

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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

February 1, 2017

What Do We Do When Things Go Wrong?

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.

So, church leader, has anything ever gone wrong at your church or in your area of ministry? I'm talking everything from a serious moral failure kind of wrong to the printing the wrong date on the event flier kind of wrong. The answer, of course, is "yes." Things go wrong all the time. It's the result of imperfect creatures living in a fallen world. Despite our determined efforts, people make mistakes, don't foresee potential negative outcomes, cannot accurately predict future events, and sometimes just don't pay attention to the things that needed to have had their attention.

Then something goes wrong, and we need to address it. And because things often go wrong, and it is our responsibility as leaders to address what went wrong, how we go about doing so is something to talk about.

Think back to some of the high-profile things that have gone wrong in recent years – inadequate or ineffective disaster responses, terrorist attacks, all kinds of stuff during a recent and very interesting national election, intelligence that proved to not be entirely accurate, things that crashed, church splits and leadership failures, failed investments, broken relationships, people and corporations that did illegal things, and the decision to throw a pass rather than run the ball from the one-yard line in Super Bowl XLIX.

The response to these things is predictable – we look for someone to blame, and we're pretty good at it. Blaming is apparently in our DNA – Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent. I'll bet some of us wondered, before becoming so theologically sophisticated, why God put that tree in the garden in the first place. It seems that whenever something goes wrong, our default response is to find someone (that's someone *else*) to blame. It apparently makes us feel better to do so – it's their fault, not mine. Whew!

I want to suggest that, for church leaders, finding and placing blame is usually a too simplistic response that is prone to allowing the same problem(s) to reoccur over and over again. Sometimes a problem is solely the result of a person's errors or misdeeds; but, more often than not, I have found that behind that one person's shortcomings there are systems in place, or a lack of them, that encouraged or allowed the problem to occur. If we don't address the underlying systems, we allow the breeding

ground for mistakes to continue to create conditions that will allow more problems to occur in the future.

Many years ago, I went to an early Saturday morning meeting at my church. At lunch I happened to look down and noticed I was wearing unmatched shoes. It gets worse – I was wearing one soft walking shoe and one leather dress shoe. Yes, I felt stupid and wondered why I did that. Obviously I didn't pay enough attention and I was to blame. But the "how" of my folly was not that I am extremely stupid or don't pay attention to what I wear. The "how did this happen" was that I selected my shoes and put them on in a dark room so as to not disturb my sleeping wife. To prevent my making the same type of mistake in the future, I needed to create a new system for early-morning dressing. My new system was not to turn on the lights and awaken my wife – no, it was to avoid dressing in the dark and to double check the results if I ever needed to do so in the future. For me, dressing in the dark is apparently a high-risk venture.

Systems come in many forms. They may be intentionally created or inadvertent. Systems are the ways we do things. They may include organizational and church cultures, leadership styles, policies and procedures, how we conduct our meetings, the reports we use as the basis for decisions, how people interact with one another, the amount of time we put into our work, whether we work as teams or as individuals, and more. When we respond to problems by looking for someone to blame so we can hold them accountable, we can inadvertently close our minds to the possibility (dare I say likelihood?) that our systems may have caused or at least contributed to the problem.

Looking for someone to blame without also addressing systems is not fair to the people involved and allows problems to reoccur. Looking to fix systems without fixing accountability for a person's problem behavior or performance allows problem people to avoid accountability and mess things up again. Looking objectively for all the factors, be they human or systems, that contributed to the problem and then addressing all of them helps us prevent reoccurrence and hold people accountable for their actions.

It's important for leaders and leadership teams to talk about and understand how they address problems when they occur and to have systems for responding to problems in place before problems arise. We ought not make things up as we go. Here are some ideas for your conversation.

- Make a list of some of the things that have gone wrong in your church over the last one to three years. Try to recall your first impulse response upon learning of it. Did you default to looking to blame? Did you remember to look at whether existing systems allowed the problem to occur or whether new systems might need to be put into place to prevent a reoccurrence?
- Has our church had a job position in which a number of people have failed to do well? Did we look beyond the people involved to determine whether our expectations for the position were reasonable or whether we engaged in appropriate hiring systems for the people involved? What could or should we do differently?
- Are there things in our church or ministry that have a history of going wrong? What are they? What about them goes wrong? Are there systems that are not working or new systems that need to be developed to decrease the frequency of these problems or stop them?
- Are there things that we leaders are prone to forget to do or to monitor? Things like scheduling required reoccurring meetings, continuously developing current and future leaders, ongoing facility maintenance, fire extinguisher certifications, review of membership rolls, and follow up

on assigned projects or work? Many years ago, my church's leadership team was surprised by a mortgage balloon payment – when we entered into the mortgage we had established no system to track the impending balloon payment.

- When we learn of something that went wrong for another church, do we take a moment to consider whether that might happen at our church and what, if anything, we might need to do to prevent it? I can assure you that the leaders at the church that experienced the crisis didn't think it would happen to them either.
- What systems do we have in place to guide our inquiries into things that go wrong? Most of us have no system and just do what seems to come naturally which is usually to fix blame. Is there a system or check list we could put into place that would help us avoid defaulting to blaming and help us evaluate the role of systems in creating the problem?

Systems are not the solution to every problem, but they are quite helpful in those areas that are important or critical to a church's or organization's wellbeing. Too many systems for too many things is unhealthful and rigid. Too few systems in too few things is dangerously risky. Effective systems for things of importance will feel just right.

When things go wrong, it's important that leaders look beyond "who is responsible?" to "how did this happen?" Figuring out how to consistently get to that question amid the stresses and urgencies of addressing things that have gone wrong is 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.*