

One Key Reason Why Church *Consultations Fail*

by Thom S. Rainer

I did my first church consultation in 1988. Since then, I have been involved in hundreds of consultations of different ilk and varying depth.

I am not the brightest person, but I can lead a church consultation with ease. I am glad, because we had more consultation requests in 2023 than I have ever seen in my experience in this ministry. The ease by which I consult is not due to my intellect, but to the fact that I have done so many. Patterns develop. Solutions become obvious. Objections can be anticipated.

When a church leader contacts us to discuss a consultation, that leader often asks us about our “success rate.” For most church leaders, they define success as a numerical turnaround. Others have a specific problem they want us to solve. For them, the consultation is a success if the problem goes away.

So, how do we answer the question? What is our success rate? If you define success like church leaders did in the previous paragraph, our consultation success rate is only about one-half.

In case you did not read closely, I want to say it again. We only succeed in our consultations in one out of two cases. That is 50%. That is abysmal.

But on the positive side, we've learned the one major factor that most often determines success in church consultations. Let's look at that one key factor. You might be surprised.

The Main Factor

I love my primary physician. He is not only a great doctor, he's a very good friend. Though I don't frequent his office that much (I am thankful for good health), I do enjoy (most of) the visits. Recently, we got into a discussion about his "success rate." He is considered one of the best diagnostic physicians in the business.

Though my doctor did not give me a quantitative success rate, he did tell me that it is lower than he wishes. Of course, I asked him why. His response was straightforward: "Because the patient does not act on my recommendations."

Hear me clearly. My doctor is a humble man, a Christian whose faith is obvious. He does not have one ounce of arrogance when he says that patients should act on his recommendations. He really knows what's best for them, but they do not take his advice and treatments.

From Human Health to Church Health

With that context, I hope you will understand my posture of humility when I share with you the number one reason our consultations are not successful: The one key reason why one out of two of our consultations are not successful is that the church does not act on our recommendations.

In other words, when a church does implement our recommendations, their chances of "success" are high. But we offer a path and not a shortcut. Sadly, many church leaders choose not to take the path we recommend. Why? I see at least four reasons.

Why Recommendations Are Not Implemented

After 35 years of church consultations, I can articulate with a high level of confidence why the solutions our consultation team offers are not implemented. Indeed, I see four key reasons.

1. Our recommendations often include a plan for the church to be more obedient to the Great Commission, the recommendation most often resisted. Evangelism scares some church members. Evangelism scares some pastors as well. I think the implementation of evangelism is spiritual warfare. The Enemy will fight us and the church from moving into our communities to reach people with the gospel.

2. Church members will focus on and even fight over the minor recommendations. Thus they don't get to the major direction the consultation offers because they are distracted by the minor issues. A church might spend countless hours resisting the recommendation of new interior signage and a cleaned-up foyer. If they resist and fight over relatively small issues, they are not likely to get to the essence of the consultation report.

3. Church members often expect a silver bullet. I've learned over the years that church members can see a consultation to be like taking a car to be serviced and repaired. Once a few issues are handled, the car (or the church) is like new, and they can get back to business as usual.

4. Church members are ready to accept change until the change affects them. When church members hear the caution that a consultant will likely recommend changes for the church, they often accept that they are fine with it. And they are fine with it until it affects them personally. For some reason, church members can view change as something that affects other people but not them.

When a consultation request comes to Church Answers, we often caution the prospective client that our consultations are successful only half the time for the four reasons cited above. Most of them move forward because they believe that their church will be one of the 50% that has a positive outcome.

Sadly, half of them are wrong.