



Leading Your Board

By AARON COLE

Pastoring at any level can be complicated and exhausting. It can also be exhilarating and fulfilling. Relationships are often the difference maker. And few relationships are more crucial to the direction of church leadership than the ones that develop between pastors and board members. There are two keys to cultivating good pastor-board relationships: managing tension in a healthy way and striking the right balance in roles that sometimes seem at odds.

Healthy Tension

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to church governance structures, but all share a common tension: accountability versus freedom. Every board has a responsibility to oversee the finances and function of the church. Every pastor needs freedom to hear from God, do His will, and serve His Church. These can seem like competing interests — and the resulting tension often leads to conflict. If leaders fail to manage it properly, strife can spill over into the entire church body. However, tension can also be healthy and beneficial. After all, too much freedom without accountability can lead to trouble.

And too much accountability without freedom can hamper a pastor's effectiveness. The solution is not to resolve the tension, but to manage it. Too loose, and there's no forward progress to missional achievement for the church. Too tight, and something or someone will break. The governance structure must provide both a high level of accountability and a high level of freedom for leadership. The successful management of this relational tension rests upon respect, trust and humility. Respect is essential even at the beginning of this relationship. It starts positionally, with people extending respect for the offices of pastor and board members. This arises from an understanding that the church is not ours, but the Lord's. Those who occupy these positions do not own them; they are temporary stewards of them. Each person is there by divine appointment, and only for a season. Respect transitions from positional to personal only with investments of time and faithfulness. As respect grows, trust emerges. Trust takes time to build, and it can erode quickly. Yet it is critical to the pastor-board relationship. After all, dreaming big and stepping out in faith requires a lot of trust. Respect and trust can't flourish without humility. Humble leaders are vulnerable, open and transparent. They admit they don't have all the answers, they are fallible, and they need each other.

Balanced Roles

In any organization or structure, there must be a head. In a company, the head is often a CEO or president. In a church, the lead pastor fills that role. The pastor should have the freedom to be the primary communicator, visionary, fundraiser and leader of the church. Throughout Scripture, God often spoke first to a leader He chose and appointed. The leader then spoke to a group, council or nation. For example, in Acts 10, Peter received a vision from God and an invitation to take the gospel and Spirit baptism to the house of Cornelius. However, Scripture also prescribes accountability for those who serve in leadership. They answer to God and to the church. According to 1 Corinthians 4:2, "it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." In Acts 11, Peter willfully submitted his actions to church leaders for questions and conversation. In the local church today, the board offers that accountability. The board's role isn't to serve the person who occupies the office of pastor. Rather, the board oversees the office itself. Board members provide guidelines and guardrails to the pastor, for the benefit of the church and its mission. This happens best in the context of healthy relationships, not through adversarial conflict. The board and pastor should always desire the best for one another and the congregation as a whole. If these two offices are functioning effectively, there will be tension. However, it need not be personal or agenda-motivated. When board members and pastors mutually submit to one another out of a sincere desire to accomplish God's will for His Church, they will be in a better position to spread the good news of Jesus.

Complementary Gifts

I believe a church board can be a pastor's best friend and a catalyst for ministry growth and success. God can use both offices to advance His mission. There will be differences, disagreements and tension as God's vision for the congregation comes into focus, but the discovery and fulfillment of this vision happens through the process, not in spite of it. Instead of trying to avoid this relational tension, pastors should lean in to it, remembering that it is natural. Allow the structure and governance to provide necessary boundaries. Board members and pastors working together in their respective roles will complement each other's gifts and contributions, build relationships, and ultimately help the Church become the hope of the world God intended.

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