
Lane Jones: Welcome to the *Andy Stanley Leadership Podcast*, a conversation designed to help leaders go further faster. On today's podcast, we'll talk about how a leader should challenge the process.

Well, Andy, over the years I've heard you talk about this topic. You've made this amazing statement. You said, "Challenging the status quo is often where leadership begins." Where did that idea come from?

Andy Stanley: Yeah, I love that statement, and it actually came from the very first leadership book that I ever read, which came out – this is hard to say out loud – almost thirty years ago.

Lane Jones: Wow.

Andy Stanley: Thirty years ago, yeah. And *The Leadership Challenge* by Kouzes and Posner, it's been out for thirty years; it continues to be republished. And sometimes I wonder, "Do I love this book because it's the first leadership book I've ever read, or is it really that good?" And honestly, every year, in fact, more than one time a year, I will find myself, when I'm doing research or I'm putting together a leadership talk, going back to that book; it is so incredibly worn out, and every page is underlined. And I think one of the things that gives this book such punch, it's not an individual leader sharing their insights or even their story, it's two researchers that interviewed and did research with a whole lot of leaders, effective leaders. And so their conclusions are data-based, not just insight-based.

And early in the book they introduce the importance of continually challenging the status quo in any organization. In fact, they argue that challenging the process, or challenging the status quo as they say it, is actually the leader's mandate.

Lane Jones: Why a mandate?

Andy Stanley: As all of our listeners know, progress is always, it's always preceded by change. If things are going to get better around here, then something has to change. And change is always preceded by challenge. If something's going to change, somebody has to come along and say, "Hey, something needs to change." So there's challenge, change. So

consequently, it take somebody challenging the status quo for real change to take place. And that is what we're going to talk about in the next few minutes. It's not always comfortable, but it is absolutely necessary.

Lane Jones: So you said thirty years ago, that was about ten years before we started this organization.

Andy Stanley: Yeah, and that was a problem, as you know because you were there. At that time I was working for my dad in a very traditional church, a great church, but a traditional church. So, you know, I read where leaders were supposed to challenge the status quo, so I thought, "Okay, I'll just challenging the status quo."

Lane Jones: And I seem to remember that not always going well.

Andy Stanley: Actually it did not go well. I think the only reason I kept my job was because my dad was the pastor. And maybe that's the only reason you kept your job too was because you were my friend. So my failure in those early days was not because this isn't an important and true principle, it had everything to do with my inappropriate and not so well thought through approach to this. So what I did, instead of challenging the status quo of entire enterprise, which was really none of my business, I decided to take this principle and apply it to my sphere of influence, which is really what everybody should do.

So my sphere of influence at that point, I oversaw our ministry to middle school and high school students, which was not a big part of what we were doing as an organization. But I thought, "Hey, this is my sphere of influence. I can begin challenging the process or challenging the status quo of student ministry in general, where I had, you know, the authority to do so." And you were there for that, Lane. You remember some of those days.

And even though what we did was disruptive, I think what saved us was we were successful, because when a leader comes along and challenges what is, but also combines that with or harnesses that to a, "Hey, here's what it could be and here's what it should be." And again, that's what we talk about so often on our podcast, that leadership is about pointing people to a preferred future. If challenging the

process is then harnessed to or linked to a picture of a preferred future, people generally are willing to sit up straight and say, "Hey, you're right. This is what we've always done, but it's not working anymore, or there's a better." So consequently we experience some success then. But let me reiterate again: simply taking this idea and charging into the whole organization was not very effective.

Lane Jones: As you said, I was around for some of that, and I remember you started actually encouraging this principle.

Andy Stanley: Yeah, with the leaders that reported to me in terms of volunteers and staff, I just began insisting on it; and I tried to do that ever since. This is not comfortable. But here's the thing, Lane, and you know this, and you're the same way. There's something that I think we fear more than being wrong, and that is being irrelevant.

So when a younger leader comes along and begins to challenge the process that we established – and our organization is twenty years old – it does feel personal, because, you know, my fingerprints are all over everything we do. But there still is in the back of my mind I never want to wake up one day in an organization that I helped create that's irrelevant, regardless of how good those ideas used to be, because everything that's relevant has a shelf life, and we know that, and we talk about that. But the only way sometimes to unearth those things that have become – refer sometimes – "old couches" is for somebody to come along and challenge the process to kind of challenge the status quo.

Lane Jones: Well, Andy, as you said, twenty years ago we were challenging the process, we were challenging this.

Andy Stanley: Yeah, we were the young guys.

Lane Jones: Yeah, we were, weren't we; we remember that. And now we've got some amazing young leaders on the staff that are doing that to us.

Andy Stanley: Yeah, and the reason I want to create a culture – and it's so important for leaders to create a listening culture, especially to next-generation leaders – is because as Al Reece says in his excellent book *Focus*, "The next-generation product will

probably not come from the previous generation. The next-generation product will not come from the previous generation."

So we had some great ideas twenty years ago, and hopefully there are a few great ideas – you know, we still have a few great ideas, right? But the truth is, you know, the next generation in our context, the next-generation church, the next-generation approach to ministry, the next-generation approach to dealing with issues and problems and challenges in our culture, it's probably not going to come from our generation. But I want to be in an organization that, again, is open to that next generation challenging the status quo in such a way that it's both helpful, and that we can then in turn get behind them instead of feeling like they're being a threat to us. And this is a dance, you know, this is more art than science, but it has a lot to do with the kind of culture that we create, and it has a lot to do with our willingness to listen to a lot of bad ideas until we get to the good idea.

Lane Jones: Absolutely.

Andy Stanley: Because, Lane, the truth is we will either benefit from those ideas or we won't. And the only way to benefit from these new ideas, the ideas, again, that, you know, sometimes they don't strike us as exactly on point. But the only way to benefit from those ideas is to know what they are; and to know what they are, I've got to create an environment, or we've got to create an environment where those ideas bubble up easily, and to avoid creating an atmosphere where, again, next-generation leaders think, "Well, they just don't listen. This is just their way and they're always going to do it their way."

And as much as I believe that, we have that here from time to time. When I get our three-month and one-year evaluations, or if I do a skip level meeting with someone and just dig in, every once in a while I run across, "Well, you know, I just don't feel like anybody's paying attention," and it's both heartbreaking and maddening; but it's just part of organizational culture, and it reiterates why we need to be so proactive when it comes to creating a culture where, you know, we have predictable systems, but at the same time, permission to challenge the status quo.

Lane Jones: Well, to that point, Andy, I remember you reading a statement from the book that you said actually scared you as a leader.

Andy Stanley: Absolutely, and I know exactly what you're talking about. This is a statement that I go back to over and over and over. In fact, when I pull out old teaching outlines from leadership talks, this statement shows up just about everywhere, whether I quote it or not. And it really did; it was inspiring in the early days, and now it does scare me a bit.

So here's what they write. They say, "Leaders must challenge the process precisely because any system will unconsciously conspire to maintain the status quo and prevent change." I want to read that again. "Leaders must challenge the process." So in other words, this is the mandate. We must challenge the process. Why? "Precisely because any system," – even good systems – "any system will unconsciously" – and again, a system isn't even a living, breathing organism. But systems have power in organizational life. "Any system will unconsciously conspire to maintain the status quo" – and then here's the kicker – "and prevent change."

So again, if we're not careful, we wake up in an organization that is conspiring against us, because every organization, whether it's industry-based, product-based, whatever it might be, every organization, the systems kind of basically determine job descriptions, they determine what people do; and if we're not careful, these systems, in our case that we created, conspires – that's a powerful word – conspires against us. And again, there are people listening today who feel like they have to go to work and work around the organization. They feel like the organization is in the way of them doing what they were hired to do. Well, that's because there are things that haven't been challenged in a while and the status quo gets in the way.

So an organization, or the systems in an organization, unconsciously – because again, they're not living, breathing organisms, they're just the habits of an organization, they're the way an organization is established, or even the physical layout of an organization – conspires to maintain the status quo and prevent change. Organizations do what organizations are organized to do. And if there is not periodic

sort of whacking the hornets' nest a bit, things just don't change and organizations resist change.

And I think in our world, you know, in church world, Lane, we hear a lot from people who say, "How do I get my church to change? How do I get my church to change?" and I'm often quick to say, you know, it's not your church, it's the people. But at the same time, the structure of a church, just like the structure of any organization, conspires against change, even, again, the facility. Sometimes we find ourself trying to do things here, and the facility conspires against us. So this is deep in an organizational life, and this is why I think the authors of this book were so right. This really is the leader's mandate.

Lane Jones: Andy, as we mentioned, our organizations just a little over twenty years old, and by most accounts, very successful. That has to make it that much harder to challenge the status quo.

Andy Stanley: Absolutely, because I'm partially responsible for the status quo. I mean, I am the status quo here in our organization, and so are you. We're one of the biggest organizations in the world doing what we do. And yet, it is more important than ever that we challenge the status quo. Like Andy Grove, former CEO of Intel said, "Success breeds complacency, and complacency breeds failure." Success breeds complacency – we all know that – and complacency breeds failure. So round and round and round we go.

So the worst thing that we could do is to allow our success to determine what we do tomorrow, because success breeds complacency. And that doesn't mean in the rhythm of organizational life we don't stop and breathe, that we don't stop and celebrate, you know, past accomplishments; it just means we can't allow our success to breed complacency. And again, the longer we are in this, the more tempting that will be, and the more important it is for us to create a culture where we are able to and willing to pay attention to the people who are challenging our status quo.

A few months ago when we talked about our staff behaviors. We have six staff behaviors we ask all of our staff to embrace. One of those is, "Make it better." And "make it better" always challenges the status quo, because to

improve something, you have to change something. And whenever I talk about "make it better," it's an opportunity to say, "When you see something in your silo, when you see something in your lane that needs to be made better, or if you have an idea about how somebody in another department, division, or even campus can make something better, it's your responsibility to speak up. And the hesitation to speak up is the hesitation to rock the boat or to challenge the status quo.

So again, even within the context of our staff behavior language, we look for ways to encourage this, and then when it happens, to reward it, because there's some personalities who can't wait to do this. I would be one of those. There are certain personalities that will sit on a really, really good idea a long, long time, until they're invited to speak into the process. So again, the culture and the atmosphere of an organization is super important as it relates to bubbling up, as we said earlier, these good ideas.

Lane Jones: Yeah, I mean, Andy, at the end of the day, none of us wants to be stuck. I mean, we don't want to be part of a stuck organization.

Andy Stanley: Yeah, and I don't want to fix things once they break, I would rather abandon them before they break and move on to the next thing. But that's difficult, difficult to do, because everybody's busy, and everybody's busy doing what they have been doing all along.

Lane Jones: Well, Andy, when you presented this to our staff, you told us there was something you wanted us to know and then something you want us to do. I want to dig into those two things. First, what is it we should know?

Andy Stanley: Yeah, this is something that we look for opportunities to talk about as often as possible. And the last time I did sort of a formal presentation to our staff about "challenge the process," I said, "The thing that I want everybody to know is that our mission and our vision is permanent, that what this organization is designed to do, that's pretty much permanent, but that our model or our approach, in our case, our programming is temporary. Our approach is temporary.

So again, helping people understand, "What do we mess

with, and what do we not mess with?" Now that doesn't mean we should never ever sit down and reevaluate our mission and vision. Of course, we should. But in terms of the day-to-day "make it better" challenge the process, the process that needs to be challenged most of the time is our approach to what we do. In our case we call it our model. So mission, you know, stays the same. Model, how we approach it. It needs to be predictable for our customers or for the people who are involved. But there's nothing about our model that's sacred.

I tell leaders all the time, and I've said in on our podcast: "Marry the mission, date the model. Marry the mission, date the model." Fall in love with your vision, but just be infatuated with your approach. Hang on tightly to the mission, but stay open-handed with the model, with the approach, with the style, because that's where we need to pilot new things, and that's where we need to experiment around the edges.

Lane Jones: Andy, that's really where a lot of our conversation really goes to is what's not working in the model.

Andy Stanley: There's nothing about our model or programming that's off limits to discussion. Now because I'm a champion of it, and because we talk about it all the time publicly, and again, what the marketplace in our case understands about us as an organization, they may think, "Hey, the model and programming is forever." It's not, we just want them to understand how we do it here.

But behind-the-scenes, none of that is off limits to discussion. And if you sat in on one of our leadership team meetings, or those of you in our podcast audience ever sat in on one of our leadership team meetings, you would know that. We have very healthy discussions around all of these things, because I'm surrounded by a bunch of people who want to do what works, again, who want to make it better.

Lane Jones: Well, Andy, with that in mind, to know that we should marry the mission and date the model, you also ask us to do something.

Andy Stanley: Yeah, in addition to knowing something I did want all of our staff to do something in response to that. And this is

something that all of you listening today can embrace within your own organization. I ask everybody on our staff to be a raving fan publicly and an honest critic privately, a raving fan publicly, an honest critic privately. For an organization to be strong and to be effective in the marketplace, you have to have both. And you can't have raving critics who represent the organization, and you can't have everybody within the organization to be a fan all the time, otherwise you don't learn anything and you don't grow.

So raving fans publicly, honest critics privately. In other words, until we decide corporately or organizationally to change something, be a fan. But behind the scenes, bring your insight to bear on what we are doing, and again, how we can make it better. If we lose either one of those, I think the clock starts ticking backwards on the effectiveness of our organization.

Lane Jones: Yeah, Andy. I remember thinking that surprised some of our younger leaders. I think they come into our organization with the notion of the way we do things is set in stone just as much as why we do what we do.

Andy Stanley: And that's understandable, because we love our product, you know, we love our brand. We love the way we do what we do. But this way won't always be the best way, and we know that. And honestly, because I've been here so long, you know, as I've said before, "A leader's IQ goes down the longer they're in an organization." The person that's been in an organization the longest is the least aware of the culture of the organization, because we grow used to it, we grow blind to things that are right in front of us because we've been there for so long. It's the fresh eyes that bring oftentimes the best ideas.

Lane Jones: Yeah, the painters never smell the paint.

Andy Stanley: Yeah, exactly; the painters never smell the paint; that's exactly right. And the thing is I'm so entrenched, really, I'm too entrenched in how we do things sometimes to know when it's not working.

Lane Jones: So Andy, you want people around you to feel empowered to challenge the process.

Andy Stanley: Yeah, and the truth is, every leader does. Every leader wants their organization to get better. Every leader wants the things around them to improve. I think leaders intuitively evaluate and critique everything.

In fact, when we do our – we do a conference every other year called "The Drive Conference for Leaders Who Love the Local Church," and I always say in our first session, "Okay, you're leaders, so you're going to have two sets of notes. You're going to take notes on what we say and you're going to take notes on what you observe about how we do things here, notes about the buildings," because leaders are by nature critics. I mean, we're students and we're critics.

And so if you're going to surround yourself with other leaders and young leaders, you have to assume they're the same way. And they're not going to always march in step, and they're not going to always think, "Our ideas are as fantastic as we think they are." And again, as we said earlier, we will either learn from their insight or we won't, and we're better off if we do.

Lane Jones: Andy, you actually told our staff, and I quote, "Deep in your heart you feel that if you were in charge, things around here would not only be different, they would be better."

Andy Stanley: Yeah, that's exactly right. In every organization I've worked in, I would sit in the back row and think, "Wow, these people don't get it." And now I'm "they." And that's okay. That is the nature of leadership. That's not rebellion, that's not being loyal, there's nothing bad about that, that's just an is. But creating an environment where we can get the best of that, but at the same time, help leaders mature to the place where they realize, you know, "There has to be some stability, there has to be predictability. We can't change all the time, but we'd better change some things some of the time."

Lane Jones: Well as you said, this idea has been out there for at least thirty years. Why don't we see more organizations employ it?

Andy Stanley: Well, I think part of it is organizations that do this you don't know that they're doing it, because it's behind the scenes. And when it comes to new product, sometimes it can take years for a new product break through. That's true with technology, it's certainly true in the drug industry. For the

leader or for the leadership team that is not embracing this, I think sometime we mistake a challenge to the process as a challenge to our leadership or a challenge to our authority. I mean, it's easy for leaders to take things personally so they don't encourage it. This has to do with self-awareness, this has to do with personal security, this has to do with leading open-handedly, and I think for a lot of us, it has to do with just remembering what we were like in our late twenties and our thirties when we thought all of our ideas were good ideas. If you forget that, then again, a challenge to the process or a challenge to the status quo, it feels like a personal challenge.

On the flipside, sometimes it's hard for young leaders to imagine that everything that is in place was originally a good idea. And this is when companies and organizations every once in a while need to talk about the history of a company or an organization, because smart people, intuitive people, they just need to hear this every once in a while to remember, "Oh, yeah, that thing that I hate that we're doing, that was a breakthrough idea ten years ago, that was a breakthrough idea fifteen years ago." So let's appreciate the past, remember that we are all standing on someone's shoulder's; and I think within that context, it helps leaders appropriately, incentively, and without making it personal, challenge the status quo.

- Lane Jones:* One generation's status quo is just another generation's challenge to improve.
- Andy Stanley:* Exactly. And remembering, I think remembering that creates the context for moving forward.
- Lane Jones:* Yeah. Well along those lines you gave our staff some really good advice regarding the tension this creates, you referred to it as "managing the fan/critic challenge."
- Andy Stanley:* Yeah, I suggested that they develop the art – and it really is art. And again, every personality is going to experience this or communicate this in a different way. But I suggested to our staff that they develop the art of challenging the process without challenging the authority of their leader. And this has to do with language, tone, timing. So when an instruction is given, you follow through now, you debrief later. I mean, all of us who are parents have had endless conversations

where we ask our kids to do something, and they want to have a discussion about why.

So early on in my parenting, my kids, they just knew where this was going. I would say, "You know what? That's a good question; and I would like to talk about why. But right now I just need you to do it. So I don't want to shut down why, but I don't want to get off on it, a why question right now, because we just need to do this." So when instruction is given, follow through now, debrief later, and never verbalize your frustration with a process or with an instruction in front of other team members. That's just unhealthy and it's disrespectful.

And again, unnecessary emotion; it gets woven into the conversation at that point. And again, it's just not necessary. So when somebody asks you to do something, follow through now, debrief later, and don't verbalize your frustration with a process in front of other team members. And this goes back to a broader principle that "public loyalty creates private influence, public loyalty creates private influence."

When I see someone who is my fan publicly and who goes to bat for me or implements something the way we've asked them to, and then comes back to me after they've done a great job and said, "Okay, I did what you asked me to do. I think it was marginally successful, but I have some questions," well, I'm going to listen to their questions, as opposed to the person that I feel like every conversation becomes an argument and every conversation is trying to push a rock up the hill. They just lose influence over time, because again, we're busy and we just get worn out.

Lane Jones: Well, Andy, as we wrap up the podcast, any final thoughts?

Andy Stanley: Yeah, as we wrap up, I would just say to all of our leaders who are just a little but put off or maybe frightened or maybe feel a little bit insecure about inviting this kind of feedback or being more open to the people who challenge the process; if the leaders in our organization have permission to challenge the process, everybody wins – they win, we win. They feel heard. We're able to tease out the good ideas and even make a mediocre idea a great idea. The organization remains relevant, more profitable. We'll create an

environment that attracts leaders, because leaders want to be listened to. Very few leaders feel like they have to be the point leader. But leaders want to feel like they are influencing their own destiny and their own future, and listening and celebrating the fact that they're not content with the way things are or where things are; it just keeps them engaged. Nothing goes underground.

So I really do think Posner and Kouzes were exactly right. This is not a nice to have, this is not an add-on, this really is the leader's mandate to challenge the process so that our organizations don't end up conspiring against us.

Lane Jones:

Well, Andy, thanks so much for today. And to all our listeners, we want to thank you for joining us. To hear more from Andy on leadership, visit andystanley.com.

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