
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Hidden Message Syndrome

“You should also be aware of the Hidden Message Syndrome,” Pastor Jim advised.

“I’ve never heard of that,” replied Bill, who pastored a nearby church. “What do you mean?”

“Let me give you an illustration,” Jim suggested. “A few years back a couple approached me as I walked to my car in the parking lot after the Sunday morning service. They shared some concerns about the children’s program with me. I smiled and nodded my head to indicate I heard them. Unfortunately, they heard a message I never sent. They understood my smile and nodding to mean I agreed with them and would do something about their concern. Since I didn’t do anything about it, they thought I had lied to them and they eventually left the church.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Bill commented.

“I know,” Jim agreed, “but it points out the fact that the church is filled with non-verbal messages. Another time our church went through a financial downturn. We weren’t able to give our small staff much of a raise for the

new budget year. I explained the situation to my part-time secretary, and I thought everything was okay. However, two weeks later she resigned. Later I heard that she had interpreted the lack of a raise to mean she wasn’t appreciated. Of course, I never meant to indicate she wasn’t appreciated, but that was the message she heard.

Let me give you one more example. In my first church I encountered a situation where an older lady was directing the Easter children’s program. I found out she’d been leading the program for eleven years. In conversations with her, she indicated she was tired and wanted some younger ladies to take over. I worked diligently to find her some help, and found two younger ladies who joined with her. Over the next year, the younger ladies were able to see the children’s program tripled in size. During that time the older lady dropped out of the program, and later left the church. She never said anything, but again I heard that the reason she left the church was that she felt she wasn’t needed any longer. It was a non-verbal message that no one intended to send.”

The stories described above are common place in churches. Non-verbal messages are sent and received regularly, for the most part unnoticed. The phenomenon is complicated in that messages are received that were never sent and other messages are sent but not heard.

Here's some constructive ways to respond to the hidden message syndrome.

First, recognize the tendency of people to hear messages that are not sent. The hidden message syndrome is a reality of life. It occurs in all forms of communication, whether in the church, home, school, business, or politics. We can all recall instances when messages were received that we didn't intentionally send. Recognizing this tendency is a good start to better communication.

Second, explain the messages that are NOT being sent. Instead of simply smiling and nodding his head, pastor Jim could have explained, "I appreciate your concern, but you need to speak to the children's program director." By speaking directly, he would have removed the tendency for the couple to hear an unintended hidden message behind his smile.

Third, ask how people are feeling or what they are thinking. Two-way communication is crucial to eliminate hidden messages. Jim could have spoken with the older children's program director to see how she felt about the growth of the program under the younger lady's direction. He simply could have asked, "I've noticed the children's program has grown. How do you feel about it?"

Fourth, probe for second thoughts later on. It's odd, but most people don't respond with their true feelings or thoughts in the first

moments of hearing a message. People need to time to think and process their feelings. It's wise, then, to provide opportunity for people to share their second thoughts.

Fifth, watch for changes in people's behavior. Most hidden messages are accompanied by changes in behavior. A family that was regular in worship attendance, but now comes rarely is sending a hidden message. A person who has decreased their financial support is sending a hidden message. An individual who served faithfully, but no longer serves is sending a hidden message.

Sixth, don't confuse understanding and agreement. Decide what you want before you try to communicate: understanding or agreement? The greater the understanding, the more chance there is of disagreement, but, the greatest harm comes from disagreement without understanding. Great understanding with disagreement is not harmful. It's best to strive for understanding.

Questions:

Can you recall times when hidden messages were received that you didn't intend to send?

Which of the six responses above do you need to employ in your own ministry?

Adapted from Dr. McIntosh's
forthcoming book
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