

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

What Should the Relationship Be Between Staff and Board Members?

During my prior employment in government I had frequent opportunity to inquire of lawyers about an issue of law. I would present an issue or situation to them and ask, “What do you recommend we do?” Their consistent reply always annoyed me, but each time I heard it I had to marvel at how accurate that answer was.

“It all depends.”

My answer to the question posed in this article is also, “It all depends.” However, what it depends upon is very important, can lead to peace or conflict among church leaders when we get it wrong or do not meet one another’s expectations, and it is very much something to talk about.

There are a number of variables that directly impact the answer to this question. To address the first variable and answer the most fundamental question on the matter, “Do we even need to talk about what the relationship between board members and staff should be?” my answer is a resounding “Yes!” Some of the variables to consider are the size and complexity of the church, the number of board members and number of staff, the skill level and experience of the staff and board members, and the culture of the church. There are others, too.

Usually when someone asks me this or a related question, it is because conflict has arisen among the leadership team because the relational boundaries or expectations are not defined. This is one of those areas of church leadership where clarity is our friend.

I’ve found among the churches we serve, and in my own personal experience, that there are four main categories of approaches to this matter. Following is a list of them with a brief comment on each.

1. *Do whatever you think is right at the moment.* This is the “we have no approach” approach to the question. Its problem is that it leads to inconsistent behaviors and

potentially creates conflicts over unmet expectations because there are no clear expectations. This approach didn't work during the time of the Judges either.

2. *A board member is assigned to oversee, "support" or "pray for" each staff member to facilitate relationships among staff and the board.* This can sometimes work satisfactorily, usually in a smaller church setting, but its benefits often decline as the church grows or just over time. The lead pastor can become distanced from the staff. These "assigned relationships" can begin to feel hollow over time as relationships seldom thrive when they are created by assignment. If the staff person is supervised by the lead pastor (or another designee), this can create the feeling that the staff member works for more than one "boss" and confusion among board members as to what their "oversight" expectations are. I almost always recommend that a staff person directly report only to the lead pastor (or in larger teams, a senior leader designated for that task).
3. *Board members and staff are not to interact with one another.* This approach is usually the response to a specific problem once faced in times past and it seldom works well. It creates stiffness and awkwardness in the church body and builds artificial barriers among its members. It can mask very unhealthy relationships among the staff and even abuse by senior leadership. I never recommend this.
4. *Defined relationship boundaries and expectations for board members and staff.* This is typically the gold mine. Because the appropriate relationship is defined in writing, it tends to have the clarity required to guide people's behaviors consistently over time. Additionally, because the expectations are known and written, they can be changed should the board determine the need to do so. The two major requirements for this option to work are that staff is not allowed to complain about their work to the board members¹ and that board members are not allowed to direct a staff member's work. There's more nuance required, but you get the point. Board members should give staff praise directly and enthusiastically, but concerns go to the lead pastor.

Here are some things that may help guide your conversation.

- Which of the four approaches most closely describes how your team handles these relationships? Is your approach yielding the results you are looking for? Have we asked board members and staff for their assessment?
- What are staff and board members and lead pastors looking for in their relationships with one another? What do we want them to be, and what do we want to avoid?
- How can we define relational boundaries so that we do not build unbeneficial barriers in board/staff relationships while simultaneously not crossing barriers that may negatively impact the lead pastor's ability to effectively lead and supervise ministry staff?
- Many churches try to do something to create a feeling of "being on the same team" among ministry staff and board members. How might we accomplish this without creating artificial relationships by assigning people to one another? Is this best done individually with each

¹ There are obvious exceptions to this in the areas of abuse, formal grievance procedures, and the like, and these exceptions should be clearly described in your employee handbook or policies.

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individual staff member or with ministry staff and board members occasionally working together as a group? Are there special events, conferences, etc., that are available to us that might be useful in developing such a team spirit?

It is important for ministry staff and board members to be on the same page related to the direction and vision and values of the church. It is also important that we don't needlessly create artificial barriers that prevent the body of Christ from being the body of Christ. Working to achieve clarity in defining relational boundaries between staff and board members is a good way to accomplish this. And 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.*

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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/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.