

Joy Equipping

“As each part does its work.”
Ephesians 4:16-18



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Reengineering the Church

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For over 25 years, I have been very involved as a lay leader in the church. For most of those years, I have worked for IBM in various professional and management capacities.

For the last 4 years I have been involved in change on both levels. In the church, I am learning and applying the cell model. In my job, I am working on a worldwide reengineering project as IBM seeks to redefine itself. My particular area of responsibility involves bringing dramatic improvement to the way IBM deals with customers—a process we call “relationship management.”

Several years ago, IBM’s financial numbers were not good. Many of us were truly afraid that the company would go bankrupt—and without dramatic change, it may have.

Many people were offered early retirement packages to bring the cost structure down to sustainable levels. Not surprisingly, when 20% of the people left, workload for the remaining people went up 25%. The company realized it had to reengineer the processes in order to cut workload. Results have been dramatic. In the last 2 years, more people have been hired than left the company during its downsizing days.

I have often been struck with the parallels between what I am doing in the business world and the needs of the church. In many ways, the cell church movement is all about the reengineering of the church.

What is reengineering?

According to Michael Hammer, the man who coined the word, reengineering is “radical change in business processes for dramatic improvement.” It means starting over. It means reinventing the way we do things. It means very, very big change.

Why reengineer?

Since change is usually accompanied by pain, why would anyone choose to do it? Michael Hammer says there are three reasons to change.

1) Desperation. Leaders realize that they are about to go out of business if they don’t change something. Many companies will go bankrupt if they don’t cut costs—and that often means cutting jobs. With fewer people to do the work, leaders come to realize that they MUST do things in a radically different way if they are to survive. Reengineering has come to have a bad name because it is so often associated with job cuts. However, in most cases the reengineering was a result of the job cuts—and proponents would say that it was necessary to preserve the rest of the jobs in the company.

2) Anticipated changes. Leaders recognize that major change is about to hit—and they want to react before it happens. This is actually much harder—nobody likes to be a prophet of doom—“the sky is falling, the sky is falling!” And the simple fact is most people won’t change until pain causes them to do it. On the positive side, however, people who can see trends coming and react to them in advance can avoid a great deal of the pain.

3) Leverage success. The third reason companies re-engineer is that they are doing well but they want to do even better. They want to increase their success to please their shareholders or perhaps even “crush the competition.”

How does this apply to the church?

Obviously, then, reengineering the church implies that we make radical changes in the church for the purpose of dramatic improvement. Let’s set aside the question of whether these “business principles” apply to the church. We know we are not dealing with “Bride of Christ, Inc.” here. But

there are similarities in why a church would decide to change.

1) Desperation. First, there is good reason to believe that some churches are (or should be) desperate. Despite a growing interest in the spiritual dimension, much of society is rejecting the church as a relevant source of spiritual experience. Most denominations and many churches are shrinking--not even able to keep those they have, let alone win the world for Christ. Pastors prepare evangelical sermons and then preach only to the converted on "outreach" Sunday. Lay people try desperately to keep programs going--and wonder why things appear to be going backwards. Kids that grew up in the church seem to have the same values as their friends from outside. It should be clear that radical change is required.

2) Anticipated changes. Canada is changing. Churches should see the writing on the wall that change is coming and they must respond. Consider the aging of the church-going population. I remember my Grandma's telling me that they had closed the small church she and Grandad had worked so hard in for many years. "Had to close it, you know. All the deacons died." This could be a real possibility for more and more churches.

Another cause is the dramatic change of the population in many Canadian cities. How can churches in multi-ethnic areas change to become meaningful to people from many different cultural backgrounds?

3) Leveraging success. What about those churches that are doing well? Do they have a burning desire to excel for their shareholder (God)? The idea of "crushing the competition" seems somewhat foreign to Christian principles. But is it?

Many churches have a wrong idea of who the competition is. They are trying to compete with other evangelical churches to attract people who are already open to Christianity. "First Church, across town, has a worship band--we have to have more contemporary music or we are going to lose people to them." The competition, of course, should be Satan and his angels. That competition--for souls--is very real and very aggressive.

If we didn't have the superior "product" in Christ Jesus, we would be lost. But we need to do more than hold our own or grow slowly. We need to excel.

How do you reengineer?

1) Go back to basics.

The first step forward in reengineering is going back--back

to the basics. Why are we here in the first place? In the case of the church, we need to go back to the Bible. Our reason for being was defined by Jesus--to make disciples.

2) State your vision clearly.

Reengineering is very much about going back to the basics and being more effective. But it isn't just about effectiveness. It is possible to have wrong goals and be effective (e.g. the New Age movement). We must first clearly understand what our goals should be and then work to become effective. If our vision for our church is that it be a safe haven where we and our children can make good friends and be untainted by the world, we have missed the point.

There are many things Christ wants us to do--serve the poor and needy, love each other, etc. But our overall reason for being here is to rescue people from the gates of Hell--to work together to advance the kingdom of God and defeat Satan.

3) Allow the vision to bring the right goals.

For example, one goal that automatically comes from the vision of making disciples is to see growth. But some churches are more effective than others.

We were once part of a church plant that was very focused on growth--and we did grow. From our humble beginnings, the church grew quite rapidly. The only problem was that most of that growth came from other churches. We saw some people come to Christ but it was very much in line with the 2% conversion growth experienced by the average church today.

Yet we now know of churches that are seeing people come to Christ at a rate of 1 per year for every 4 believers. This is 10 X the average (estimated at 1 for 42 believers). What are they doing to be able to sustain that growth? We need to find out and see if we can learn from them (always remembering to ask God if this is what he wants for us.). Will our goal be 2% conversion or 20%?

4) Evaluate where you are and how you are doing

Evaluation can be emotionally difficult. None of us want to think about our weaknesses. I remember a comment from a business man who had been reading quotations from his company's customer satisfaction survey. "I feel dirty. I know everything they are saying is true. But we don't mean to be like that."

Very often, an honest evaluation pushes us into denial ("We're not really like that!") or defensiveness ("It's their fault. We wanted to do better, but..."). The purpose is not to beat ourselves down and take on a guilt complex. Rather, it is to identify those areas where we need to improve.

We need to have an accurate understanding of where we are and what we need to do. In business, we ask “Are we meeting the expectations of the owners (stockholders)?” In the church’s case, the “owner” is God. To decide whether we are meeting his expectations, we can study his Word and talk to him. And when we fail, it is wonderful to know that unlike many human stockholders, he will forgive us and let us start fresh.

5) Think 10 X better

Reengineering isn’t about being negative. Once we have honestly evaluated ourselves, we need to allow ourselves to dream about how God wants to use us to turn his world upside down. As we seek his direction, our vision will expand and come alive.

We need to break through the barrier of thinking that if we keep trying harder, we will do better. Just how much better does the choir have to sing to bring in 10 X as many people?

How much more efficient does the Outreach committee have to be to see 10 X as many people won to Christ? Too many times, we assume that we could succeed if we tried a little harder or worked a little longer. And the truth is that all we really do is raise our guilt level. There is something very freeing in realizing we can’t be 10 X better just by trying harder. Rather, we have to reengineer.

6.) Benchmark

One technique which is used to both discover and evaluate new ideas is to benchmark. The term comes from the idea of laying your product alongside the standard in order to see how it compares. In business, this has come to mean finding out how the best in the world are doing.

However, implementing a copycat method based on a superficial analysis can be dangerous. A business leader was asked if he worried that the competition might copy his “hot” new idea. He said he hoped they would—because if they tried to copy it without the fundamental changes he had added to support it, they would drive themselves out of business.

This has been evidenced in churches who have attempted to copy methods such as the Willow Creek model or the Cho model without understanding the underpinnings that make these churches successful. The in-thing is to have a “seeker service” or “cells,” but if the foundation is missing, the church will flounder.

For example, the cell-based structure is only one of six principles to which Cho’s church attributes its growth. And it isn’t even first on the list. Prayer is. And they have a weekly all night prayer meeting to prove it.

7.) Streamline the process

In order to get better results with the same resources, it is necessary to ensure that everything done is focused on creating the desired results. This is called streamlining the process. The intent is to stop doing things that are not creating the desired results and find better ways to accomplish what is desired.

It might be hard to imagine church as a process. But, what are we trying to accomplish? The church’s mandate is to make disciples. What are the processes we go through to create disciples? How do we go about changing them so that they are more effective (by 10 X). And what things are we doing that we may have to stop doing because they are no longer effective?

At IBM, we have changed drastically from what we were 10—even 5—year ago. Recently, I provided individualized instruction to several thousand people across North America by using conference-calling technology aided by computer programming. This was done in a very short time, with no travel, at a huge savings in both cost and time over traditional methods. And I did most of this work from my office which is located on the second floor of our house. I didn’t even have to drive to work!

Think what could happen if churches became as efficient in carrying out their visions! The good news is that we already have churches around the world who are acting as benchmarks.” And I am very impressed that the leaders who developed these early models of the cell-based church did not collaborate. Each of them sought the scriptures and God’s leading and came up with the same basic concepts. You don’t need a PhD to do this. You need a heart devoted to God, and a spirit willing to listen.

Our traditions and practices shouldn’t be sacred. Reengineering—change—shouldn’t frighten us. Rather, as we realize that there are ways we can serve God better, we should move forward with great excitement!