

Does Your Church Have a Trusting Leadership Culture?

Some of the very best days I have known in ministry have revolved around high-functioning staff friendships and relationships.

Seeing plans come together, an organization take off or a worship experience exceed expectations is meaningful beyond words.

Some of the hardest days in my life have revolved around low-trust staff members and relationships that soured, became conflicted or were broken.

Seeing the worst part of a person who is also a fellow staff member is haunting.

I suspect that every minister I know can affirm those two statements.

In preparation for leading a breakout at a conference on “Building a Healthy Staff Culture,” I’ve been giving much thought to what makes a congregation’s staff effective and healthy.

Having a church staff that functions in a healthy way is not easy. Nearly all the conflict calls we get at our Center for Healthy Churches deal in some way with staff members.

The variations on the theme of staff conflict take many forms.

Sometimes the conflict is between staff members, and other times between staff and laity.

Some congregations are abrasive toward their staff, and some staff members are abrasive toward their congregation.

Whatever its form, staff issues nearly always figure in the mix of a conflict call.

In my conversations with many clergy, the primary source of concern and

frustration with ministry is nearly always something related to staff.

Many pastors worry about their staff culture and fear that it is undermining the ministry of the church.

It never fails. When clergy get together and talk about the hardest parts of their ministry, their staff situation is at or near the top of the list.

There is no magic cure to this perennial issue, of course. While there are best practices and habits that can create a healthier culture, there is no magic pill, Bible verse or staff model that will solve all our issues.

Staff members are flawed, sinful, incomplete human beings. That fact means we will always find ourselves in some sort of stressful situation when they are involved.

Perhaps it helps us understand the pervasiveness of our issues when we realize that Jesus faced many of the same dynamics with his disciples.

The very best help I have found is the ability to reframe the primary issue into one of trust.

Building a high-trust culture is at the heart of a healthy church and its staff.

Low-trust cultures cripple churches or organizations and doom them to perpetual high anxiety and conflict.

I've lived in both, and the joy of a high-trust staff culture is exhilarating. The ability to follow your calling without fear is invigorating. I hope you have had the joy of that experience.

Low-trust cultures breed insecurity, bitterness and frustration. Nothing is taken at face value, and motives are constantly questioned or assigned.

Sadly, for many clergy, this is the norm for their experience in churches. It is often cited as the single most influential factor in someone's decision to leave

vocational ministry.

Building trust is more than reading books or echoing proper rhetoric. Being able to act in a trustworthy manner is at the heart of those staffs that work together collaboratively and humbly.

In this arena, as in most, we act our way toward a healthy future first. Save all the talk; show your convictions by how you live.

I like this list that Stephen M.R. Covey has put together of behaviors that can positively impact a leadership team if practiced diligently:

- Talk straight
- Demonstrate respect
- Create transparency
- Right wrongs
- Show loyalty
- Deliver results
- Get better
- Confront reality
- Clarify expectations
- Practice accountability
- Listen first
- Keep commitments
- Extend trust

Each behavior is a critical contributing factor to building high trust cultures. Each must be practiced in moderation—too much or too little is toxic.

I hope your staff and congregational leaders have an ongoing conversation around the issue of trust.

If not, please start one. Doing so will inevitably increase your ability to work together and enhance your church's impact and influence.

If you can trust the leadership of your church or organization, amazing things can happen. If not, then you will find yourself frustrated and discouraged.

Once you name and frame the issue, there are ways to build trust and recover the joy Christ intends his people to know. Might it be so for your leaders, your staff and your congregation.

✘ [Bill Wilson](#) is president of the Center for Healthy Churches in Clemmons, North Carolina. You can follow him on Twitter [@BillWilson1028](#) and the center [@ChurchHealthy](#).