



FOREWORD BY JOHN BEVERE
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FRONT ROW

LEADERSHIP

STOP
CRITICIZING
AND START
LEADING

FRONT-ROW LEADERSHIP

STOP CRITICIZING AND START LEADING

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Published by Salubris Resources

1445 N. Boonville Ave.

Springfield, Missouri 65802

www.salubrisresources.com

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Cover design by PlainJoe Studios (www.plainjoestudios.com)

Interior formatting by Prodigy Pixel (www.prodigypixel.com)

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ISBN: 978-1-68067-103-2

Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 • 1 2 3 4

YOU CAN'T CREATE CHANGE FROM THE — BACK ROW —

“The greatest deception men suffer
is from their own opinions.”

—LEONARDO DA VINCI²

We all have opinions, don't we? They can be accurate or misdirected. They can be powerful or impotent. When we see or hear a news story, we usually have an opinion, even though our exposure to the truth is limited to a sound bite chosen by a news editor. When we see a situation develop, we draw our own conclusions about what actually happened.

Though every organization is different, all have front and back rows. People on the back row aren't any less gifted or talented than people on the front row. In many situations, the people at the back have skills and abilities front row people don't have. So, why do back-row people stay on the back row?

Many back-row sitters let their philosophical objections prevent their participation in solving problems or strengthening the organization. Rather than being a part of the solution, they let their criticism become a distraction, or even an end in itself. I've observed that this is a trend among many millenials—and sometimes, the

brighter and more perceptive they are, the harder it is for them to move beyond criticizing to offering constructive input. You can read their blogs and their social media posts and quickly tell that they are careful observers . . . especially of the flaws in the status quo.

Understand that we are talking about intelligent, articulate young people. The problem is, they too often prefer controlling the room from the back row: sitting with their arms folded and passing judgment on the actions of those on the platform who are leading the organization. The people I'm talking about often have others who are listening to them—probably admiring their intelligence and the witty ways they verbalize their disapproval of the leadership. Theirs is a subtle type of rebellion. They aren't mounting an open challenge; they're undermining the organization in increments—one clever critique at a time. They aren't interested in moving to the front row and taking responsibility for implementing the changes they call for; they're more likely to keep focusing their attention on what's wrong instead of engaging constructively with leadership to make things right.

I believe that many of these young people stay on the back row and criticize because they don't believe in the possibility of constructive change. They ask themselves, "Would it really make any difference if I moved to the front row? Is it even possible for this organization to change in any meaningful way?"

The great classical composer Jean Sibelius said, "A statue has never been set up in honor of a critic." It's true! While there's certainly a place for honest, clear-eyed discussion of things that need improvement, there's also a time to move beyond criticism to bring about positive improvement. To do that, you've got to get out of the critic's chair and move from the back row. You've

got to risk being wrong in order to lead toward what is right.

Why are people so critical? According to an article in the *Harvard Review*, people become overly critical because of what psychologists call projection. It's a psychological defense mechanism that people use to deny their own faults by attributing those faults to others.³ In other words, be careful what you complain about, because it might shine a light on your own faults!

Most people don't really understand why they're so critical; they simply see it as their right. They don't realize the power of negative thinking. Not only does it highlight their faults, it also destroys their enthusiasm. Critical people aren't easily inspired to jump in and help.

Now, I realize that as a leader I'm not perfect. In fact, as a leader, it's essential for me to listen to voices that are saying things I might not enjoy hearing, from people who love me and the organization enough to speak up when my attention needs to be re-directed. I'm not talking about the type of loving, constructive criticism that's aimed at steering the organization back to the right path.

Instead, I'm talking about those who consistently, over time and in various situations, see the glass as half-empty and focus their critiques outwardly, rather than taking the responsibility inwardly to own the change they wish to see. We've all known these people; we've been on committees with them, we've worked

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for them, and we've employed them. Their constant, nagging negativity isn't constructive; it's destructive.

From a faith perspective, negativity is one of the most powerful weapons used against us. Our propensity toward negativity is used to keep us on the back row, where we exercise our opinions rather than our influence. If you find yourself stuck in a cycle of negativity, here are five things you can do:

- 1.** List things for which you are grateful. Include your talents, abilities, and gifts. Think about your family, friends, provisions, and possessions. It's hard to be negative when you're expressing gratitude.
- 2.** Complete this statement: I can make a difference by _____ . Spend some quality time thinking about ways you can make a difference in your work, organization, church, home, or community. Don't leave out any possibility. You'll have to ignore that voice inside that wants to convince you to keep your seat on the back row.
- 3.** Once you complete the statement above, identify one thing you *will* do to make a difference within the next seven to ten days. Don't put it off. Everyone on the back row can probably identify a few things they can do; they just aren't willing to do them.
- 4.** Displace negative influences with positive ones. Try this . . . don't think about vanilla ice cream. Can't do it, can you? The harder you try not to think about it, the more you think about it! You can't make yourself stop thinking negative thoughts any more than you can make yourself stop thinking about vanilla ice cream. The secret

is *displacement*—replace negative influences with positive ones. Read the Bible or other inspirational works. Change the television or radio station. Tune out the negative comments on social media. When you encounter someone who’s negative, try to turn the conversation in a positive direction. The more you seek positive influences, the closer you’ll get to the front row.

5. Ask yourself, “Really?” When your thoughts lead you down a path of speculation and insinuation, stop and check with reality. Is what you are imagining *really* going to happen? Most of the things we worry about never happen, yet we donate hours of productive time to their consideration. What’s going to happen if you volunteer to lead a class and you unexpectedly get drafted by your favorite sports team in a supplemental amateur draft? *Really?* When you’re looking for excuses, any excuse will do!

In a *Forbes Magazine* article, Mike Myatt offered a three-step process for leading change. He said leaders must (1) identify the need for change, (2) become an advocate for change, and (3) contribute to the process of change.⁴ Let’s take a closer look at Myatt’s suggestions as they relate to becoming front-row leaders.

FRONT-ROW LEADERS SEE THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Organizations that refuse to change won’t survive. So, no matter where you are, the organization around you needs change if it’s

going to remain relevant. That's true about your company, your civic organization, or your church. Front-row leaders recognize the need for change and can prioritize the changes that need to take place.

Research often takes place with a control group and an experimental group. The control group is kept consistent while

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the experimental group receives some experimental procedure. Usually, only one experimental procedure is applied at a time. This allows researchers to determine the effects of each procedure. Change must be handled similarly. If too many things are changed at once, there's no way to know which change

had a positive effect and which had a neutral or negative effect. Front-row leaders are strategic in applying change.

FRONT-ROW LEADERS ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

An advocate is a person who actively supports a cause. Front-row leaders know that people often resist change. They acknowledge the emotions associated with change. Rather than harass those who resist, front-row leaders help alleviate fears and calm concerns. They aren't willing to push change through if it will damage organizational health to a greater degree than failure to change.

There's a difference between being an advocate and being a

spokesperson. Advocates usually engage in conversations. They listen to people and thoughtfully respond to their comments. Spokespersons usually engage in one-way communication. They aren't a part of the decision-making process; they simply have the job of announcing the results.

Front-row leaders build consensus and invite people to participate. They're team builders and enthusiasm catalysts. They can connect vision with reality and clearly identify the gap between the two. These are gifted people who are vital to every organization.

FRONT-ROW LEADERS CONTRIBUTE TO THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

In chapter one, we talked about the importance of leading by example. This is much the same. It's one thing to see the need for change and to encourage change; it's another thing to be active in the process.

In his article, Myatt said there are four characteristics needed for people to lead change. There must be (1) vision alignment, (2) clear responsibilities, (3) consistent accountability, and (4) specific authority.

Change must be in alignment with the vision of the organization. That means the organizational leaders must clearly articulate their vision and keep it in front of people. If there isn't a clear vision statement, change will become random and won't provide any benefit.

Once the proposed change is in alignment with the vision of the organization, responsibilities must be assigned. People need to know exactly what they should do, especially in organizations powered by volunteers. There's nothing more frustrating than the uncertainty associated with unspecified change.

When people know what they're supposed to do, there must be a system in place to keep them moving toward the goal. Accountability is as simple as checking in with people to see where they are in their areas of responsibility. When people know you're going to ask them about their areas of responsibility, they'll stay focused on the task.

Finally, people need the authority to get the job done. As a leader, you need to clearly identify the decisions that can and can't be made by those participating in the change process. Provide budgetary and communication guidelines. Put a checks-and-balances system in place. Do whatever you need to do, but don't give people responsibilities and not empower them to carry them out.

The back row is full of talented people who choose not to leverage their gifts, talents, and abilities for the benefit of their organizations. Not only do they compromise the strength of the organization but they squander the opportunity to invest their lives in something larger than themselves. It's heartbreaking to see people camped out on the back row, knowing they have gifts that could propel the organization to amazing heights: gifts that aren't being used. If only they could lean in! The results would be astounding—for the organization and, even more, for the people themselves.

Someone once said, "Never pray for anything unless you're willing to be part of the solution." We can take that another direction—never complain about anything unless you're willing

to help make things better. If we would all live by that mantra, there would be a lot less griping and a lot more activity!

KEY POINTS

1. Many back-row sitters let their philosophical objections prevent their participation in solving problems or strengthening the organization.
2. Organizations that refuse to change won't survive.
3. Change must be in alignment with the vision of the organization.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you usually handle situations in which you have philosophical objections?
2. Describe a time when you were part of an organization that went through a season of change.
3. How would you rate the quality of that change process?
4. What are three questions you would ask to determine if a proposed change was consistent with the organizational vision?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Ketterling is the founder and lead pastor of River Valley Church, a multisite church started in Minnesota in 1995 that currently has over 7,500 in attendance across eight U.S. campuses and two international campuses (Valencia, Spain, and Mbekeleweni, Swaziland).

Rob is the author of *Change Before You Have To* and *Thrill Sequence*. He currently serves on several church and para-church boards. He is a member of the lead team of the Association of Related Churches (ARC). Rob and his wife, Becca, live in Minnesota.

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IN A WORLD FULL OF CRITICISM, NOW IS THE TIME TO STEP UP AND LEAD FROM THE FRONT ROW! ROB'S AMAZING BOOK WILL CHALLENGE YOU TO BE AN INITIATOR AND TO STEP FORWARD IN YOUR LEADERSHIP."

— **Chris Hodges**, senior pastor, Church of the Highlands, Birmingham, Alabama

Rather than sit on the back row and complain about people, processes, or programs, move up to the front row and make change happen! That's what *Front-Row Leadership* is all about.

Whether you're a CEO, a volunteer, or a homemaker, leadership is your responsibility. You have the opportunity to be an initiator and to lead the change you talk about with your coworkers, family members, and friends. We need your wisdom and insight on the front row!

One person can still make a difference today! *Front-Row Leadership* can help you become the person of influence you were born to be. If you care enough to complain, you can care enough to lead. The world needs you to rise to the challenge and take your place on the front row!



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