

Promoting Innovation

Diocesan Research and Planning Office
March 2003

Oftentimes parish leadership looks for ways to creatively address some issue in the parish. The issue may be something minor (how to facilitate the flow of parishioners to Communion) or it may be major (how to increase school enrollment). The following outline presents several ideas for promoting innovation and creativity. While some ideas come from business models, they can be adapted for parish use.

I. The basics

- A. Make certain phrases off-limits
 - 1. “That’s not the way we do it here”
 - 2. “We tried it once and it didn’t work”
 - 3. “The _____ group will not go for it”
 - 4. “If it’s not made here, there’s no value in it”
 - 5. “Everyone has to do it the same way”

- B. Increase our “core competencies”
 - 1. Study the Church, theory and practice of ministry, conflict resolution, etc.
 - 2. No tricks or gimmicks – do the work!

- C. Copy innovation wherever it is found
 - 1. Business, industry, government, education, etc.
 - 2. Even non-Catholic churches

- D. Create pilot projects – people are more likely to accept innovation as a pilot project; there is a built-in “out” if the project does not achieve good results.

II. Allow a “broken front”

- A. Let entities (parishes, parish groups) innovate on their own
- B. The “united front” — everyone must move forward together — may stifle creativity. The phrase “either you’re with me or against me” should send up red warning flags.

III. Decentralization of parish power

- A. Pastor and staff may empower others
- B. Creates ownership among parishioners
- C. Decentralization of power does not mean the pastor gives up his authority as pastor. It also does not refer to compromising on Church teachings. It may, however, speak to ways of creatively implementing Church teachings.

IV. Promote continuous improvement as a core organizational value

- A. Starting from the top, all should carry this value
- B. Do not relegate improvement to the “designated innovators” of the parish

V. **Promote “intentional abandonment”**

- A. Institutions often use considerable energy to maintain “what is”
- B. May need to leave behind certain older practices and ways of doing things
- C. One cannot innovate without systematic abandonment — this is *very important*. What used to work but no longer is effective? How much time and energy do we spend in trying to keep it going?

VI. **Frolic in failure**

- A. Create a climate where failure is another form of growth
 - 1. Note: this does not refer to failure due to inattentiveness or sloth
 - 2. Learn how to fail intelligently
- B. No risk-taking = no creativity
- C. Publicize failures (without judgment or shame) so that others may learn from it, e.g. “We thought this approach would work but it didn’t, so *c’est la vie* and we’ll move on and try something else.”

VII. **Talk up innovation — make it an “obsession”**