THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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October 2011 - Volume 19, Number 1

Why Do Smart Churches Make Dumb Decisions?

By inventing the phonograph, young Thomas Edison launched a major change in how and when we listen to music. And his light bulb changed our world by lighting the nights.

But Edison's high IQ didn't prevent him from making a bad decision. After building his fame with light bulbs that used direct current, Edison couldn't imagine a world in which alternating current ruled. So he opposed the new and far superior AC technology which (a) can be inexpensively fed through wires over vast distances and (b) can power both tiny light bulbs and giant machines.

By rejecting alternating current, Edison paved the way for his star employee, Nikola Tesla, to spread the use of electric power across the world. Decades after AC proved itself the world's best commercial current, Edison kept arguing that his DC idea was better!

That Edison story captures the major insight in Zachary Shore's book, *Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2008). Edison fell into a cognitive trap—a rigid mind-set that can block smart people from seeing the importance of new facts—and thus, blocks the addressing of new circumstances.

For that same reason, highly intelligent church members sometimes make unwise decisions that undermine their church's future.

By learning how to recognize those thought traps, we reduce their destructive power over us and our church.

1. In the cognitive trap of "info-avoidance," people actively disregard information that they prefer not to hear. In one congregation, an obsession with positive-thinking caused the governing board to automatically discard new ideas that could have fixed major problems. Influential church members repeatedly said to one another, "Our church is wonderful and we don't need to change anything." Thus, the governing board (a) obsessively avoided hearing unpleasant information about declining worship attendance, (b) labeled people who delivered that information as "negative thinkers," and (c) tranquilized itself with the false hope that "things will get better if we stay positive." Last year, that congregation closed its doors.

With many church members, fear is a "cognitive killer." Their fear of failure paralyzes constructive thought and action. As in a bad dream, they want to scream but no sound comes; they want to run, but they can't move. The result: Several years of slow death, until the church becomes terminally ill and no type of action can save it from closing.

2. In the cognitive trap of "static cling," people refuse to recognize that a fundamental change is under way. In a center-city congregation, the ethnic composition of people living in a seven-block radius of its front door changed. In a suburban congregation established fifty-five years ago, the driving distance from homes of new community residents is no longer ten minutes; now, it is twenty-five minutes—too inconvenient a distance for most young parents to drive their youngsters to youth activities. A rural county has lost 50 percent of its population since 1960. Thirty years ago, most of a church's worshipers were farmers; now most of them are commuters.

When demographics change, the cognitive trap of "static cling" often blocks churches from fine-tuning their ministries in ways that connect with the spiritual needs of a new population base.

"We have such a wonderful church! I don't see why we need to change anything, do you?"

3. In the cognitive trap of "fearing to appear weak," churches continue to use methods that attracted numerous attendees four decades ago. Some such churches are striving to avoid the appearance of "entertaining people" or "catering to modernity in order to attract members." Other such churches—locked into old habits—refuse to fine-tune their worship, buy a keyboard, sing praise songs, or install projection screens.

In some such churches the pastor drives with one foot on the brakes. In other such churches the rigid mind-set of two or three long-term members—quoting "Give me that old-time religion; it's good enough for me"—blocks their congregation from decisions that attract and retain significant numbers of age-eighteen to forty-four young adults. In still other such churches pastor and people form a conspiracy to "stand by our faith"—and many of their decisions bar the church doors against most younger and new people.

Such churches tend to excuse their future-blocking behavior by blaming the people who don't attend their worship service or participate in their 1950s-style ministries. "People are just not as committed as they used to be!" they exclaim with sadness that feels a bit like thinly veiled arrogance. By portraying themselves as loyal to God in ways that "less spiritual people" cannot achieve, such churches give themselves an anesthetic that keeps them from feeling their inflexible mind-set.

4. The cognitive trap of "cause-fusion" takes a variety of forms. A few such churches blame their declining worship attendance on "so many people staying home to watch worship on TV"—not realizing that research proved their theory false two decades ago. In other such churches, a "mono-causal myopia" blames declining worship attendance on one single cause—failing to see that in most cases declining worship attendance results from a combination of five to seven causes.

5. In the cognitive trap of "one-dimension obsession," people believe that only one thing is important. Some of them say, "What we need is great preaching!" Others say, "If we just had a better building!"

Actor Nicholas Cage played Ben Gates, central figure in the movie *National Treasure*. Cage asks his partner, "What is one step this side of crazy?"

His partner replies, "Obsessed?"

Cage says, "No, passionate!"

People who are crazy, or obsessed, or passionate about effectiveness in *only one* of their church's ministries seldom build long-lasting congregations.

6. In the cognitive trap of "mirror imaging," people think other people think like they think. In a congregation whose members' median age is sixty-five, most of the worshipers assume that today's young-adult parents want the same type of worship and Christian education methods for their children that they wanted as young-adult parents. When that mirror-imaging theory proves untrue, many of the older worshipers don't get it—and in some cases blame today's young adults for faulty thinking and low spiritual commitment.

7. In the cognitive trap that believes "expertise equals sound decisions," people value education over effectiveness. In one such church, a highly educated, classically trained, music director (a) has never worked with youth and (b) defines excellence in church choirs as "performance quality"—with no emphasis whatsoever on "developing a spirit of warm fellowship among choir members."

The belief that knowledge is more important than achievement leads many churches to weak results in various ministries. Expertise in a field does not always equal (a) the ability to work with people so that they feel like a world-class team and (b) sound judgment regarding strategy and policies that meet the spiritual needs of worshipers. Expertise doesn't always generate wisdom; sometimes it generates rigidity.

8. In the cognitive trap of "cure-allism," people dogmatically believe that a successful method works the same way in every church. When worshipers say, "If we do what Rick Warren's Saddleback Community Church in California does, maybe we can become a great church, too!" they are often participating in the "cure-allism" delusion.

Churches do not automatically become effective by imitating great churches elsewhere. Effective churches become open-minded enough to (a) learn the spiritual needs of parents, youth, and children in their surrounding community and (b) learn how to provide worship, programs, and caring that meets those needs.

Practical Application: During the first few minutes of a regularly scheduled governing board meeting, distribute a copy of this *Parish Paper* issue to each person. Read it aloud as the group follows along. Ask each person to place a number in the margin beside each of the eight cognitive traps (using a scale of one to five, with five signifying the most nearly accurate description of our congregation's thinking pattern). Collect the sheets. Ask someone to tabulate the answers and be ready to report the totals during a fifteen-minute discussion at the end of the meeting.

Ask your governing board members to help one another stay aware of the various invisible, self-destructive cognitive traps that block their congregation's future effectiveness.