

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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October 1, 2017

What We Look For in Our Leaders

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

I suspect that most people who read the title of this article expect me to talk about character requirements for church leaders from I Timothy 3, Titus 1, and, perhaps, I Peter 5. Not this time. Rather, this article focuses upon what traits people look for in their leaders, not just Christian leaders and not just Christian followers.

I must admit that I usually cringe when I or others say that the qualifications for church leaders are spelled out in the aforementioned texts. I don't think that's entirely true. It seems to me that the traits listed in those texts are the *minimum Christian character* requirements for elders and, by application, other church leaders. I suggest we look for more traits in evaluating potential church leaders, including their obvious commitment to the local church, some indication that they would be able to work together with others as a team, appropriate generosity and financial support of the church, and much more.

The people in our churches are, in fact, people. So it seems useful to at least look at what traits people in general are looking for in their leaders and to consider whether those traits are important for church leaders as well. Understanding what followers look for in their leaders and evaluating whether we are or are not providing those things is something to talk about.

I call your attention to one of the seminal works in the library of many if not most students of leadership: *The Leadership Challenge*, by James Kouzes and Barry Posner. Here is a brief summary of their research findings on this topic.

Kouzes and Posner posed this question: What values (personal traits or characteristics) do you look for and admire in your leaders – those who you would willingly follow? They distilled 225

different answers into a list of 20 characteristics that they used in posing the same question to thousands and thousands of people in three iterations. Each time they asked respondents to list seven of the twenty traits that they most looked for in a leader “*they would willingly follow.*” These traits help people become want-to followers, not have-to followers. They found that over and over the same four traits were the only ones that appeared in over 50% of the replies. Here are those four traits.

- Honest. Think integrity – saying what you mean, meaning what you say, truthfulness (and not shading the truth), not cheating, etc. People want to follow honest leaders.
- Forward-Looking. Simply put, people want their leaders to have a good idea where they are going. They want leaders with real vision who are working to achieve it. We want to follow leaders who are going somewhere.
- Competent. This is simply the ability to get things done, specifically, the things that leaders are supposed to be doing. People want their leaders to be capable and effective in the range of leadership behaviors required to get things done.
- Inspiring. People want their leaders to be enthusiastic, energetic, and positive about the future. They want leaders to be able to communicate vision in ways that cause those they ask to follow to confidently climb on board.

It has been my experience that almost every church leader I’ve worked with (pastors, elders, and team leaders) have been honest – that might be because honesty falls into the category of “above reproach” we see in scripture (yet, unfortunately, I did have to write “*almost...*”). But, one or more of the other three are sometimes missing. I’ve encountered people in church leadership roles who cannot answer the “where are we trying to go” question. I’ve met others who are full of vision or who are good theology teachers but cannot figure out how to get things done. And, sadly, some are just dour, sour, boring people who make Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh seem wildly exciting.

What people look for in their leaders is something to talk about, especially if we leaders want people to actually follow our lead. Here are some ideas to start this conversation with your team.

- Knowing that no person has every desirable leadership trait, which traits are required, which are highly desired (preferred) and which are just desirable at your church? Are there any “disqualifications” that are not included in the Bible’s list of qualifications (such as not supporting the church financially)? How would you evaluate these things in a potential leadership candidate?
- How do we avoid unconsciously “raising the bar?” This is the process where existing leaders begin to expect more of new or emerging leaders than they had when they were new or emerging leaders. For instance, a group of 55-65 year-old elders who think a 35-year-old potential candidate is too young, even though they themselves began serving in leadership while they were in their thirties.

October 1, 2017

- How can church leaders *demonstrate* that they are honest and worthy of trust? Be specific and make a list. After brainstorming this, ask whether your team *as a whole* is displaying these behaviors in word and in deed among the flock.
- How do church leaders demonstrate that they are forward-looking? Many church leaders struggle with capturing consistent and clear vision, values and key strategies. Do our statements of mission, vision, values, and key strategies guide our decisions? Do we frequently talk about them or keep them to ourselves? Are we actually forward-looking, and how would others know it?
- How do church leaders demonstrate that they are competent to perform the work they are called to do? Can we recall any times where our congregation (or another congregation) questioned the competence of its leaders? What might we learn from these experiences?
- How do church leaders inspire others? How do we differentiate between genuine inspiring leadership and its counterfeits? Are there any behaviors we should seek to accentuate in ourselves that will enable us to better inspire those we lead?

Understanding what followers look for and expect from those they would willingly follow should be useful to those of us who embrace the awesome responsibility to serve in the ministry of leadership in our Savior's church. While foolish for church leaders to become people-pleasers, it seems to me wise to understand and pursue these traits that are so important to followers' confidence in following our lead.

Honest, forward-looking, competent, and inspiring – what are you and your team doing about these traits? That's something to talk about.

Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.

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