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Leadership

Good to Great to Godly

Corporate wisdom means "getting the right people on the bus," but spiritual leadership requires something more.

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"We need more structure in our decision making. Without that discipline, we'll never accomplish anything."

"We're a church, not a business. We need to rely on God. We can't operate like the corporate world."

Ever been on one side or the other of this argument? Or perhaps in the middle? The tensions are present in most churches in America today. As corporate "best practices" are applied to church life, church leaders struggle to make sense of it all.

When I worked in business, *Built to Last* by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras was one of a handful of keep-at-my-fingertips references. It identified factors that enabled organizations to achieve superior performance over the long haul. So it was with great anticipation that I went to a Leadership Network event where Collins was to speak. In his presentation, he described the research findings that led to his second book, *Good to Great*. He emphasized the importance of getting "the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus." Collins discovered that strategic direction was less important than having the right leadership team. If you have the right people, they will help define the future direction of the organization. If they're in the wrong positions but have great potential and fit well, you can move them to a "different seat on the bus." But when someone is wrong for the organization, whether due to personality clashes or lack of ability, hanging onto that person can drag the entire enterprise down. Collins concluded that we should focus on senior staff as a top priority.

I nodded my head in agreement. Even though my job was in the marketplace at the time, I was also consulting with churches on pastoral leadership issues. I knew the tendency of many churches to make excuses rather than confront underperforming staff members. I remember thinking, *Wouldn't the church be much more effective for the Kingdom if we got the wrong people off the bus?*

Little did I know that within a year I would join a church staff and gain first-hand opportunities to test this and other business principles as a church leader. I did not foresee the challenges I would encounter.

As I made this career transition, I expanded my reading beyond the business realm, and one of the first books I read was *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* by Jim Cymbala. It's hard to get whiplash from a book, but that's how it felt as I read the powerful story of Brooklyn Tabernacle. The whiplash did not come from the congregation's success, but from the simple, faith-filled approach to leadership that Cymbala described. He seemed to run counter to the leadership methods of corporate America, saying things like, "We don't need technicians and church programmers; we need God. He is not looking for smart people, because he's the smart one. All he wants are people simple enough to trust him."

As a person trained in business practices, I wished that I could dismiss Cymbala, but as I turned the last page, I was forced to face a powerful question: What does it mean to be an effective, biblical leader in a local congregation? It was no longer enough for me to say, "My leadership gift has been shaped in the marketplace, and now God wants me to use this gift in ministry." I needed to take a fresh look at leadership in the local church.

Since then, I've met many others who wrestle with this issue.

Blurred leadership lines

During a recent vision check, my optometrist was concerned that even after correction; my vision in one eye was not 20-20. I was concerned as well. Not just because this could indicate a serious underlying problem (which, fortunately, was not the case), but because I wanted to see clearly.

Church leaders also strive for clarity, but things often seem blurry when we put on our business-derived leadership lenses. For example, business leaders know that we must consider the different constituencies that relate to our companies: customers, employees, and owners/shareholders. By making a high quality product at a reasonable price, customers will be satisfied and sales will increase. Higher morale in the workforce is an important factor in making these products efficiently, so we seek to encourage and motivate the employees. And the shareholders who have invested their money in the company expect their investment to yield a good return.

Apply constituency thinking to a church, however, and your head starts to spin. In business, the three groups are mostly separate and distinct. In a church, a single person or family can be customer, employee, AND shareholder. You may not relate to these terms, but change the language to members, volunteer workers, and contributors, and the overlap becomes obvious.

One church was excited about adding a new care ministry, but doing so meant asking the local scout troop to meet on a different night. Looking at this through business lenses, it's a simple question of which ministry has the higher priority and will best advance the mission of the church. But when one of the scout leaders is a member, a key volunteer in the youth ministry, and the son-in-law of a major contributor, the decision gets much stickier.

Lines blur in ministry, such as whether to focus on those currently in the church or those who have not yet been reached. The priorities and emphases that fit one group may not fit the other. Of course, businesses must try to attract new customers while retaining existing ones. But in the corporate world, a cost-benefit analysis determines whether the expected profits justify entering a new market.

In the church, the "bottom line" is life transformation, which defies simple cost-benefit analysis. We wonder whether it's better to see one new convert or five believers who grow significantly in their faith. Or whether the dollar spent on children's programming produces more fruit than one spent on youth ministry. Or how to make the trade-off between music ministry or benevolence. So we wrestle with priorities and resource allocation, trying to make the right choices as we pursue a goal that is sometimes vague and elusive. What kind of leadership is needed to move from blurriness to clarity, from seeing through simple business lenses to seeing more as God sees?

Executive, legislative, or situational leader?

The size and complexity of many churches requires something beyond the preacher/shepherd model, and many congregations soar with CEO-style pastors. Others thrive with a team-based approach to leadership. Then there is Jim Collins's theory that "legislative leadership" is most appropriate in the non-profit arena. In contrast with "executive leadership," he says that "legislative leadership relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen." Is effective congregational leadership limited to this legislative style? Collins goes on to hypothesize that "more likely, there will be a spectrum, and the most effective leaders will show a blend of both executive and legislative skills."

My experience is that church leaders—senior pastors, other staff, and laity—need a style that transcends both of these, a leadership approach that is spiritual and situational (sometimes legislative, sometimes executive). Even as we create structured processes for making important decisions, we must allow time and space for God to speak into the hearts of leaders. Sometimes it's the pastor who hears God most clearly; at other times one or more lay leaders may have a divine insight. In other words, the "best practices" from business have much to offer regarding decision making, but they omit the greatest asset available to congregational leaders—the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Several years ago, our church was finishing construction on a major renovation project. The original plans were too big for our financial resources, so we divided the work into two phases. As the first phase was nearing completion, we began to dream about moving directly into phase two. The drawings were ready, the contractor was still on site, the church was growing and was financially strong, and the building felt incomplete. All the standard indicators said "go." And yet our senior pastor had a check in his spirit about whether this was the right course to take.

So he convened a small group of lay and staff leaders and asked us to pray for wisdom in this decision. The group clearly sensed that we should not move ahead on the project, despite the "facts" in its favor. In retrospect, it became apparent that was the right decision, as one year later we had the opportunity to purchase a second campus and launch a new site, and then two years after that, we completed a very different "phase two" on our main campus.

Consensus is not always the Spirit

Just "seeking consensus" is not the same as being Spirit-led. Another church was weighing what to do with its Sunday morning schedule. There were competing ideas between traditional and contemporary worshipers, different age groups, and varying perspectives on how to best attract new families to the church. They prayed and involved lay leaders extensively. The final solution was a compromise that tried to satisfy as many people as possible. But the result created more problems than it solved, and the church was faced with changing its schedule again.

There are also congregations that make no pretense of seeking God in their decisions. The leadership core may have been selected by virtue of tenure or financial contribution rather than spiritual sensitivity, or the church's culture may simply be "all business."

In one church where I was involved in conflict resolution, I suggested that a serious spiritual dynamic was at work. The response from one side was that this wasn't the case because they were sure they had enough votes to "win."

I don't know of any technique that will guarantee the right decision every time, but I do know a couple of tools that are available to every pastor and church leader. Enlisting other prayerful, spiritually mature advisors is vital in times of uncertainty. They may come in many forms—within or outside the church, long-term mentors or people with experience in a particular matter. These additional voices often have a choice word from God that makes the difference in pivotal decisions. Time is the other powerful tool. If the right course of action is uncertain, leaders should not let a man-made timeline rush the decision. It's better to wait on God than decide without him. Of course, knowing which and how many advisors to enlist, or how long to delay can be a difficult decision on its own.

That is why effective congregational leadership is situational and spiritual. At times, a clear, direct decision is appropriate, even if there is opposition. You may have sensed a strong leading from God or see the "big picture" more clearly than anyone else. At other times you may need to put the facts aside and say to a group of trusted ministry partners, "I don't know what to do in this situation. Can we pray together? I need your collective wisdom."

Does "strategic planning" leave God out?

The stakes of decision-making grow when we move from a single decision to charting the course for several years. Is there a place for strategic planning in a church? Or is it more spiritual to simply trust God, even if that feels like "winging it"? The standard tools—analyzing strengths and weaknesses, developing vision statements, setting future goals—seem so corporate. And yet,

plenty of spiritually attuned congregations engage in some sort of planning process.

I've never known a church that intentionally left God out of its planning, but I have known ones that didn't leave room for him to work in the process. One indicator of this is a rigid, predictable timeline. Some churches always do certain steps at the same time each year, culminating in the final plan and budget for review and approval before the new year begins. These plans are rarely bold or dramatic, but they set the course for the coming year. I look at such processes and wonder, "Where is God?"

If the entire planning schedule is locked in too tightly, doesn't that imply that we know when God will speak or that we're prepared to move without him? If planning always generates only incremental change, does this suggest that God is predictable or that we're not trusting him for bolder steps?

When our church was first given the opportunity to acquire the facility that became our second campus, we were already in the middle of a planning process. A \$3 million purchase that would radically change our culture was not on the drawing board. As we began to evaluate this possibility, some members challenged us by asking, "When did we make multi-site part of our strategy?" The answer was, "We didn't. But maybe God has."

Over several months, we convened leadership groups to discuss and pray. Even though we realized this decision had to be Spirit-led, we also analyzed it in detail, looking at financial implications, community demographics, launch plans, and lessons from other multi-site churches. After several months, we sensed that we had heard from God and that the congregation was ready, and we voted overwhelmingly to purchase the facility and start a new campus. Some might say that our strategic planning process was derailed, as all our other preliminary plans fell by the wayside. But I think it's more accurate to say that God intervened in the process in a powerful way, and we listened and followed.

Not all Spirit-led planning results in bold moves. Sometimes God may say "not yet." I facilitated a planning process for another congregation with the stated goal of developing a clear, compelling vision for the future. Yet as I began to see different pieces of the puzzle, it became evident that the church was not ready for a major leap forward. After several years of growth and new initiatives, many leaders were weary and some of the underlying processes for decision-making and communication were frayed. In our planning workshops, leadership recognized that the most important priorities for the coming season were "boring" nuts-and-bolts action items. This decision to pull back from any bold steps was not a "no," but a "not yet," and it ultimately set the stage for a more exciting future.

Many congregations have lay leaders who have been involved in strategic planning in the marketplace and are ready to offer this expertise to benefit their church. Many congregations need a more disciplined approach to setting future direction and priorities. There is great potential in this collaboration, as long as the leaders know that any congregation that doesn't leave room for God in its planning will be disappointed.

Discernment versus conventional wisdom

Jim Collins' monograph *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* has an interesting line before the title: "Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer." Is Collins right? Yes and no. It's clear that the unfiltered, wholesale adoption of best practices from business is not the answer. The church is not a business, and if we run it like one, God might end up as just one of the constituents to be considered, not the One for whom the whole thing exists.

And while it is not a business, we're foolish if we ignore the reality that a church has many characteristics that can be made better with organizational wisdom. We can't read Jesus' parable about counting the cost before building a tower ([Luke 14:28-30](#)) without hearing the down-to-earth decisions to be made. Or see Jethro advising Moses to appoint officials to share the leadership burden ([Exodus 18](#)), and not recognize the need for a sustainable organizational model. Then there are the lists of qualifications for deacons and elders ([1 Timothy 3](#) and [Titus 1](#)), which clearly show that it's important to have "the right people on the bus," leading our churches.

Business thinking is not the answer, but it is part of the answer. For me, the most important lesson in this chapter of my leadership journey has been discovering the other part of the answer. Or perhaps I should say it's been acknowledging that the biggest part of the answer is beyond me.

I'm confident that my business training has benefitted the churches that I've served. It has provided me with an interesting career, but it also has had a dark side. My expertise in the corporate world led me to believe that I could solve virtually any organizational problem. It might take lots of hard work and analysis, but no challenge was too big or too complicated for me and the teams that I worked with.

While that may work well in the corporate world, it's a dangerous stance in the church. Too much reliance on business practices can mean too little reliance on God. I've learned to savor the moments when God gives a profound insight, and I'm much more willing to give credit to the Source when this happens. I've gradually become more comfortable saying, "I don't know the answer" and slowing down so that I can wait and listen. And I've developed a deep appreciation for the spiritual champions around me who understand that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

I don't quite agree with Cymbala that God "is not looking for smart people." I know that God doesn't need me to accomplish his plans, but I live with the mystery that he has chosen to assemble the body with a unique variety of gifts for his purposes. It is in this context that we should see the best of business and spiritual leadership put to work.

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