

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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### When Does Success Lead to Failure?

John graduated at the top of his seminary class. Bright and scholarly, he became the pastor of a small-town church. His teaching ability impressed parishioners, but the honeymoon was short. People complained that he (a) neglected important administrative details that pastors usually handle and (b) made major decisions without consulting the governing board. After two years, the personnel committee asked him to resign.

Ted completed his electrical engineering degree with a high grade-point average and became an electrical contractor. The business became famous for the number of secretaries and electrician's helpers who quit or were fired each year. Ted's church invited him to chair its property committee, but he soon resigned in frustration, complaining that committee members wouldn't cooperate.

What do John and Ted have in common? Through years of demanding study to develop specialized professional skills they became successful at managing *themselves*. When they transitioned into managing organizations that included *other people*, they failed.

**Transitions Are Tricky:** Any job or role in which we invest significant energy over several years wires our brains with unconscious thinking and behavior patterns. When we shift into a different job or role, we tend to retain some of those thinking and behavior habits, especially those that helped us succeed in our previous job or role. To succeed in new circumstances, we must refocus. Yet, refocusing is often far more challenging than we expect.

When clergy—or laypersons who become committee chairpersons—successfully transition into new roles, they must refocus in three ways: (a) the skills they use most, (b) the manner in which they use their time, and (c) the work on which they place the highest value—in other words, the activities that they feel are most important.\*

**Typical Transition Stresses:** Most seasoned church observers have seen the following instances in which success led to failure.

*From small-church pastor to midsize-church pastor:* After completing seminary, Beverly was very effective in her first congregation. Three years later, a midsize church that was six times larger in membership invited her to

serve as senior pastor. But the chaplain-style of leadership that Beverly had perfected in a small-church failed in this midsize congregation. To succeed here, she had to develop a Y-Director-style of leadership—in which she juggles the numerous priorities and activities of seven busy committees and several ministry teams.

*From midsize-church pastor to the large-church pastor:* Greg, an exceptionally gifted speaker, served as pastor of a midsize congregation. After five years, a church whose average worship attendance exceeded 1,200 called him as their senior pastor. But the Y-Director style of leadership that Greg had perfected in a midsize church failed in this large congregation. To succeed here, he had to develop a CEO-style of leadership in which he coordinated nine committees *and* fifteen ministry teams *and* a dozen staff members *and* a multi-million dollar budget *and* gigantic facilities on two campuses.

*From committee member to committee chairperson:* Jason, a skilled carpenter and plumber, served as a dependable trustee for several years. He often donated sev-



eral hours each week to small repair jobs so that the church wouldn't have to hire someone to do them. He felt honored when the nominating committee asked him to become chairman of the trustees. To succeed in this role, Jason had to learn how to (a) chair meetings in a way that guided the trustees through complex decision-making, (b) motivate the trustees to unleash *their* energy, (c) stay in step with the governing-board's policies and goals, and (d) work smoothly with the custodial staff.

*From church member to staff member:* Julie, a recently widowed single mother, had grown up in the congregation. A well-liked and active participant, everyone thought she would be perfect as the church secretary. But after twenty years of freely expressing her opinion about "what is best for our congregation," Julie had to learn that a staff member relinquishes that prerogative. An effective employee's loyalty is to the staff team and the senior pastor as chief of staff. She had to learn to voice concerns about policies and procedures *only* to the senior pastor and/or in staff meetings. She took great care never to say to her friends, "I think we should have done it differently"—because such remarks by an employee create conflict and ill will.

**Classic Causes of Transition-Failure:** Search committees and nominating committees often choose people because of their technical achievements at particular ministries. But committees are often unable to differentiate between people who can *do* and people who can *lead* others in doing.

Search committees and nominating committees often know how to select people with a specific talent. But committees find it much more challenging to discern whether those people fit their congregation's theological values and customs.

Pastors, staff members, and committee chairs often find that giving up the tasks and responsibilities that earned them a new position proves far more difficult than they expected.

People who have spent most of their time *doing* rather than *discussing* often tend to charge ahead with decisions, actions, and assignments—without sufficient knowledge and without clearing things with the appropriate groups or other staff members.

**Successful Transition Techniques:** For both church staff and committee chairpersons, valuing the productivity of others includes (a) conversing with committees and the governing board, (b) helping volunteers and paid staff plan ministry accomplishments, (c) motivating volunteers and paid staff to undertake and execute ministries, (d) monitoring the performance of volunteers and paid staff, (e) coaching volunteers and paid staff, and (f) rewarding volunteers and paid staff with praise and recognition.

*Effective leaders focus less on their own work-performance and more on the work-performance of others, especially by...*

- Defining and assigning work to be done, including communicating with committees, staff, and the governing board regarding needs, expectations, planning, organizing, choosing people, and delegating.
- Enabling volunteers and paid staff to do their work by monitoring, coaching, providing feedback, acquiring resources, problem solving, and communicating.
- Building social contracts by establishing respectful relationships with volunteers, staff, committees, and the governing board in ways that facilitate open dialogues and trust.

*Effective leaders accurately assess the work of volunteers and paid staff by...*

- Identifying (a) strengths and weaknesses, (b) the major one or two activities in which they spend the most time, (c) who they meet with and how often, and (d) what their priorities are.
- Discovering their impact on others, especially the people they supervise or cooperate with in other committees and staff positions.

*Effective leaders develop successful habits by...*

- Viewing questions from volunteers and paid staff as opportunities to help them succeed, not as interruptions that keep them from getting *their own work* done.
- Coaching volunteers and paid staff regarding how to do their ministries effectively, rather than rushing in to fix their mistakes.
- Refusing to distance themselves from the problems and failures of volunteers and paid staff; thus, teaming with them to achieve positive results.
- Taking seriously the role of motivating and supervising paid staff by (a) learning how to lead effective weekly staff meetings and (b) conducting quarterly coaching conferences with each individual they directly supervise.

**The Bottom Line:** Distribute copies of this page to your personnel committee, staff, or governing board. Ask them—without signing their names and without discussion—to underline the phrases in the "Successful Transition Techniques" section in which they feel you excel, to circle the phrases in which they feel your abilities need to grow, and put N/A above phrases not applicable to your position. Collect the pages. Total the circled and underlined phrases on a clean page.

The resulting tabulation is your roadmap to success.

\* These insights, adapted from *The Leadership Pipeline* by Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter, and James Noel (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp. 16-20, are as valuable in churches as in secular life.

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