

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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The Problem of Leading: Appointed to Lead or to Please?

"If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said 'faster horses.'"

Attributed to Henry Ford (sort of...)

Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things."

Peter Drucker

Since I began serving as director of church health for EFCA West, I have had the opportunity to work with many churches and many church leaders – pastors, staff and elders/board members. One thing I've frequently found is that we church leaders are often fearful of implementing what we believe to be needed changes because of our fear of what people in the church will think. So, we try to figure out ways to determine the preferences of the congregation prior to making the decision.

One area where this frequently occurs is during a pastor search process where the congregation is surveyed to determine what they want in their next pastor. One thing I usually stress with church leaders is that the congregation's responses become useful data for consideration but should not necessarily guide the search process. I believe the same holds true for other directional and strategic decisions made by church leaders – member preferences are useful data for consideration but should not govern their decisions.

The difficulty with this for many church leaders and congregants is that most of our experience with leaders falls into one of two camps. At work, the boss is more of a dictator, benevolent or otherwise – what he/she decides is what we do. And, away from work, we have representative government – we elect people to office to do what we want them to do, to represent us, even though they have the freedom to legislate based upon their own conscience, at least until their next election or recall.

A problem faced by leaders in the church is to properly answer the following question: Are our church's leaders appointed to lead or to please? That's something to talk about.

I have found that expectations by and of church leaders varies significantly from church to church. These expectations arise from prior experiences (both personal and church-wide), demographics of the church and community, size of the congregation, leaders' skills, congregation's trust of current and prior leaders, variations in policy, governance document requirements, and more. Because of these differences, it is important for church leaders to understand the expectations and realities of leadership in the congregation you currently serve. Significantly exceeding leadership authorities, whether real or perceived, can be catastrophic to a leader's continued effectiveness and result in major conflicts within a church.

Here are some suggestions to guide your conversation.

- What are our church's stated expectations of its leaders? These are most often found in the church's governance documents (constitution, bylaws). Do the stated expectations specify or include the idea of leaders actually leading the church?
- What decision authorities do your governance documents reserve to the membership and what authorities are given to its leaders? What is the appropriate role for church leaders in seeking to influence the membership's decision?
- What is the congregation's expectations of its leaders, and do their expectations square with those stated in the governance documents as well as with current leadership behaviors? Be specific about any differences among them.
- If the church expects the membership to be consulted before leaders make major decisions, what do we/they mean by a "major" decision? What do we/they mean by the word "consulted?"
- Discuss the differences between leading and representing. In your church context, when should leaders lead and when should they pursue the congregation's wants/preferences?
- Is your team facing a significant decision for the church? If so, what role should the congregation have in providing input into that decision?
- Are there decisions that need to be made that we are reluctant to implement based upon perceived congregational reaction? What roles might incremental movement (one step at a time) and leadership patience have in helping the congregation to move forward despite their reluctance to do so?

Effective church leadership is moving followers from where they are to where they need to be with minimal casualties along the way – whether they want to go there or not. I don't believe there has ever been an important and effective strategic decision in a church that didn't include one or more congregational casualties along the way. One of the ways we leaders can minimize casualties is by moving with great patience and in increments – as I like to say, "Don't spook the sheep!" We can spook the sheep by demanding too much too soon, a trap into which I sometimes have fallen.

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We leaders (yes, “we”) at times listen to the congregation when we are considering a major change. I’ve come to believe that listening at that stage is generally too late. Mt listening to the congregation needs to result in deciding that action needs to be taken and should inform my conclusions as to what may need to be changed. How are they doing spiritually, emotionally and physically? Are they on mission? What are their fears and struggles? What brings them joy? How can the church minister them and inspire them to accomplish the mission? Perhaps if I listened first, more deeply and more often my assessments of situations and potential actions, as well as our subsequent decision-making would be more effective and might result in less conflict and discomfort among the sheep I shepherd.

Sometimes it feels like we do things in this order:

Assess > Decide > Listen (or lobby?) > Implement

Should it not be more like this?

Listen > Assess > Decide > Implement

How we leaders figure out what needs to be done and go about doing it 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.*

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/>.