall effectiveness of your children's ministries is sorely needed.

In his book, Real Time Strategic Change, Robert W. Jacobs lays out a plan for organizational change that may help your local church. Jacobs believes that any major and lasting change must involve the whole organization in brainstorming, developing, implementing, and evaluating a strategy for change. He writes, "In a real time strategic change scenario, all members of the organization are meaningfully involved in deciding upon and responsible for delivering the organization's results" (18). Unfortunately, as mentioned above, too many times plans for change have come from the top down. Jacobs' advice allows for widespread development and ownership by the very people who will be most affected by and most responsible for any strategic changes that are devised. Involving many people in a real time strategic change event invites and engages the very people who "have the information, expertise, or experience to offer that would increase the likelihood of success" (Jacobs 125). Furthermore, this widespread

involvement moves people toward the kind of “understanding, accepting, and owning [of] their responsibility in implementing changes” that enables effectiveness (Jacobs 125).

Adapting Jacobs’ real time strategic change event, all of your children’s ministry leaders and volunteers would gather for an entire day of honest assessment and strategic planning. You, along with a few other leaders, will serve as a guide for the retreat. While the details of the retreat agenda will be worked out with a team of key people, it will mainly follow this flow: from dissatisfaction to vision to first steps to overall strategy. Essentially, you want all people who serve the children of your church to have a voice in assessing, visioning, and strategizing. This meeting will allow several next steps to surface that are a key to the strategic changes agreed upon. It is vital that everyone comes out of this meeting with the kind of understanding, ownership, and excitement that motivates them toward the agreed upon next steps in nurturing a more effective children’s ministry.

### **The Execution**

This real time strategic change event is a great idea that will likely go nowhere in an organization that does not know how to execute change. In their book, Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done, Bossidy and Charan argue that a strategic plan is meaningless “if you don’t at the same time make sure your organization has or can get what’s required to execute it, including the right resources and the right people” (7). Many churches do not always execute changes and decisions efficiently and effectively. There are likely several reasons for this, not the least of which is that churches have a tendency to view the execution of a strategic plan as a less than spiritual venture. “We need to leave room for the Holy Spirit,” they say. However, what many mean is “we don’t have the time, energy, knowledge, or commitment for the execution of strategic change.” What is more, most churches are dependent upon a host of volunteers who are often quite busy and must be motivated by something more powerful than compensation for their effective service. This is why Bossidy and Charan suggest that execution is heavily reliant upon selecting, training, and motivating the “right people.” Frankly, there are probably some people who will not be able to execute well and will, therefore, impede progress in your children’s ministries.

In order to execute well, the leader will need to create a culture of execution. Effective execution entails the development of a detailed process for how to get things done. The “substance and detail must come from the minds of the people who are closest to the action” (Bossidy 178). In my estimation, so many churches fail to execute well because they do not sense the need or take the time to develop not only a culture but a process for executing well. In fact, a culture of execution will not develop apart from processes that execute ministry.

It seems that if your children’s ministries are going to be effective you will need to develop more specific procedures, policies, and positions so that everyone is working off of the same play book. While some may sneer at such a detailed and intentional process for ministry, the right kind of person will be attracted to the kind of support, thoughtfulness, and accountability for results that are built into the process. However, the authors of Execution are careful to point out that “an astonishing number of strategies fail because leaders don’t make a realistic assessment of whether the organization can execute the plan” (195). Leaders must indeed develop a plan for execution, but the plan should be realizable within their particular church culture.

### **The Conclusion**

Perhaps you have a well-run and fruitful children's ministry. What ministry program, then, in the church you attend is the most urgently in need of enhancement? There is no silver bullet to solve every single problem. There are, however, several actions that can begin to turn the tide of that ministry in a more God-honoring and fruitful direction. Here are some of the necessary steps to nurture a more effective ministry program:

- First, engage in a real time strategic change event in the form of a 1-2 day retreat that will involve every director and volunteer in the ministry needing enhancement. During this retreat, the group will honestly assess their dissatisfaction, create a shared vision, and then consider the specific steps to move their ministry program in the right direction. In other words, they will prayerfully and carefully consider where the ministry is (assessment), where it can go (vision), and how it will get there (strategy).
- Following the retreat, and to a certain extent before the event, the ministry leader needs to consider the "who" and the "how" questions of execution. Who needs support? Who needs coaching? Who needs to be repositioned? How can the strategy be detailed into bite-sized pieces that make up an overall process that leads to high quality and effectiveness in your ministry? How can policies, procedures, and positions enable efficient and effective execution?

It is my hope and prayer that as you invite all of your ministry staff and volunteers into the process of strategic change, the ministry will benefit from the wisdom and expertise of those in the trenches. I pray that the process reveals to leaders like you how to best support, coach, and provide accountability for those who serve in the ministry you lead. I pray that the strategy and execution of your ministry plan prevents the mediocrity that sometimes surfaces in the ministry programs of a church and diminishes her potential for kingdom building.

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#### Works Cited

Bossidy, Larry and Charan, Ram. Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done. New York: Crown Business, 2002. (278 pages)

Jacobs, Robert W. Real Time Strategic Change: How to Involve an Entire Organization in Fast and Far-Reaching Change. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006. (335 pages)