

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

By Bob Osborne, EFCA West
Director of Church Health
(bob.osborne@efca.org)

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The Bobble-Head Phenomenon

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.

Prior articles can be found at www.efcawest.org. Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

I am the owner of eight bobble-head dolls, a peculiar subset of the category of things known as collectables. I slowly acquired them over the span of several years upon entering Dodger Stadium to watch baseball games. I didn't go to any games to acquire a collectable bobble-head doll – their acquisition was incidental to watching the game. They are called “bobble-heads” because when you tap their spring-supported, oversized heads, they, well, bobble. They are called “collectables” because when we acquire them, we somehow feel guilty about getting rid of them so they, well, collect on our bookshelves and countertops.

So, what do bobble-head collectables have to do with churches and church leaders? I'm glad you asked. I call it the Bobble-Head Phenomenon, and that's something to talk about.

Many years ago, both at work and at my church, I began to notice the Bobble-Head Phenomenon. It goes like this. A team or group is asked for input regarding an issue or topic by a strong leader (including strength coming from personality, position in an organization's power/leadership hierarchy, or some other personality or behavioral trait). The leader provides his/her ideas, inputs or recommendations first, then other members of the team or group tend to nod in agreement; they do not routinely offer their own perspectives, opinions, or ideas about the suggestion. They look like a collection of bobble-heads.

For those who think in formulas:

Strong leader + first inputs = bobble-head phenomenon in the team.

Please note that there is nothing wrong with being a strong or dominant leader and nothing wrong with being a quieter or more introspective leader. One is not inherently better than the other, they are just different. But, both need to learn to work well with the other, and in a team it is important that the entire team contributes in significant conversations.

I remember sitting in on an executive meeting several years ago and hearing an idea put forth from my agency's top leader that was not logical or otherwise well thought-out and then, when he asked his

executives at the table for their thoughts, they all nodded in unison. Any conversation about the issue occurred in hallways well after the actual meeting, and none of those conversations were positive about the boss's idea or useful to changing the outcome. At first, I was irritated at the meeting participants for not speaking up (yes, including myself), but then it dawned on me that the boss had set this up by the way he handled the conversation. I felt less guilty.

When a strong leader presents his/her ideas first to a team or group and then asks team members to give their ideas, what actually happens is that the leader puts the others in a position where whatever they say will pass judgment on the leader's idea. There are only three options for the team members. Either they like it, don't like it, or want to modify it. Two out of three options have negative connotations. Most people are at least somewhat reluctant to publicly criticize their leader's ideas. Depending upon the leader's tolerance for opinions contrary to his or her own, this can be a recipe for disaster – the team shuts down and merely assents, nodding their heads in unison. That's the Bobble-Head Phenomenon.

Assuming we actually want the candid, unfiltered and honest opinions of others on a given topic, how does a strong leader go about getting it? Here are some questions that can jump-start your conversation and minimize the Bobble-Head Phenomenon in your team.

- Do we as a team sometimes suffer from the Bobble-Head Phenomenon? Any examples?
- Who are the more dominant, verbal, think-aloud people in our leadership team? Who are the quieter ones whose inputs may need to incubate longer before being shared aloud with the team? It's oftentimes helpful to admit to what everyone else already knows but won't say. How can we draw out their input?
- Has the team made any decisions in the past few years where you (or other team members) were reluctant to share your thoughts prior to the decision? What were you thinking and feeling at the time?
- How can our strong leader(s) obtain other's thoughts and opinions on a topic without presenting their own opinions first? How can a strong leader benefit the team by avoiding prematurely "showing his hand?"
- In what types of conversations might the Bobble-Head Phenomenon pose the greatest danger to our team and the church? How can we be especially vigilant when making these types of decisions?

There are several ways to lessen the likelihood of having the Bobble-Head Phenomenon occur within your team. Here are several to consider.

- If the decision is of high importance (for example, vision clarity and strategic decisions are of high importance; approving the minutes of the last meeting is not), ensure that every team member, especially the more quiet ones, speaks to the issue. Our elder team has every elder speak to any significant issue at hand – each must say something specific about his support and concerns. We cannot just say, "I agree with Jason."
- Sometimes it is helpful to have someone other than the dominant leader facilitate meetings (elder or staff meetings). Just because you are the pastor or highest-level leader in the room does not mean you must lead the meeting. A major benefit of this concept in churches is that the pastor, oftentimes a dominant leader, has greater opportunity to actively listen and focus upon

what others are saying when he is freed from the responsibility of moving the meeting along from the moderator's seat. The pastor can say after discussion, "I appreciate your input. I'll evaluate it over the next few days and get back to you with a decision/recommendation/etc." When a dominant leader chairs the meetings, the meetings are often quite efficient, but much valuable insight and information may go unsaid.

- When I served as the elder chair at my church, we found that when I or our lead pastor spoke first about an important idea or suggestion there was less discussion of the issue among the other elders than if we said there was an issue we were facing and elicited others' input before weighing in ourselves. We now try to introduce such things by saying something like, "We are thinking about some ideas to improve the patio facility to foster more time for our church family to linger together after Sunday services. Do you have any thoughts on this?" After others have spoken, we are free to join the discussion.
- In his book *Sticky Teams*, Larry Osborne provides some very helpful advice about presenting first drafts, not final proposals (page 96). Larry writes, "A strong, initiating leader who presents everything in final form puts the rest of the team in an awkward position. Those that hate conflict become rubber stamps. Those that fear domination dig in and become adversarial, either aggressively or passive-aggressively." We have found it helpful to take this advice one step further and strive to present *ideas* before we start a first-draft so we can include the team's input in that first draft. It takes a little longer, but gets everyone involved in the conversation.

The Bobble-Head Phenomenon is seldom intentionally created – it just happens. And because it just happens, it is something we need to be vigilant to avoid. It is not just the responsibility of the strong leader; it is the responsibility of the entire team. And because it's a team responsibility, it's something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.*