



THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Herb Miller and Lyle E. Schaller, Co-Editors - For photocopy permission, email: HrbMiller@aol.com

Provided by the Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ
Commission for Leadership Development and Commission for Evangelism & Congregational Vitality
Paid for by generous contributions to *Our Church's Wider Mission Basic Support* and Fellowship Dues

January 2012 - Volume 20, Number 1

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How to Perfect Your Leadership Triangle

The most effective pastors, staff, committee chairs, and ministry-team coordinators possess three skills in equal proportions: relational, organizational, and spiritual.

Relational Leadership

Yes, church leaders need more than relational skill. But without relational skill, other skills become irrelevant. Relational skill includes twenty qualities:

1. **Joyful Attitude**—spiritual institutions whose leaders need a joy transfusion attract few participants.
2. **Sense of Humor**—counteracts the tendency to develop an overly serious demeanor that is the personality equivalent of a turpentine bottle.
3. **Enthusiasm**—displayed in facial expressions, body language, and words.
4. **Optimism**—which the Bible calls *hope*. People who dispense this quality in their conversations tend to attract rather than repel allegiance to themselves and their goals.
5. **Caring Spirit**—genuine interest in people and a concern for their individual needs.
6. **Indiscriminate Affirmation**—praise-filled conversations, despite bushels of reasons to go in the opposite direction.
7. **Sensitivity**—the ability to understand people and their reaction patterns.
8. **Objectivity**—the ability to accurately assess and respond to reality, which protects people from seeing issues through a window of bias and emotional distortion.
9. **Forgiving Spirit**—a poor memory of wrongs done by others, which counterbalances the wrongs observed via objectivity.
10. **Nonjudgmental Nature**—the habit of communicating grace to people who do not share identical moral, ethical, or religious standards.
11. **Receptive Listener**—able to gather information and insights from conversations with people who express a wide variety of concerns and opinions.
12. **Openness to Considering New Ideas**—the inclination to express a “Why not?” attitude when listening to a proposal, instead of blocking new ideas by immediately citing several reasons why they won’t work.
13. **Forthrightness**—the courage to sensitively share concerns with others, even at the risk of alienation.
14. **Communication Skill**—the ability to clearly express ideas and goals.

15. **Effective Conflict Manager**—with regard to both personal criticism and organizational-conflict issues.

16. **Cooperative Spirit**—a team player who can mesh personal goals with those of other church leaders, in contrast to coming across as defensive, paranoid, or argumentative.

17. **Honesty and Integrity**—consistently (a) keeping promises, (b) functioning responsibly, even when tasks are not especially enjoyable, (c) leading a disciplined moral life, and (d) communicating identical information to various groups and individuals, rather than shading reality to tell people what they want to hear.

18. **Humility**—serving without a demand for public recognition.

19. **High Energy Level**—the stamina to maintain a fast pace and juggle several demands simultaneously, without complaining of overwork.

20. **Positive Appearance**—clean, neat, and appropriate apparel, shined shoes, and well-kept hair.

Can you think of people serving in church roles who lack one or several of these relational qualities? Does that deficiency damage their leadership influence?



Equalizing one's skill sets makes
for more effective leadership.

Organizational Leadership

Not all church leaders with high relational skills possess strong organizational abilities. An executive coach who works with both churches and corporations lists five prescriptions for successful leaders of organizations:

1. Get clear regarding goals and standards. Understand what you are trying to accomplish and how you plan to measure the results.

2. Communicate goals and standards. Make sure that everyone is clear about expectations and feels accountable for results.

3. Set direction for and coordinate the work of others. Develop a disposition toward delegation—the inclination to coach the team rather than try to play all of the positions.

4. Address problems sooner rather than later. Instead of running from potential conflict, approach it as an opportunity to care about people and increase their satisfaction with a job well done.

5. Provide feedback to team members. Frequently applaud actions that support the organization's goals. When things do not go well, explain why a change in approach is beneficial. [Scott Eblin, "Pastors and Managers," *Congregations*, September/October 2001, The Albin Institute, pp. 22-24]

Can you think of people serving in church roles who lack one or more of these organizational qualities? Does that deficiency damage their leadership influence?

Spiritual Leadership

Effective church leaders possess more than relational and organizational skills. They give the overall impression that encouraging people to strengthen their spiritual connection with God is one of their primary goals.

The five behaviors listed below are not the only means by which people achieve spiritual growth. However, people in a national survey said that these five are the most powerful means by which they moved closer to God and grew in Christian discipleship. [Herb Miller, *Connecting With God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994)]

1. Worship: This helps us to focus on God and to sense God's presence. Be deciding to worship, we say that we are not sufficient by ourselves. We need another God besides our own ego.

2. Prayer: This lets God into our lives in four primary ways. Through prayer, God (a) changes our reality, (b) speaks to us, (c) redecorates our interiors, and (d) moves us toward our life goals. Until we are ready to put ourselves second instead of first, we do not pray.

3. Fellowship: This is one of God's ways of reinforcing our inclination to spiritually connect with, and stay connected with, God's goals for our life. Fellowship with other Christians increases our self-esteem in ways that make us more open to (a) listening to God's guidance and (b) making positive changes in our lives.

4. Bible Study: This is another tool that helps us hear God speaking to us and moves us closer to God in our

thinking and behavior. Participation in a regularly meeting group that focuses on Bible study helps us stick to our values and ideals.

5. Financial Stewardship: Why do the four Gospels report Jesus talking more about money than about love or repentance? Then, as now, people are tempted to put the god of their money ahead of the real God; and thus, break the first commandment—"You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Giving financially to God keeps money idolatry from replacing God and destroying our ability to grow spiritually.

Can you think of people serving in church roles who lack one or more of these spiritual qualities? Does that deficiency damage their leadership influence?

Equalizing Your Triangle

The three sides of an equilateral triangle are the same length. Shortening one side changes the triangle's character. Most people serving in church roles are stronger in one of the their triangle's three sides than in the other two. They rationalize that imbalance by thinking, "If I excel in my gifted side, the other two sides will take care of themselves." That assumption is inaccurate.

Productive self-evaluation requires feedback from others. Pick six people whom you trust. Ask them to meet with you as a group for two hours. Open the meeting by asking everyone to keep the discussion confidential.

Hand each person a copy of this *Parish Paper* issue. Without discussion, ask each person to rank you on each item, using a scale of one to ten, with ten being the highest. Ask people not to sign their names.

Collect the sheets. During a break, ask someone to tabulate the answers and calculate the average score for each item. Distribute another copy of this *Parish Paper* issue. As you read the averages aloud, ask group members to write the average beside each of the items.

On the five items with the highest scores, go around the room, asking everyone to say one sentence regarding why she or he thinks that score is high.

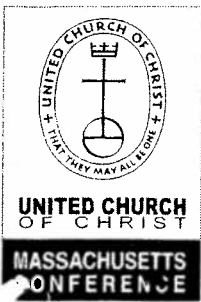
On the five items with the lowest scores, go around the room, asking everyone to say one sentence regarding how you might strengthen that quality.

Articulate to the group any points at which you need their help or the help of other church leaders in strengthening these traits.

Close with one-sentence prayers, asking each person in the group to pray.

The Bottom Line

In which side of the leadership triangle are you most gifted. How can you lengthen the other two sides?



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February 2012 - Volume 20, Number 2

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How to Manage Change Resistance

Why do church leaders so often underestimate resistance to change—even when the status quo is not working and the change promises to deliver big benefits?

Dysfunctional Church Culture

Newcomers often fail to see that a dysfunctional behavior pattern—deeply rooted in the congregation's traditions—often locks the status quo in place. Examples:

1. *Inward Focus.* Some congregations, especially those historically prominent in their communities, suffer from undiagnosed IDD (Insight Deficit Disorder). Their many successes during past years block the core lay-leadership groups from looking outward for new ideas.

2. *Complacent Arrogance.* Other congregations gradually become disconnected from changing realities in their communities and young-adult families. Thus, they fail to see and address contemporary ministry needs.

3. *Diffuse Accountability.* In churches with large boards and powerful committee chairs, the decision-making systems often kill most of the creative ideas at conception.

Other Change-Resistance Causes

A list of other, more-specific, barriers to change would include the following:

1. Fear of making a damaging mistake
2. Fear of changing a method that has worked well
3. Fear of losing familiar habit patterns or relationships
4. Fear of discarding a cherished value
5. Fear of an uncertain future
6. Fear of trying to learn a new skill
7. Fear of losing financial support from parishioners
8. Painful past experiences with change efforts
9. Power-needy leaders who "want to do it my way"
10. Denominational norms make the change feel wrong

Change-Resistance Tips

Practical ways to reduce the stress that often accompanies change efforts:

1. Remember that people make changes when their survival anxiety becomes high enough to counterbalance the anxiety they feel when contemplating a change.

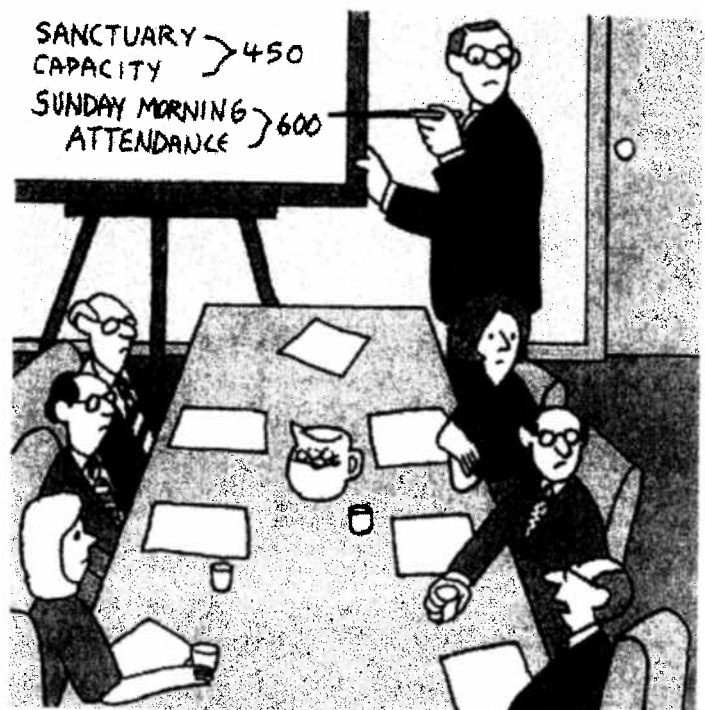
2. Many people feel that the word *change* condemns "the way we've always done it." Therefore, replace that word with "fine-tune," "update," "refine," and "continue in the direction we've been heading for several years."

3. If possible, avoid actively killing a cherished tradition. Try to *add* to present ministries instead of deleting one of them. Let sacred cows die a natural death.

4. Avoid (a) making major changes via newsletter pronouncements and memos, (b) letting stressful situations pressure you to make instant decisions, and (c) Lone-Ranger actions instead of developing a consensus.

5. If the proposed change is substantial, such as altering worship times, adding a Saturday night worship service, or introducing an unfamiliar worship-music style, appoint a special task force to study the matter and make recommendations. Compared to a standing committee, a special task force tends to (a) view the proposal from a new perspective, (b) think more creatively, and (c) produce a better product.

6. In some instances, set up a pilot program. Testing a new method for one year "to see how well it works" runs minimum risk. Pick pilot projects that church members perceive as (a) important to maintaining one of our congregation's historic ministries, (b) a dramatic way to attack an old challenge with a new technique, and (c) something we can test in a brief time span.



"I fear if we add another service to handle the overflow, it will effect attendance at our main worship service."

7. In some instances, measure and report performance differently. Examples: the number of first-time worship visitors each month, the percentage of regular attendees who started attending during the last five years, or the percentage of members above age sixty-five compared to the percentage below age twenty-five.

8. Say that making the proposed change will be a challenging task but is theologically important. Preaching and teaching on issues related to the proposed change helps move parishioners' perspectives beyond "what our pastor wants us to do" to "what God wants us to do."

9. In some cases, consult with an outside expert. Creative innovation often occurs when someone helps church leaders view reality from a new perspective.

10. Begin discussing the change months before it would take effect, so people have time to revise their thinking.

11. Present change proposals openly and comprehensively. Allow time for questions and clarifications. The greater the participant involvement, the greater the likelihood of acceptance.

12. In the initial presentation of your proposed change, review the pros and cons of other options already considered and rejected. Frankly acknowledge any potential losses and pain the change could produce. This lets people know that you have thoughtfully considered the tradeoffs—and takes the steam out of detractors eager to point out "the reason that won't work in our church."

13. If prudence or organizational rules require that you take a vote, never do that during the meeting in which you initially introduce the possible change.

14. Rarely do more than 5 to 10 percent of people initially view a new idea as desirable. At the other end of the spectrum, 5 to 10 percent of people strongly resist a potential innovation the first time they hear about it. (Both groups consist of people who feel they should take immediate, aggressive action for or against a new idea as soon as they hear it.) Don't disregard these needs:

- Most of the 80 to 90 percent of initially passive people, who do not care that much one way or the other, need time to discuss and ponder the idea—so that they develop sufficient passion to unite with the 5 to 10 percent who immediately favor it.
- Most of the 5 to 10 percent who initially oppose the idea need time to rethink it so they can move from resistance to passive acceptance or enthusiasm.

15. Conflict is an essential part of every change process—and moves people toward acceptance. Provide appropriate times and places for "concerns" and objections to freely bubble up.

16. When people criticize your proposal, you may feel personally attacked. But their objections are more often an attack on your leadership role (anyone else occupying that role would receive the same criticism).

Understanding criticism for what it is—anxiety because the change affects people's lives—prevents negative reactions from undermining your emotional stability and sense of self-worth.

17. Respond coolly to what feels like a personal attack, especially when the criticism comes from people you care about. When you take change-resistance personally, you aid and abet a common way of taking leaders out of action: making yourself the issue.

18. Discuss the proposed change in all groups that the change would affect. The more significant the change, the longer you must work at coalition building.

19. During group discussions, ask people to list positives and negatives related to the proposed change.

20. Encourage people to speak honestly about potential flaws in your strategy or initiative. Without that input, your overconfidence about the idea can lead to (a) intellectual arrogance, (b) a grandiose sense of self-importance, (c) self-deception that sees only the factors that confirm your opinion, and (d) disastrous missteps.

21. Increase your communication with core leadership people. For example, during the period when the change takes effect, have coffee once a week with the staff member or layperson who (a) must lead the change or (b) is dedicated to seeing the initiative fail.

22. Tell the staff in kind but firm ways the importance of cooperating and the consequences of failure to do so.

23. Expect to give the same explanation speech—in which you outline the reasons why this change is beneficial—at least six times during several weeks or months. Some people are so busy rejecting the idea the first time you present it that they cannot hear, or remember, anything positive from that explanation.

24. Close to the implementation stage, ask people to throw in suggestions for how to accomplish this change as smoothly as possible.

25. When implementation is approximately 75 percent completed, don't be surprised when a few people—from whom you have heard no resistance until now—become quite vocal in their objections. Remember to ...

- Smile and say that you understand how they feel.
- Remind them which church group or groups decided this change is a good idea, and why.
- Resist their effort to (a) suck you into their doomsday emotion and (b) get you to rescue them from their anxiety by blocking the proposed change.

The Bottom Line

Ninety-five percent of resisters eventually say with pride how glad they are that "we made that change."

Five percent of resisters will never like the change, no matter how logically anyone explains the reasons, and they will continue to loudly denounce it in their individual conversations and in church groups.

Love them anyway.