

## **Challenges Leaders Face**

**By Bob Young**

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I am at heart a preacher. Most of my life's work has been in local church ministry. Along the way, however, I have had several other jobs including motivational sales, manufacturing production, and public relations representative for a sales firm. More recently, I worked in Christian higher education for almost a dozen years—about half of them as an administrator. Also, over the last 15 years, I have served as a church consultant, or as part of a consulting team for local churches and church leaders.

In these varying roles, I have observed leadership skills from the bottom up and from the top down. I have been challenged to develop my own leadership skills. I have tried to help others develop leadership skills. I have taught courses on church leadership at both the undergraduate and graduate level. My doctoral studies focused on leadership. Every leader can improve his or her leadership skills. For some leaders, the improvement may be only a tweaking. For others, leadership skills need a major overhaul.

This article suggests some of the major problems leaders face. While I hope that many readers might benefit from these thoughts, I am especially interested in thinking about spiritual leadership in the local church. I write with ministers, elders, and deacons primarily in mind.

The first three points ask questions leaders can use as a part of their own self-evaluation.

### **What is your job?**

I am amazed at how many leaders do not know what their job is. Many elders would be hard pressed to list in quick succession their top three to five objectives as an elder. (If you are a church leader, list the most important objectives of your assignment in your mind right now before you read further.)

In the course of consulting with churches, I have asked many elders what their job is. Most list objectives for the local church rather than their own responsibilities. Many church leaders lead from a "separated" perspective rather than leading "from among the flock" (Acts 20:28-31). Such church leaders have erected an artificial wall between "us" and "them" and are often uninvolved in the menial tasks of the church. One result is that elders faced with an important but seemingly trivial task for which no one is responsible say, "That isn't my job." (How many elders do you know that take their turn in the many service opportunities that exist in most congregations?)

I remember an eldership that had shrunk to less than half of its former size when I helped analyze the church and ministry context. The number of deacons in that church had been reduced by over 80% in the last few years. The church, largely due to its desire to continue ministries and commitments already in place, had more work than workers. When I suggested that the elders might have to (temporarily) assume some leadership in specific ministry areas, the response was that such was outside their job description. They defined their job as supervisory. I tried to point out that while their job includes delegation, it also includes serving as mentors and equippers (Eph. 4:11-16), and that it is sometimes necessary to walk alongside those who are doing the job to demonstrate and encourage.

Church leaders that are not actively involved in the various ministries of the church will soon be out of touch—out of touch with the workers, out of touch with the work, and out of touch with those the church serves.

In one church where I served, we had a very active outreach program. We shared the gospel with hundreds of people and over a decade averaged one baptism in Christ every two weeks. On one occasion, an elder bemoaned the fact that there were getting to be too many people, and that the new people were being influenced and led by those who taught them the gospel rather than the elders who had the authority to lead (referring primarily to himself). Another elder who was actively involved in the outreach efforts observed that he was enjoying the challenge of leading so many folks in whose lives he was involved.

A great difference exists between elders who spend most of their time in budgets and supervision and those who are personally involved in the ministries of the church. A leader cannot channel talent and time and resources to the primary needs if he does not know what talent is available, what jobs folks are already doing, what talents are needed and where they are currently being used, and what the primary needs and opportunities are.

Effective leaders know their job.

### **Are you stable, yet open and adaptive?**

Many contemporary leaders are bound by the past. While it is good to know the foundations that were established in the past, one unfortunate result of this focus on the past is that many leaders become closed-minded. Those selected as leaders are often among the most gifted and accomplished. Past successes, involvement in the church, serving in other capacities and leadership roles on the way to the “top” makes the average leader susceptible to pride.

One result is that almost every decision has to go through the leadership group. Closed-minded people are seldom open to passionate discussion. Minds are already made up. Conclusions are reached quickly. There is little room for discussion, differences, or dissent. Another result is that people who are charged with multi-million dollar budgets in their workplace cannot spend \$25 in the church without getting approval. Budgets are not planning and delegation tools. Budgets serve to control.

While leaders who provide stability to their organization are to be appreciated, leaders must avoid the tendency to provide stability by controlling everything. Fortunately, some churches and leadership teams have seen the fallacy of this unhealthy focus and are trying to reverse this attitude. Nonetheless, one must ask how many capable servants have been lost in local churches because real talent and real commitment will not long stand for the “my way or the highway” attitude. (Think of capable, dedicated members who have gone to another church—frequently a different brand of church. Or think of the number of preachers and ministers who have quit ministry and gone into secular employment.) While a number of excellent ministers and church workers remain active and committed in our churches, these successes must not justify putting our heads in the sand regarding the failures of the past.

Effective leaders can distinguish principles and traditions. Effective leaders can maintain their commitment to the guiding principles and at the same time be open and adapt.

### **Are you prepared?**

The question I am asking is not whether leaders are prepared to lead, although that is an important question. The question is whether leaders are willing to prepare themselves for the work they have to do. Are you willing to grow and develop and become better prepared for the job God has given you?

Another “aisle meeting” (emergency meeting). Drop what you are doing—this has to be decided right now. “They” need a decision, so we make it up as we go. Significant changes of direction or policy are decided in a few minutes. An eldership was able to reverse in a 5-minute aisle meeting a decision that had taken over an hour in the scheduled meeting. (The decision of the regular meeting was that the punch bowl would not leave the church building; the decision in the aisle meeting was that the sister who owned the punch bowl could take it home if she wanted to.)

I have been amazed over the years at how few elders bring past minutes, folders, or notebooks to scheduled meetings. I am amazed, given the importance of the work being done, at how few church leadership groups keep notes or minutes. Many come to the meeting without pen and paper in hand. Agendas are rare. The lack of minutes means that action items from past meetings get lost and accountability is non-existent. Sometimes old business is recalled and forwarded, but lots of good ideas which took up valuable time and discussion are never advanced.

Lack of preparation also means that the urgent and trivial continue to feed the inability of the leaders to set expectations, plan ahead, think things through, and provide real leadership. Lack of preparation explains why many leaders dread meetings. Lack of preparation explains why many meetings are unproductive. Lack of preparation explains why not much changes in the organization.

The next five items ask how the leader interacts with those he or she leads.

### **Will you listen to us? Will you care what we think? Will you care for us?**

Many leaders communicate little interest in what their followers think. They make decisions and then seek confirmation of the decision rather than involving the members of the organization in the decision-making process. Too often, the real question is, “What do you think about what we decided?” Honest members will tell you that there is no right answer to such a question.

For many leaders, communication is a one-way street with leaders as givers not receivers. Church leadership teams who see their primary role as decision-making are especially guilty of this. Equally bad are those leaders who ask for input but then disregard it. When leaders drop the communication ball long enough, no one tries to communicate any more. Leaders, followers, and the entire organization suffer.

Some church leaders make it a practice to meet with smaller subgroups of the congregation periodically to encourage dialog and idea sharing. The first eldership I worked with devoted one meeting each month to reviewing the directory and sharing any communication that any of the group had had with the members. In that way, the eldership as a whole was able to “hear” every member. They also used the time for reviewing challenges

and problems among the members, and for prayer. In fact, that eldership prayed for every member every month, in specific and thoughtful ways.

### **Will you involve us? Do you know how to delegate?**

One of the greatest weaknesses in many leaders is the failure to delegate. Among those who do delegate, it is often done poorly. My experience says that people want to be involved in and make a difference for the organization. The greatest untapped resource in most churches is the members who continually sit on the sidelines. Some of the most aggressive of the members who are ignored will leave and find another church or organization where they can be involved. Their departure may be attributed to any one of a number of causes, including unfaithfulness, but the truth is that faithful, committed members who are left on the outside long enough will find another place where they can be fulfilled.

### **Will you train us? Will you help us learn?**

Another weakness of many leaders is the failure to help others build skills. Amazingly, skill-building is discouraged in some organizations! Many leaders echo the mantra, "People are our most important asset," but fail to act consistently with what they say. One of the primary jobs of leaders is reflected in the etymology of the word "administration", that is, ad-ministration, meaning "toward ministry". An effective administrator encourages others toward ministry. This role is reflected in Paul's observation that leaders equip God's people for works of service (Eph. 4:12).

An effective leader helps others grow. When the members of the organization are growing, the organization functions properly (Eph. 4:16). Each member has a place and a role to fill. Leaders encourage appropriate involvement (according to giftedness) and help develop the gifts and skills of the members. Providing training often involves mentoring and walking beside those who are learning. Elders, how long has it been since you telephoned a potential leader in your church and invited them to join you for an evening of visiting? When was the last training session you hosted—for teachers, worship leaders, deacons, or others?

Effective training broadens the outlook of the membership, pushes us out of our comfort zones, provides an opportunity to model the values of the organization, and encourages learning, serving, persevering, and future leadership. I believe most church leaders do not recognize how powerful the training and mentoring process is in providing leadership for the church.

### **Will you promise not to over-commit us?**

Most people and organizations want to do more than they are currently doing. It is natural to want more, and leaders often see their role as making it happen. It is easy to make commitments when we are not the ones who will have to do the work. How many churches would be better off in identifying the two or three major purposes of God for their congregation rather than trying to accomplish multiple ministries, but doing none of them well? Every organization, guided by the leaders, must ask itself what it can realistically and reasonably do, and what things are most important.

One of the vital responsibilities of leaders is to help establish priorities. Failure to establish priorities leads to either bullying (at church, this usually exhibits itself in guilt trips) or

cheerleading. Neither are effective tools for long-range accomplishment of the things that matter most.

### **Will you promise not to blindside us?**

While surprises are often pleasant and desirable, some surprises are not so pleasant. Please keep us in the loop. Do not surprise us with unannounced projects and commitments that are “beyond the point of no return”. Let us help you since we are as invested as are you in the work and since we are also among the faithful and committed. Do not treat us as spiritual adolescents.

### **Do you care?**

Ultimately leaders, especially church leaders, are charged with the well-being of both the organization and the people who make up the organization. It is not enough for the church to succeed when the members are falling by the wayside. One of the first roles of church leaders is to shepherd—to tenderly care and feed and nurture.

Leaders may find forgiveness for many of their missteps, but failure to care about others in the context of meaningful relationships and personal development is often unforgiveable.

I often hear leaders complain that they lack influence with those they lead. Leaders who take care of the above items will have influence with the people because they will be spending lots and lots of time with the people. Listening, nurturing, involving, delegating, mentoring, and training are time-consuming.

It is strange that many leaders spend more time with one another and in meetings than they do in organized, intentional time with those they lead. Leaders, where is your list that reminds you of whom you have been with and whom you have not? Where is the record of your personal interaction with your people? How often do you spend quality time with the members of your flock? How do you make certain those on the periphery are not left out?

When I was serving as executive vice-president of a university, I kept a list of every employee and made an effort to spend some specific one-on-one time with each one regularly, listening, caring, and encouraging. In ministry, my wife and I try to have a special contact with every family every year. We want to know the members—we want the members to know we care. We want the members to know us, our hearts, our commitments, and our love. Such opportunities for communication give us the opportunity to follow the advice I have given above.