



Leadership Matters



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Managing Information and Knowledge as a Resource for Your Congregation

In Europe in the Middle Ages, people acquired the information they needed for an entire lifetime by observing what other people did, and doing the same things. The concept of "childhood," as people in the developed world understand it today, was unheard-of. If a child survived the various diseases that killed most of them before their first birthdays, he or she was regarded as a small adult, dressed in cut-down versions of adult clothes, and acquiring the skills needed to run a house or raise animals or plant and harvest crops by watching what adults did and helping out.

Big news, such as which army was winning the wars that plagued Europe or who had been selected as the new Pope, was carried around the countryside by town criers or traveling performers who sang ballads that told the stories of the day. Most people spent their entire lives within ten miles of where they were born, and had no need to learn anything of the world beyond their own communities.

For those few people who learned

to read and write, usually in monasteries or convents, books included the prayers and texts that formed the center of their spiritual lives. Only men in positions of authority within the Church needed to be able to read and write documents such as treaties and marriage covenants.

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Once Gutenberg developed movable type, printed materials became available to middle-class people who could afford to buy books, and reading and writing spread beyond the educated elite. For the first time, people began to acquire information beyond what they needed to survive.

The world view of people whose access to information was so restricted is unthinkable to us today. Information has been flooding us all since the beginning of this century. With the invention of the telephone, telegraph and radio, humans for the first time in their history had a way of ensuring that information could spread quickly, beyond one or two highly-placed individuals or a local community. Today, we speak of the need to manage information like other resources such as money or time.

In a congregation, information comes from both inside and outside. Within the congregation, people can

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Team Learning Among Unitarian Universalists: A Case Study

One quite recent change in many Unitarian Universalist congregations involves a new relationship with money. In the past, money was one of the most difficult subjects for Unitarian Universalists to discuss. Many congregations conducted their canvasses by mailing out postcards and asking people to mail them back with their pledges indicated, or refused to conduct a canvass at all. Money was in many ways more taboo in Unitarian Universalist congregations than sexuality.

Several factors played a role in changing this norm. One was the recommendation by Unitarian Universalist Association president, the Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, who encouraged all members of headquarters and field staff to read a book called *Money and the Meaning of Life*, by Jacob Needleman. Dr. Buehrens also invited the author to make a presentation at General Assembly, arranged for Mr. Needleman to sign copies of his book in the Exhibit Hall, and encouraged members of the district field staff to conduct workshops on this topic at their own district meetings. The book generated interest in looking at

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collect data about the number of adults who attend Sunday worship, the percentage of youth registered for the senior high class who participate in a social justice workshop, or the number of pastoral counseling sessions a parish minister conducted in the last three months.

Congregational leaders can also acquire information about the community in which the church is sited. They can keep track of economic factors such as the number of major employers in the community, changes in the demographic makeup of a suburb or a rural area, and the number of people who vote in local school board elections. They can host educational forums on issues of current interest in the nation, and can encourage people to participate actively in environmental and other issues that affect the entire world.

In learning communities, people understand the difference between *information* and *knowledge*. They know that information can be manipulated, comes in discrete bits and bytes, and is value-neutral. This may not be true for the ways in which it's collected, or for the uses to which it's put, but in and of itself, information just *is*.

Knowledge, on the other hand, results when people attribute *meaning* to information. Statistics on employment in the Rust Belt states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio are based on information. Consideration of the effects on a small congregation's budget of the lawsuits that have been filed against Firestone Tire and the resulting closure of the Firestone plant in Decatur, Illi-

nois, resulting in the loss of more than 4,000 jobs in a town already reeling from plant closures, is based on *knowledge*.

In a UU congregation that functions as a learning community, lay and ordained leaders might discuss the implications of the plant's closure on the availability of volunteers for ushering or the upcoming canvass, with a certain percentage of the congregation's members filing for unemployment or dealing with how to find the money for school clothes. Leaders might also decide to sponsor a series of presentations on the economic implications of *maquiladoras* in Mexico, and to increase the number of people being recruited for the Caring Committee.

To help members keep from feeling isolated and beleaguered, lay and ordained leaders might want to arrange for a pulpit exchange with a predominantly African-American congregation

attended by Firestone plant employees, and ask both ministers to preach on maintaining hope in circumstances that could lead to despair. The board might appoint a task group to investigate how Spanish-speaking residents are affected, and what assistance they might need in hard times. And a group of volunteers might make a special effort to arrange tutoring sessions for high school students struggling with math, for whom academic success might lead to increased economic opportunities after graduation.

All of these strategies would come about as the congregation struggled to create and use knowledge derived from information about the plant's closure. In learning communities, the issue isn't what information any one person has; the issue is how team learning is affected, and what meanings are attributed to facts. The leadership team will work on effective communications with regard to information anyone possesses. They'll be interested in analytical tools

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Resources

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How Groups Create New Norms

In the late 1940s, Kurt Lewin described a process by which an individual or group might learn to use information in a new or different way. First, according to Lewin, there must be *disequilibrium*, resulting in a clear need to re-examine the present circumstances or system. People need to feel “off balance” to some extent, so that their established ways of perceiving things will unfreeze.

In the same way that a change in temperature unfreezes water and changes a solid to a liquid state, this disequilibrium uncouples a person or group from “the way we’ve always done it/regarded it around here.” The feeling of being slightly off-balance contributes to a willingness to look at things in a new way, consider different options, seek out information using other means,

think about things that are done as habits or without reflection.

Finally, new habits or ways of doing things can be implemented so that new knowledge is incorporated, in a stage that Lewin described as *refreezing*. He believed that each time a person or group needed to learn how to utilize new knowledge, the same process of *unfreezing* — *change* — *refreezing* was required. In groups, the decision-making process of consensus helps to create new norms, since implementation of new knowledge is made easier when people feel a high degree of ownership in both process and outcome.

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Support for the new behavior or method is critical in the refreezing stage. M. Rokeach found that analyzing the value system connected with the old behavior was crucial before a new behavior could be adopted. Examination of how norms of behavior are supported by the group helps a leadership team to analyze what sorts of support for the new norms will help in the implementation process. R. M. Khoury found that if there is some ambiguity in the subject or norm, and people are required to make their opinions public, social forces will move in the direction of adopting new norms of behavior.

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money as a tool through which value can be ascribed, rather than in hard economic terms, and ministers began preaching sermons on the theological implications of this way of looking at money.

Another factor was the establishment of a group of highly trained consultants who visited congregations in times of ministerial transition. These compensation consultants began speaking freely with congregations about such costs of ministry as health insurance, retirement accounts, and sabbaticals. When additional information was provided, the same consultants also provided information about levels of compensation for religious educators.

The Office of Church Staff Finance prepared a report on fair compensation based on numbers of adult, youth and child members, and the Extension Department began requiring that congregations seeking an Extension placement meet guidelines of fair compensation—both salary and benefits.

New curricula were prepared so that congregations wishing to conduct training for people involved in canvassing had resources they could use. District consultants offered workshops on these curricula and provided feedback to UUA staff on how congregations were engaging with money issues.

Today, a Unitarian Universalist congregation without a formal canvassing process is unusual. In many congregations, new members are encouraged to pledge during the orientation process, and face-to-face canvassing is the norm. The level of giving is up in most congregations, and the topic of money is no longer fraught with the same level of tension as was once true.

As a result, the norms about money have changed. There is an increased willingness to consider economic class issues along with other oppressions, and an understanding that class and other oppressions must be regarded as linked for change to occur.

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that will help them create knowledge from information, and in strategic planning processes that will help them assess short- and long-term effects inside and outside the congregation.

In addition, congregational leaders should be able to weigh the implications of both information and knowledge in relation to their mission and vision, as well as their theological stances. A congregation of religious humanists might be interested in maximizing human potential through contribut-

ing state of the art computer equipment to a high school located in an area of falling property values. A congregation based on Wiccan beliefs might want to donate books on the interdependent web of all existence to the same school.

Through the management of information and the utilization of knowledge, Unitarian Universalist leaders can help their congregations through team learning, analysis, and strategic planning processes to keep their bearings in today's turbulent circumstances.

The purpose of **Leadership Matters** is to provide resources for all UU congregations to explore what it means to be a learning community, and how to do it well.

Leadership Matters is a quarterly publication of the Learning Center for Leadership, a division of The Mountain Retreat & Learning Centers, Inc. The Learning Center for Leadership's mission is to provide programs and resources that enhance skills for transformational leadership.

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