

# Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

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## Parkinson's Law and "The answer is in the room"

*Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.*

I find the writings of C. Northcoate Parkinson (1909-1993) amusing. He is probably best known these days for what has come to be known as Parkinson's Law – "Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." In 1957, Parkinson wrote a book entitled *Parkinson's Law* in which he included essays on 10 of his "laws."

The "Law of Triviality" is the focus of this article. This law notes that, "the time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum involved." In his amusing essay, Parkinson writes that governing bodies generally fail to debate complex issues (such as the funding of a nuclear reactor) because they truly lack the depth of knowledge to do so and don't want to look foolish before others. They will, however, engage in spirited and lengthy debate about relatively innocuous things such as buying a bicycle shed or the cost of coffee for refreshments because they want to demonstrate that they are on top of things and doing their jobs. I must confess that, having spent over 40 years of my life working for government, *Parkinson's Law* provides many a knowing chuckle for me.

What is Parkinson's Law of Triviality's connection to church leaders? In my mind it points out one area of futility I repeatedly encounter in my work with church leadership teams. It arises when a church's leadership team encounters a serious, complex issue, problem, crisis, or other decision to be made. Many times I've heard church leaders talk about having spoken or thought of the bromide "the answer is in the room" immediately before embarking upon a course of action that results in a new crisis.

Allow me to propose a contrarian slogan as a new starting point for church leaders about to embark upon dangerous, uncharted territory: "*The answer is likely NOT in the room.*" Allow me to explain.

As church leaders face important, serious, and/or complex decisions, I often hear them preface the thoughts they share with the words, "I think..." And, therein is the problem – when we are deciding something significant, we need to "know" what we are talking about. The temptation (I've yielded to it) is for team members to share their opinions with one another, often based upon old, shallow, or no actual knowledge or expertise about potential effective solutions, and then to focus upon and agree to the solution that seems or feels best to them. If it's not an important decision, this may not be a major problem; but, if it's a big decision, it's a recipe for disaster.

What can leadership teams do to embrace the contrarian concept of, "The answer is likely NOT in the room"? Here are some things you and your teammates may want to talk about.

- Do we agree that, especially as it relates to issues that are complex, serious, highly technical, or in which we have little or no actual experience, the answer is likely not in the room?
- In which areas do we actually have bona fide expertise among our team members, and how can that expertise be leveraged? What areas of expertise do staff members have?
- Should we, before engaging in significant discussion about these types of issues, start our deliberations by asking, “Who do we know that we should ask to share their expertise with us?”
- Who do we already know that has expertise in the following areas?
  - Legal counsel/attorneys
  - Insurance and risk management
  - Information technology
  - Social media
  - Counselling and mental health
  - Medical issues
  - Finance – security, protocols, and audits
  - Specialized ministries (children, student, seniors)
  - Theological expertise
  - Facilities maintenance and repair
  - Pastoral transitions
  - Other?

I like to suggest to church leaders that oftentimes the answer is not already in the room, so we have the responsibility as leaders to find those who can help us develop the answers and invite them into the room to help us. For many, this is a new way to operate, but it helps us avoid the pitfalls of arrogance in assuming that we know all that needs to be known, helps us avoid problems caused by our well-intentioned mistakes, and can increase the bonds of unity between church leaders, staff, and members of the church family when others are included in the deliberations leading up to those final decisions.

The entire EFCW West ministry team is pleased to provide support and input to church leaders facing important decisions as well as to assist in connecting with others having expertise. It is our ministry to serve churches and their pastors and leaders.

Are the answers already in your board room? When did you last invite others to come inside to provide expertise? Who is already among your core of advisors? Who would you call to gain perspective from someone not directly involved in your church’s situation? How do we differentiate between major issues requiring expertise and minor issues where the answers are likely already in the room? How can we increase the likelihood that the important decisions we make will help rather than hurt the church?

That’s something to talk about.

*Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at [bob@efcw.org](mailto:bob@efcw.org).*