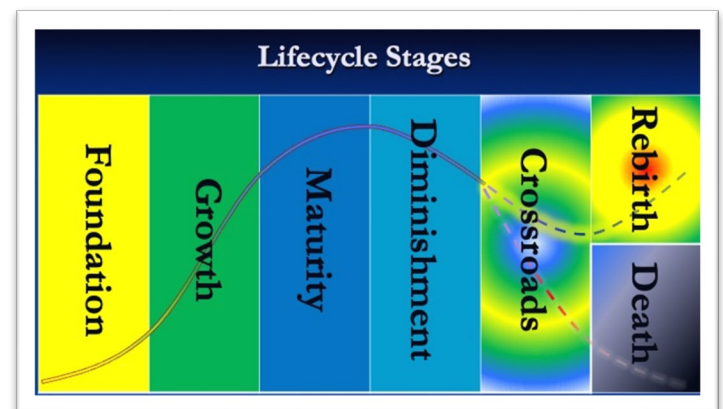


Lifecycles: Implications for Your Critical Issues

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Lifecycles¹

Just as individuals grow through stages in life so, too, do communities (i.e., organizations). The life of a community progresses through stages, each with its own characteristic risks, challenges and opportunities. The degree to which a community successfully transitions from one stage to the next will determine its overall health as it moves forward to the next stage. In other words, if a community is able to learn from, integrate, and transcend the efforts made in the earlier stage, its health will be stronger going forward.



Each stage in the lifecycle of a community brings its own set of developmental tasks that must be accomplished to progress to the next level. And each set of development tasks has its own risks and rewards, demanding uniquely different skill-sets and mind-sets from its leaders and members. The number and description of stages in a given lifecycle are described differently by different authors (Adizes,ⁱ Arbuckle,ⁱⁱ Cada,ⁱⁱⁱ Dunn^{iv}). However, they tend to include the following.

Phase I: Foundation

The birthing of a new vision is the cornerstone for any new community. Typically, a charismatic leader (or a small group of pioneers) gives birth to a new vision with a burst of inspiration and energy. The passion and dogged determination of the leader to actualize the vision evokes the same response in others who are attracted to the cause. Undaunted by obstacles, there is

¹ This description of lifecycles is taken from: Ted Dunn, *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation*, First ed. (St. Charles, MO: CCS Publications, 2020). Somewhat modified from Chapter 10.

unwavering pursuit of the vision as the excitement of a new venture mobilizes those involved. *Inspiration* and *innovation* for carrying out the vision mark the early stages of any community.

New beginnings are a leap of faith. The spirit, at inception, is greatest when structure is at a minimum. There is flexibility in meeting the needs in service of the mission (i.e., whatever works). Problems are seen as opportunities and action outweighs planning. Those involved have fire in their belly, and a sense of ownership and urgency to see the dream become a reality. While the spirit is highest at this stage so, too, are the risks for communities. Startups make it by a wing and a prayer.

There is a huge difference between having a dream and creating an enterprise that harnesses the energies of others toward that same dream. With few rules and many inconsistencies, mistakes and conflicts abound. At this stage, a community needs leaders who inspire and followers with a can-do spirit to overcome the chaos. Unfortunately, the vast majority of startups, upwards of 90%, never make it past the first year.

Phase II: Growth

As the vision begins to take hold and others are drawn to it, there is a period of rapid growth and development. There is an exponentially accelerated rate of expansion of ideas, people, resources and projects. The system can barely keep up with the influx of new members, new ideas and new projects. Structures, organizational charts and plans are considered a “work in progress,” and are constantly being created anew as the venture builds momentum. *Rapid growth, experimentation, as well as trial and error* learning, are the hallmarks of this time in a community’s development.

This is the stage where more is better. More members come, more jobs are started, and more problems create more opportunities. The spirit is high as people flock to the excitement of the founder’s dream and it becomes their dream too. There is excitement in seeing their dream become a vision, their vision become a reality, and being a part of something that is full of life and vitality. Because there is so much to do and barely enough people to get it all done, the tasks are organized around persons, not an organizational chart. In other words, tasks are done by whoever can take the ball and run with it, regardless of who has the qualifications or what their title might be.

The risks at this stage are great as well. *Founder’s syndrome* is a well-known risk that can bring premature death to a community. Founder’s syndrome is that experience of a founder who is incapable of *letting go* of his or her dream so that it can become the organization’s dream. It is like possessive parents who are so tied into *their baby*, they can’t let go so the baby can grow on its own. In addition to Founder’s syndrome, this stage is characterized by loyalty conflicts and inconsistencies between old timers and newcomers.

If the leader can successfully let go of what was originally just his or her dream so that it becomes the community’s dream, then the community will flourish. If they can make the transition from founder to leader, they can succeed. If not, it will fail. The *ownership* for the dream must become shared by everyone in the community for it to continue on to the next stage. The type of leaders needed in this stage are those who can share power and the type of followers needed are those who can self-initiate and take hold of the dream.

Phase III: Maturity

The cumulative effect of multiple mistakes, power struggles, and growing pains takes a toll on a growing community. The response is to bring order to the tensions and conflicts inherent with growth. Jobs are assigned to people who are qualified, rather than to whomever is willing. Endeavors are more predictable, planned, controlled and organized. The chaos is managed and the risks are reduced and, so too, is the spirit. *Order, control, and security* are characteristics of this stage.

In order to find its stride and the means for carrying out its vision, a community begins to standardize, departmentalize, organize and stabilize. It seeks to maintain its successes by institutionalizing its methods. As explosive growth slows and steadies, the community has time to systematize its efforts, preferring sanity, security and predictability over chaos, instability and risk. Offices and titles are stamped into the organizational chart and behavioral expectations are written into handbooks of policies and procedures. *Institutionalization* and *maintenance* of the status quo are hallmarks of this period.

The community is becoming more formalized, risk avoidant and conflict avoidant. They are focused more on smooth sailing, self-preservation and financial security, rather than new initiatives, development and growth. They are slow to move and adapt to new possibilities, preferring instead to protect their turf, wealth, old ideas, and past accomplishments (“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”). The revolutionaries are becoming bureaucratic conformists, and their spirits are being tamed and domesticated. They are looking more often in the rearview mirror, rather than forward into the future

The community is functional, results-oriented, stable, predictable, and controlled. They are well organized and more mellowed. However, they are becoming complacent, and lethargy is setting in. People are getting tired of meetings. There is more time spent in the office than in the marketplace. They are increasingly rule-centric, boss-centric and bureaucratic (“Do what you’re told and don’t rock the boat”). The system is losing spirit, energy, flexibility, creativity, and the capacity to innovate. They are turning in on themselves, rather than outward and onward.

Phase IV: Diminishment

The next stage of a community’s lifecycle is destabilization and decline. The original vision has lost its luster and participants have lost their zeal. Inspiration and innovation are in short supply, and what is predictable, controllable, and manageable takes precedence over what is not. Those who offer a new way of thinking and possibilities for growth are judged and labeled as disobedient, disloyal or crazy. The tried and true takes precedence over trial and error, and the community stops learning, adapting and growing. *Stagnation* and *despair* are hallmarks of this stage.

During this phase, the system is struggling to survive. It seeks reassurance by writing well-polished mission statements, erecting statues, and giving awards to honor its past champions. While it takes pride in past achievements and reminisces over the glory days, it is, all the while, calcifying, fossilizing and decaying. Having lost its root energy, and divorced itself from contemporary relevance, new people are no longer attracted to join. New blood (new vocations) trickles to a halt, cutting off supplies of new energy, ideas and people.

Ironically, the system begins to die by its own narrow focus on survival and its efforts to forestall the inevitable. It has come to value, and has been designed to maintain, what has already been accomplished. It no longer values new ventures. It places controls over innovation and experimentation such that adaptation to a changing world is prevented. Those who built and believe in the system are promoted, appointed, elected, and re-elected in order to preserve an illusion of security through familiarity. They serve and protect the system which they created and supported. By preventing radical change they unwittingly collude in its demise. Fidelity to the past takes precedence over an allegiance to the future.

The heaviness of structure and loss of hope for the future weighs on the system like a wet blanket, smothering the life out of the community's spirit and mission. It becomes too rigid, too encumbered with structures, policies, procedures, and bureaucratic red tape to adapt any longer. People speak more of their memories than of their dreams for the future. The community's spirit is dying and, conscious of this or not, spoken of or not, deep inside they know it.

Phase V: Crossroads

In general, there is an inverse relationship between the spirit of a community and its degree of structure. Albert Einstein said that when there is maximum entropy, there is minimum useful energy, and the reverse is true as well. In other words, the spirit is highest at the foundation stage, when the passion of a charismatic leader ignites a synergistic response to a new vision and structures are yet to be put in place. The spirit is lowest when ghost structures of the past have all but vanquished the future. The original flame is dying out. The hallmark of this crossroads, where the pathways of life and death cross over, is the point at which the community's *spirit has reached its nadir*.

At this point, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' stages of grief are all present simultaneously, permeating the system with a surreal admixture of emotions. *Denial* is present among those who don rose colored glasses, insist that *all is well*, and continue to cheerlead for the future. There are others who are *angry* and bitter, festering in the toxic waste of unreconciled pain from old disappointments and wounds. Some are *bargaining*, looking for quick fixes and brokering new deals, while others pray in quiet desperation for divine intervention. Others are *depressed* and have checked out, thrown in the towel, and resigned themselves to the end. Finally, there are those who have *accepted* and come to terms with the current realities. They are the ones aware of the crossroads at which they now stand and are asking, "Now what?" They are the ones discerning real options.

The system has hit bottom. If enough people are consciously aware of this, and dare to speak it aloud, then the system, the community, has a choice. They can consciously, deliberately attempt to restructure, reorganize, rekindle or rebirth a new life. If these choices are discerned well and resolved peacefully, any one choice can liberate the spirit. Even a discerned choice for *closure* can release the spirit from its quagmire and the endings can be grace-filled. Likewise, if the choice to create life anew is discerned well, it too can liberate the spirit and bring new energy to the task.

Tragedies happen at the crossroads when choices are not made at all or are not made well. Choices that are made out of fear, capitulation or coercion are disastrous. Choices that are made

out of unrealistic, wishful thinking are equally disastrous. Some believe that they have to choose life (After all, who would say “No” to this Deuteronomy invitation?), but have not discerned what that truly means for them. Some groups think they are choosing life, when all they are doing by their minimal, incremental efforts is guaranteeing their own demise. Some choosing life, no longer have the capacity, will, or forbearance to take the journey.

Implications

Depending upon which stage in the lifecycle you are located, your understanding and approach to vocations, completion, and leadership will differ.

Vocations

Vocations are not the cause of lifecycle changes, they are coincidental. Early in a lifecycle, if the mission and vision hold passion and the community is successful, vocations will naturally abound. The influx of vocations helps the community grow. As a community matures, and its Spirit wanes, the number of vocations naturally declines. When a community reaches a crossroads, the presence or absence of vocations is relatively inconsequential to the future of the community.

If the community dies out, so too will its vocations. Even if it is one of the ten percent who are transforming, it still may not bring new vocations through the door. Birthing new life does not necessarily mean birthing a new lifecycle (e.g., refounding). If a transforming community happens to spark a surge of new vocations and begin a new lifecycle (yet to be seen), the community would likely be part and parcel of a larger movement. In other words, the emergence of a community’s new lifecycle will likely coincide with the emergence of a new lifecycle for all Religious Life (i.e., all boats rise with the tide). Religious Life is still on the downturn and has yet to demonstrate the emergence of a new lifecycle. Bottom line: vocations are not the cause of a new lifecycle, they are coincidental.

Completion

Every season has its time under heaven and every new season is some other season’s end. Thus, completion tasks are evident at every new stage in the lifecycle of a community. Every new stage in the life lifecycle requires completing certain structures, patterns, values, and beliefs to make room for new ones. For example, at the end at the *Foundation Stage* the founder must avoid “founder’s syndrome” and let go of his/her vision so it can become the community’s vision. The existing structures, patterns, beliefs, values, etc., must also come to completion to give way to new ones so that the community can move to the *Growth Stage*; otherwise, the community will die out. Each stage, and the associated way a community lives and manifests its mission, must come to completion to make way for the new stage.

Completion has become a popular term during this season among Religious given the tasks at hand at this particular stage. Unfortunately, for many it has carried the connotation of death and dying, a finality instead of a crossroads. Without question, the vast majority of communities will eventually die during this lifecycle of Religious Life. Many members are, indeed, dying (e.g., 2,500 a year in the United States). But your sisters in Bolivia, Brazil, Jamaica, Mozambique, and the United States are still very much alive. They are not actively dying. They do not wish to

“come to completion” if that means planning for death, instead of planning for life. Hopefully, they will complete the tasks necessary so that they might flourish once again.

Leadership

The kind of leadership needed at the Crossroads Stage is different than the kind needed at any other stage. And the kind of leadership needed at the Crossroads stage also is determined by the particular path or direction the community wishes to take. If the community is unwittingly choosing the *path of least resistance*, by definition their leadership is ineffective. It is a moot point here. If a community is choosing the *path of fruition* or fulfillment, they will need leaders who can plan well in many of the traditional ways. They will need to help their members feel safe and secure for the remainder of their days.

However, if a community wishes to pursue the path of transformation, it will need to create a new paradigm for living community and carrying out mission. Changing the number in leadership (adding or subtracting one or two people) will not suffice. The community needs to create new structures, mindsets, and practices informed by new values and worldviews. They will need leaders who can create the container, orchestrate conflict, and accompany their members through the chaos of transformation. They will need members (and laity) to proactively participate in co-creating a new vision and paradigm. Collectively, they will need great *courage*, *creativity* and *tenacity* to bring to completion and let die all that needs to die, while making room and bringing forth the New that is waiting to be born.

ⁱ Ichak Adizes, *Managing Corporate Lifecycles*, Rev. and enl. ed. (Paramus, N.J.: Prentice Hall Press, 1999).

ⁱⁱ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

ⁱⁱⁱ Lawrence Cada et al., *Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

^{iv} Ted Dunn, "Refounding Religious Life: A Choice for Transformational Change," *Human Development* 30, no. 4 (2009).