

The Outstanding Organization

Karen Martin

A key insight that runs throughout Martin's book is: "Many organizations have forgotten that their core purpose is identifying and solving problems."¹ In contrast to organizations that have forgotten their core purpose, "outstanding organizations ... never fear calling a problem a problem."² Martin further observes that, because they do not fear the existence of problems, "They go out of their way at every turn to find hidden problems and bring them out into the sunlight so that everyone can see them and can get on with the task of solving the problem in the best way possible."³

God the Holy Spirit works in a similar way in and for His Church. At Pentecost, Jesus delivered on His promise to send the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26). And the Spirit of fire and truth entered the church to purify, purge, and protect this holy organization. The Holy Spirit has the task of calling to light not only the problems; that is sin, but also the solution, that is God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. John records, "When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because people do not believe in me" (John 16:8-9). And Jesus declares, "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me" (John 15:26).

I. Causes of Chaos and Conditions that Create Outstanding Organizations

Martin's approach to problem solving involves careful problem definition, root cause analysis, evaluation of possible countermeasures, and monitoring countermeasures.⁴ She describes organizational chaos as: "shifting priorities, unclear direction, unstable processes, unhappy customers, disengaged employees."⁵ She continues, "Most organizations have become so accustomed to chaos that they don't even recognize it."⁶

Many congregations get accustomed to odd behavior and call it the norm. So when an outsider (i.e. new members, new staff, etc.) comes in suggesting "change," the congregation sees that as "chaos;" whereas the "self-inflicted" chaos Martin's describes, congregations may consider the norm.⁷

¹ Karen Martin, *The Outstanding Organization*, (McGraw Hill, 2012.), 4.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 4 – 5.

⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

DM9742 – CONGREGATIONAL ANALYSIS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

In this book, Martin identifies four conditions that must be met in outstanding organizations: clarity, focus, discipline and engagement.⁸ **Clarity** accounts for how much time an organization spends clarifying information, from the minor items to major items like the mission and/or vision. **Focus** has to do with an organization's effort to prioritize, the degree of support from leaders, and how resources are shared among projects. **Discipline** involves whether projects get completed, sharing of responsibility for continuous improvement among all members, and "patient perseverance."⁹ **Engagement** is that passionate component. How involved are the people in their work?

Notwithstanding a plethora of books, seminars, and other resources available for churches related to clarity, focus, and engagement I found Karen Martin's thoughts on organizational discipline practical for congregations I serve. Organizational discipline in the physical realm leans towards day to day ministries being carried out in peace and, if lacking, creates disorder rather than peace.

II. Building Organizational Discipline

Based on Martins' observations, avoiding organizational discipline is not the way a church will avoid problems and maintain peace and unity. In Paul's letters to the churches he calls out behavioral problems (in leaders and members alike) in order to promote unity and peace. In 1 Corinthians 14:33, Paul reminds the church, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace." And in verse 40, he exhorts the church saying, "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

These recommendations continue for the church today. Edward Deming, renown American engineer, professor, and statistician is reported to have said often, "If you can't describe what you are doing as a process, you don't know what you are doing."¹⁰ Perhaps some organizations avoid describing processes when the activity may highlight another problem. Henry Ford once said, "Most people spend more time and energy going around problems than in trying to solve them."¹¹ Martin recommends the **Plan-Do-Study-Adjust** (PDSA) Method for problem solving. She says, "PDSA is a cyclical mode that promotes continuous improvement."¹²

Churches benefit both physically and spiritually from improved organizational discipline: "how you hire people, how you plan and manage meetings, how you deliver value."¹³ Not only is there a benefit to new and existing congregational members but also to staff and lay leaders who seek clear goals, guidelines, and processes. Church members, visitors and staff all benefit the most when these interactions are in peace and good order (disciplined organizational

⁸ Ibid., 16 – 20.

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Karen Martin and Mike Osterling, *Value Stream Mapping*, (McGraw Hill Education, New York, 2014.), 15.

¹¹ Martin, *The Outstanding Organization*, 119.

¹² Ibid., 120.

¹³ Ibid., 138.

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approach). Generally, Martin advocates some level of standardization for organizations hoping to achieve their mission and improve organizational discipline.¹⁴

III. Theological Reflections

For Martin, an outstanding organization is able to prioritize problems, “identifying the most important problems and dealing with the root cause.”¹⁵ In a similar way, God the Holy Spirit prioritizes the problems facing the church in both the physical and spiritual realms. Clearly, Martin proposes solutions to problems facing organizations whose sole focus is in the physical realm. But, the Church lives in the physical realm, too, and uses the physical resources God provides in order to best promote the gospel to seek and save the lost. Ultimately, Martin notes the key to problem solving is not the methodology but the people. She states, “The discipline and engagement of people matters more than any element of a methodology.”¹⁶ Interestingly, God also begins and ends in relationship to the people who make up His Church, dealing with each of us individually through our reconciliation with Him in Christ.

¹⁴ Ibid., 138.

¹⁵ Ibid., 126.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.