

Forming A Leadership Team In A New Church Plant



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A Frequent Problem

One of the most frequent and recurring problems in the planting of a new church occurs when church planters choose their initial leadership team. More grief, it seems to me, has come into the lives of both the church planter and the potential leader than perhaps any other issue in the early months of the church plant. Time and again I have seen church planters wearied by complications within their leadership teams, and I have seen well-meaning lay leaders sacrifice time and effort, only to become frustrated and disillusioned with church life. Curiously, the New Testament warns planters/pastors to be careful in choosing elders (“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands . . . I Timothy 5:22), but it also warns potential lay leaders to be careful in accepting leadership positions (“Not many of you should presume to be teachers . . .” James 3:1).

Value and Agenda Disharmony

The basic difficulty which occurs is one of **value and agenda disharmony**. In other words, as time goes on the leadership team discovers that they are at odds with one another (sometimes with the pastor) over certain issues affecting the direction of the church. This is not unlike a marriage, where partners discover that they “thought they knew” what the other person was like, but now are finding a completely different picture. But unlike marriage, where the partners will work things through because of their pledge to stick together “for better or worse,” leadership teams in new churches operate on an entirely different set of assumptions. When care has not been exercised in choosing an initial leadership team, and wrong assumptions have been made relative to the purpose and tenure of that initial leadership team, the result is painful for everyone. I have observed such difficulties for the following reasons:

- **There have been “pre-existing leaders”** who may have been on-site prior to the arrival of the church planter. These leaders have had the initial vision for the new church, and they have already been making decisions about the new church. It is natural (though not necessarily healthy) for them to assume that they will be the future leaders of the church. The church planter must come according to their terms. When it is discovered that “we’re not on the same page,” tensions mount.
- **There are often insecurities on behalf of the church planter.** The planter may be new to pastoral ministry, can be intimidated by stronger personalities, and would not want to risk hurting someone’s feelings by not inviting them on the team. They want everyone to be happy, but as we’ll see, long-term harmony is often sacrificed for short-term peace.
- **The planter has limited time available**, especially if bi-vocational, so they do not exercise care in choosing leaders. And, frankly, they are happy that at least someone wants to serve and take some of the leadership burden away.
- **Potential leaders feel pressure to serve.** In their heart they know that this is not their role, but the planter needs help, so they decide to

serve in a leadership role. It would be in their best interest and in the best interest of the church if they were to serve in another capacity.

- **Some potential leaders were not allowed to lead in previous church experiences**, so this is their opportunity to be a key influencer. No one, including the planter/pastors, have entirely pure motives, but on some occasions, there are those whose motives are blatantly impure.
- **Assumptions are made that the initial leaders will be perpetual leaders.** When disharmony or other issues arise, it is only with great pain that leaders are asked or forced to leave the team. There is no “clean” way to leave a leadership team or to remove someone from a leadership team.

A Solution That Works

Experience shows that it is possible to both meet the leadership need of a new church while avoiding the pitfalls referenced above. The solution is based on at least four principles:

- 1) There must be multiple leadership phases before a formal board is chosen.
- 2) There must be an avoidance of church-sounding nomenclature as these leadership teams are formed.
- 3) There must be a clear purpose and time-frame for each phase.
- 4) There must be a “changing of the guard” at each phase.

Here is how this comes together. Suppose the church planter is on-site with an emerging core group or launch team. Perhaps there are thirty adults now, offerings are being received, and there is a need for some leadership team to be formed. The major mistake a church planter could make at this point is to “appoint elders.” That would be, in my opinion, a violation of Paul’s instruction to Timothy (I Timothy 5:22). Rather, the planter should adhere to the above principles and do something akin to the following.

Phase #1: The Launch Team Advisory Board

The first thing to do is call together a group of people whose purpose is to help the church planter make significant decisions while this church is growing its team and preparing to launch public services. Participants are told clearly (in writing) that they are being invited to help the planter make important leadership decisions up until the time the church is launched publicly. After the church is public, the Launch Team Advisory Board will be dissolved, and a new team will rise up to take its place.

Phase #2: The Strategic Planning Task Force

After the church is launched, the Launch-Team Advisory Board meets one more time to celebrate the victory. The planter reminds them that the LTAB is now

dissolved. Over the next few weeks, he/she will prayerfully consider formulating a new leadership team to take the church to the next level. Some from the LTAB will be invited to participate, but others will step aside and make room for newcomers. Yes, this is a benevolent dictatorship. Yes, some people will want to stay whom shouldn't, and there is the possibility of some misunderstanding. But it is much better than the "old way" of doing things. The planter will then prayerfully decide who should stay, who should step aside, and which newcomers should be invited to participate in the Strategic Planning Task Force. Again, a letter will go out, specifying that the purpose of the SPTF is to help the planter make important leadership decisions, for instance, *during the first year of the new church's life*. After the first anniversary the SPTF will be dissolved, and a new team will rise up to take its place.

Phase #3: The Short-term Leadership Team

After the first anniversary of the new church, the Strategic Planning Task Force meets one more time to celebrate the victory. The planter reminds them that the SPTF is now dissolved. Over the next few weeks, he/she will prayerfully consider formulating a new leadership team to take the church to the next level. Some from the SPTF will be invited to participate, but others will step aside and make room for newcomers. Yes, this is a benevolent dictatorship. Yes, some people will want to stay whom shouldn't, and there is the possibility of some misunderstanding. But it is much better than the "old way" of doing things. The planter will then prayerfully decide who should stay, who should step aside, and which newcomers should be invited to participate in the Short-term Leadership Team. Again, a letter will go out, specifying that the purpose of the SLT is to help the planter make important leadership decisions, for instance, *until our church has a formal constitution and is formally affiliated with our district and denomination*. After that the SLT will be dissolved, and we will start to operate according to our constitution's leadership structure.

Phase #4: The Formal Board/Elders/Etc.

By this time, enough water has gone under the bridge for the planter and the leaders of the church to have a pretty good idea of who should work with whom, and who might be best suited for a formal leadership role with a longer commitment. Now many of the value and agenda harmony issues have been resolved, and a number of other benefits have been achieved – not the least of which is that the church has started to model that leaders come and go, and that no one is indispensable.

Other Observations

- **Use whatever names you want, and as many phases as you need.** The above "four phase" scenario is just a suggestion. You may find that you need more or fewer phases. But be sure to steer clear of names such as "elder, deacon, overseer" during these early phases.
- **In the beginning, don't give away roles, give away jobs.** This is very important in the early days of a church. "Roles" connotes titles and policy making but "jobs" connotes service. Once a "role" is given away, it can be

difficult to take it back if necessary. Until you are absolutely sure of a person's match for a role, don't assign it.

- **In the beginning, not all leaders need to come from the church.** That's right! Often you can find others to join your team who come from another church, etc., who have some experience and can give objective perspective to the emerging church.
- **Choose short-term pain and long-term gain.** Tell leaders who want to but aren't being invited to the next phase that "I'd rather have you dislike me in the short run and like me in the long run than the other way around."
- **Sure, you'll still have hassles.** But you'll be much better off than the "old way."
- **Some have suggested** that the church planter should have to defend his choices for his various leadership teams to his coach. This would both serve as a screening process, and it would take some of the pressure off of the church planter when it comes to inter-church politics.

Benefits

In the early days of Launch Team development the "early adopters" came on board with great vision and enthusiasm but sometimes without perseverance, leadership skills or proven character. They can be very helpful, but most will not move on to the next leadership phase. Utilizing multiple leadership phases helps move them out of leadership into another area of service.

The second leadership phase then enables the church planter to add some "late adopters" to the "Leadership Team" while moving other leaders to another task. Also, during the first year of the Launch Team development moving towards the public launch, the Launch Team will be expanding, so having a second stage allows the freedom and flexibility to add new leaders who have come on board since the first leadership phase.

The third phase, or the "Short-term Leadership Team," allows the planter to further observe potential leaders, add new leaders, and ease out some leaders. This is a good time to add some "specialists" to the team; people with skills and interests in writing, theology, documentation, organization, and so on. It is during this phase that the Constitution, Statement of Faith, and formal leadership structure will be clearly defined and written, in preparation for official affiliation with the Conference.

General benefits to following this approach include: modeling flexibility in leadership, modeling that leadership is service, providing greater flexibility in identifying and slotting leaders, ease of assimilating and incorporating new leaders (keeping "power brokers" to a minimum), freedom to involve godly and gifted women without a great deal of theological struggle, and time to prayerfully discern God's leadership choices.

