

The Tremendous Power of “How?”

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Opportunities to excel often come disguised as problems, if we describe a problem as a deviation from some standard. In other words, if something happens that should not have happened, or something doesn't happen when it should have happened, then, ladies and gentlemen, we have a problem.

Because ours is an imperfect world, we run into problems every day; some are major, but most are minor. When we confront a problem, our reflex is to ask, “Can we solve this problem or should we just make adjustments and learn to live with it?” It's a binary approach. “Can we or can't we?” – a basic “yes” or “no” mindset. This is really the “if” question – “if we can or if we can't?”

Often we face this “if” question prematurely. Instead of fully assessing the situation, we prematurely answer the “if” question with “no.” As a result, the problem persists and gets worse. We stop the flow of creative juices before they can even start.

One of the most effective leaders I've ever known taught me a valuable life lesson; he called it “The Tremendous Power of ‘How?’” Here's how it works.

When we run into a problem, we can instantly decide that this deviation, mistake, etc. is completely unacceptable. A dash of ego helps us develop this value statement: “We are too professional and too competent to allow this problem to threaten our high level of excellence. We will solve this problem.” A positive statement of conviction like this summarily dispatches that troublesome “if” question to the trash can, where it belongs. With the “if” question no longer on the table, we now have the joy of unpacking one of our best friends – the question of “How?”

When we are collectively dealing with the “How” question, we benefit from an inevitable out-flowing of creative juices. “How” draws upon all the previous solutions and lessons learned that we've used to solve similar problems. “How” engages everyone's passion, commitment, and resolve. With all our years of experience, education, and practical knowledge focused like a laser beam on a problem, most of our problems melt away. Chalk up another victory for “How?”

Here's an example of the “How” approach as it resonated through the First United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1999.

For 138 years, our church scheduled the third Sunday in November as “Pledge Sunday.” In 1999, our month-long Stewardship Campaign was to culminate in announcing that our annual budget of \$2,371,695 had been realized from pledge cards the parishioners had placed in the collection plates during our two morning services. I'm not proud of the fact that in the entire history of our church, the budget had never been fully pledged on Pledge Sunday. Instead, months after Pledge Sunday each year, with very little fanfare, we would eventually announce that we'd finally received pledges equal to the budget.

In 1999, our senior pastor, Dr. Karl Stegall, asked church member, Margaret Carpenter, to chair the Stewardship Campaign. Margaret was well-known in the church and in the community. She had received numerous civic honors and awards and had been named Alabama's Small Business Person of the Year. She had served two terms on the Montgomery County School Board, was the first woman president of the Montgomery Area Chamber of Commerce, had developed the Council of Small Business Enterprises, and was the first woman ever to serve on the Alabama Power Board of Directors. Margaret was the first woman member of the Men of Montgomery, resulting in a name change for that venerable organization to the "The Committee of 100." As a member of the Stewardship Committee, I was privileged to see this servant leader at work.

At our first meeting, Margaret declared that our congregation would not only fully pledge our budget, but we would do so on Pledge Sunday. With that statement, she immediately dispatched the "if" question to the trash can. As you might expect, there arose a chorus of doubters and nay-sayers with a plethora of "reasons" why we could not achieve such a goal. Politely but firmly, Margaret said, "We are a great church with successful and caring Christians. We need to focus our collective energy, efforts, and creativity on developing a successful strategy for 'how' we will get our members to step up on Pledge Sunday and make their financial commitments. I would now like to brain-storm ideas on 'how' we are going to accomplish this goal on Pledge Sunday."

She walked over to the flip chart and at the top, she wrote "Ways to Completely Pledge our Budget on Pledge Sunday." She wrote the number 1 on the chart, turned around and said, "Let's get started. Who's got the first idea?"

After a pregnant pause, someone ventured a suggestion. Margaret thanked him, wrote his idea at number 1, wrote the number 2, turned back to the group and asked very matter-of-factly, "What else?"

The process generated some excellent ideas. Margaret appointed project teams to develop specific action plans and called the next meeting for the following week. Before closing with prayer, she challenged us, saying "We have a great start. Think and pray about how we can achieve our goal. Ask friends, neighbors, and co-workers for their ideas."

Her approach set the tone for all our subsequent meetings. Some of the original doubters offered some of the best ideas. We all could feel the passion and commitment building.

On Pledge Sunday, there was an unusual excitement in the air. Call it divine intervention, positive leadership, or perhaps the tremendous power of "How," but our congregation over-pledged our budget in the first service. When the final count was tallied after both services, we had over-pledged the annual budget by \$55,497.

As you might expect, Margaret, a true servant leader, took no credit, but deflected the outpouring of praise and appreciation to the committee, the clergy, and our congregation.