

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Can We Stop Pursuing Greatness?

I recently finished reading yet another book that gave a number of things to do to become a great leader. I have a gazillion leadership books, magazines, blogs, etc., in my leadership library. Like most leaders, I want to continuously grow in my understanding of leadership and my application of that learning to my leadership responsibilities. And I have. I truly believe that a leader that stops growing in his/her understanding of leadership and capacities for leading will quickly become a burden and a detriment to the organization or people they are supposed to be leading.

But I suffer from fatigue. Not tiredness from leading, but fatigued by the non-stop barrage of authors and speakers urging me to pursue greatness. I don't aspire to being great – that word has so much baggage. The idea of pursuing greatness feels so competitive, so comparative, so egocentric, so not-humble, so “look-at-me-everybody!”

And so not-like-Jesus.

So I asked myself, “Can I stop pursuing greatness?” I think the answer is “Yes.” I also asked myself, “Is greatness the desired outcome of my leadership work?” I think the answer is, and should be, “No.”

May we stop pursuing leadership greatness? Can our teams stop pursuing leadership greatness? Should you and should we? Leadership mediocrity or slothfulness is certainly not something to be pursued and is not the only alternative to pursuing greatness.

What leadership result other than greatness might we choose to pursue? That's something to talk about.

Before helping you frame this conversation with your team, let me share some thoughts about leadership greatness and its alternatives.

- We must remember that our work is for God and His purposes and not our own. It is God's will that we pursue as we lead, and for that we will give an account (Hebrews 13:17). Our responsibility as leaders is to do the best we can under the circumstances

and to trust God for the results He wants. I often need to remind myself of Proverbs 21:31 – “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD.” (NIV)

- Jesus spoke of greatness in terms of practicing and teaching His commands (Matthew 5:19). He said that one who wants to become great must be a servant of all (Matthew 20:26; Mark 10:43). And I think Jesus was encouraging his disciples to pursue service, not greatness. This is in stark contrast to defining greatness in terms of fame, notoriety, numbers of followers and clicks or broad public exposure.
- Some leaders will achieve “greatness” in the eyes of others. That is wonderful! But all leaders will not. The truly great leaders hold their greatness humbly and are thankful for the influence and results that God has given to them and they leave a legacy rather than a trail of destruction in their wake. Some of us have been given five capacities or opportunities and some two and some one. But each of us is to grow that which was given to us to the benefit of the master.
- Sometimes those of us not so well known think poorly of well-known church leaders. It makes us somehow feel better to tear down those better-known leaders. We quietly assume the worst about them (and sometimes pass on that negative blog post without knowing the circumstances ourselves). We may even secretly hope or assume that some weakness or sin in them will lead to their public downfall. In three words, don’t do that.

Let me suggest that a better goal for leaders than pursuing greatness is the pursuit of effectiveness. Effectiveness is attainable for most – greatness is not. Effectiveness is local – greatness requires approbation of others outside our ministry. Effectiveness is better adapted to the circumstances and seasons in our lives and ministries – greatness oftentimes becomes a burden too heavy to carry into subsequent seasons of ministry.

What if our goal was to be *effective* leaders rather than great leaders? How might we go about this? Here are ideas to start your conversation.

- Effectiveness is measured by accomplishing what we set out to do. What are we actually trying to accomplish as leaders in the local church?
- How might we deal with and consider applying input we gain from books, blogs, and conferences espousing the pursuit of “greatness” through a lens of pursuing effectiveness instead?
- Work with your team to discern three or four “top” priorities for the church you serve. If you find it hard to eliminate enough to get the number to three or four, might the church have become program-centric rather than mission-centric? What is it you are trying to do together and what are the few key things that need to be accomplished to be effective in achieving your mission in this season?
- Church elders or leadership teams sometimes make the accomplishment of goals the responsibility of the lead or senior pastor. What would it be like if accomplishing

leadership goals were the shared responsibility of the entire team? What changes in systems and culture might we need to make?

- Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden is often quoted as saying, “Don’t mistake activity with achievement.” When we look back over the past year, how would we assess our leadership effectiveness? Are we tempted to equate activity with accomplishment? What *mission-related* accomplishments have we seen in the past year?

One of my favorite sayings and pieces of advice for church leaders is, “Clarity is our friend.” Oftentimes, pastors and board members are confused or not united in their understanding of what the church is actually trying to accomplish, what its leaders are trying to accomplish, and why they are doing so. We think we have clarity and are united, but when we poke around a bit we find we are not. In addition, we oftentimes are trying to accomplish so many things that we lack the focus, energy and resources to actually accomplish them all. Clarity is our friend.

Someday, my current ministry with EFCA West will come to an end. When it does, I don’t think I’ll care about reaching or not reaching some level of greatness. But I care passionately about being effective at accomplishing the tasks set before me in this season. The question I’ll ask myself is whether or not I was as effective as I had the capacity to be. Greatness cannot be sustained over time (we all eventually leave our post and are replaced), but effectiveness cannot be taken away. May God grant us the blessing of effectiveness in our labor for His kingdom.

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

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 <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.