

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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June 2010 - Volume 18, Number 6

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Why Does Mentoring Succeed and Fail?

Question: How can I mentor my congregation's staff toward greater effectiveness in their ministry skills?

Answer: A staff member's internal motivation (his or her "want to") enormously influences growth in ministry skills. Thus, the most effective mentoring happens when staff members voluntarily begin seeking the advice of a highly skilled, respected, and trusted leader.

You are asking a more complex question: "How can a pastor mentor the church's employees for whom he or she has supervisory responsibility?" In that circumstance, efforts to increase staff-member skills must rely on less-influential internal motivations such as a desire to maintain a positive relationship with the supervisor.

The Good News and the Bad News: Two opposite results happen when pastors attempt to mentor a church's employees for whom they have supervisory responsibility: Approximately 60 percent of those employees experience significant growth in their ministry skills. And approximately 40 percent of those staff members experience little or no growth in their ministry skills.

Observations of staff members in the mentoring-resistant 40 percent indicate two causes for a lack of growth in ministry skills. About one-half of staff members in this mentoring-resistant 40 percent come across as arrogant: a superiority attitude blocks them from hearing new ideas from their pastor or supervisor. The other one-half of mentoring-resistant staff members have deep-rooted emotional problems that block them from hearing and using new ideas from their pastor or supervisor.

To be more specific, mentoring-resistant staff members often exhibit one or more of the following psychological traits: (a) needing emotional support and approval all the time from everyone, (b) habitually blaming other people, (c) failing to support others emotionally when disagreeing with them intellectually, and (d) interpreting differences of opinion as personal threats.

What methods produce effective mentoring of associate pastors and program staff by senior pastors?

Two methods are effective in mentoring church employees for whom pastors have supervisory responsibilities:

First, schedule ninety-minute, weekly, staff meetings to discuss *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 22, How to Strengthen Clergy/Staff Leadership & Relation-*

ship Skills. (Download this volume free of charge from the www.TheParishPaper.com Web site and give a copy to each staff member.)

These staff discussions assume that (a) the pastor who leads the discussions has some skill in group process, (b) the associate pastors and program staff desire to strengthen their skills, (c) everyone studies the material in advance of the discussions, (d) everyone realizes that the discussions may surface matters that are painful or contentious, and (e) everyone desires to obtain insights and is willing to talk through prickly issues.

At the first discussion, ask each participant to state what she or he hopes to gain from this study. Also, agree on some parameters for the discussions, such as "Honest expression of feelings but no personal attacks on or criticisms of other group members."

Second, schedule quarterly communication conferences with each staff member to discuss his or her three-month goals and priorities. Use these guidelines:

1. In preparation for each quarterly communication conference, the senior pastor asks each staff member to

≡≡≡ Mentoring situations generate a variety of responses. ≡≡≡



list at the top of one sheet of paper his or her goals and priorities for the next three months. At the bottom of that sheet, ask the staff member to list items needed from other staff members in order to succeed at his or her goals and priorities.

2. In each quarterly communication conference, the staff member prioritizes his or her goals, including some explanation of each goal's importance, along with a brief action plan and potential obstacles to each goal's achievement.

3. In some instances, the senior pastor may suggest an additional goal and/or suggest that a staff member reprioritize some of his or her goals.

4. At the second and each subsequent quarterly meeting, the first item of discussion is the staff member's review/evaluation of the three-month goals and priorities sheet from the meeting three months ago and what he or she has learned in the process.

5. The discussions in these quarterly communication conferences create opportunities for (a) positive communication with the senior pastor, (b) discussing goals and challenges in a timely rather than a haphazard way, (c) setting goals and priorities in consultation with the senior pastor; thus, achieving a clear understanding of expectations, (d) opportunity for the staff member to express concerns and describe needs related to his/her roles and goals, (e) creative discussions regarding specific tasks, (f) adding priorities, (g) deleting or postponing priorities, (h) timely feedback from the senior pastor regarding desirable or undesirable behaviors, (i) asking, "Are there ways in which I can help you with your job?" and (j) informal job-performance evaluations that happen in a natural way throughout the year—rather than year-end, hindsight criticisms regarding some aspect of ministry performance.

In large congregations, each supervisory staff member can use quarterly coaching conferences with staff members in his or her department.

What methods produce the most effective mentoring of clerical and custodial staff? The business administrator may conduct a communication conference with each member of the clerical and custodial staff every six months. In a memo, the supervisor tells his or her staff members that this meeting is oral in nature, not written. However, the supervisor asks each staff member to review his or her job description and be ready to discuss and possibly update parts of it.

Ask each staff member to prepare for the conversation by reflecting in advance on the following questions:

1. What goals do you see yourself working toward during the next six months in relationship to your role of helping our congregation strengthen its effectiveness in various ministries?

2. What are the biggest challenges you are experiencing right now in regard to your role with our congregation?

3. In what areas are you trying to increase your skills, so that you can accomplish your role more effectively?

4. What aspects of our church's organizational and communication systems cause you the most frustration right now?

5. How can I help you do your job better?

How do effective leaders handle mentoring successes and failures? If a staff member falls into the mentoring-responsive 60 percent category noted above, reward him or her in appropriate ways: praise, recognition, increased responsibilities, and regular salary increases. (Most supervisors give their best employees too little attention and positive feedback!)

For the mentoring-resistant staff members in the "arrogant" category noted above, kindly but firmly insist that they modify their self-destructive attitude. For staff members in the mentoring-resistant "personal emotional problems" category noted above, kindly but firmly insist that they take advantage of counseling opportunities provided through either (a) your denomination or (b) an agency in your community.

Warning: Do not expect positive changes to happen with staff members in the mentoring-resistant 40 percent group without kind but firm oral communication from you. It doesn't! Nor is hoping that things will get better on their own—without kind and firm communication with the staff member—ever a productive plan. Such behaviors, without supervisory intervention, either stay the same or get worse.

If the staff member does not follow through with the above-outlined suggestions, ask him or her, "Do you feel that you might find more meaning and satisfaction in a different type of ministry?" Communicate and coordinate with the church's personnel committee to (a) keep its members posted on your work with the staff member and (b) ask for their counsel.

The bottom line for staff members: The best way to think outside the box is to look in other boxes.

Among those other boxes, why not include the senior pastor or your supervisor?

The bottom line for pastors and supervisors: Benjamin Franklin, after narrowly missing death from a storm at sea while serving the United States Government in Europe, quipped that if he were a Catholic, he might vow to build a chapel to some saint. But he thought it might be wiser to build a lighthouse.

Is not the building of a lighthouse one of your most important roles?