
WHY IS DELEGATION SO DIFFICULT?

Practical Thoughts for Church Leaders

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“It is to your advantage that I go away...” —Jesus, the Savior of the world

When we left our home church in late 1984 to plant The Coastlands, this scripture kept coming to my heart again and again—along with a simple prophetic understanding: I was to structure this new church in such a way that it functioned, as well without me (in its daily operations), as it did with me. In other words, disciple people; develop systems and delegate significant responsibilities within those systems to those people. If Jesus left the world in the keeping of humans, it is hard to justify a leadership attitude that struggles with entrusting church work to those same humans.

Not that it has been a smooth journey, but between the bumps and potholes (sometimes through them), I have learned a few things that might help you in configuring your ministry so that more people (volunteers and paid workers) can be involved meaningfully in the process.

Many pastors and church leaders with whom I interact have a subtle misconception about the origin of volunteers and disciples; pastors pray for volunteers rather than developing them. Leaders wait for mature disciples to miraculously appear in church, forgetting that disciples are not sent from Heaven but made on Earth.

And that is precisely where mobilizing and delegating to people in our church comes into play. We are desperate for more ministry workers, not only for our church programs, but also to more effectively reach out to the surrounding world.

Could it be that a merciful and kind God is giving us the biggest clues imaginable—linking His most basic assignment for us with our most obvious and continuous need? We need more workers; He wants more disciples. Hmmm. What would happen to our thinking if we connected our primary frustration with our primary mandate?

Discipleship, like church itself, is a process; an active on-going shaping of one person by another, enabling the disciple to develop in ways he or she probably could not develop alone, or, at least, not as quickly. Its goal is to “*perfect every man in Christ*” (*Colossians 1:28*), and its means include both public and private admonition.

Mobilizing people, making disciples, and delegating responsibilities to those disciples is an engrossing, all-engaging activity of the heart and of the mind. It forces shifts in priorities, time allocations and basic orientations towards ministry. Therefore, it will require a rethinking of our entire approach to ministry.

Why Is It So Difficult To Delegate?

Why is it so difficult for pastors to delegate significant work and ministry to the people in their churches? There are several basic reasons, and it is often a combination that gives rise to the reluctance to entrust programs and responsibilities to others. Most of our behavior as leaders is unconscious, but what we do and do not do sends unmistakable signals to our church about what we value. Even though we might tell people to “*get involved, volunteer,*” we can be sending conflicting behavioral signals that communicate, “*Just kidding, we’ve got everything taken care of with the people who are already engaged.*”

While we recognize the importance of mobilizing increasing numbers of responsible ministry partners, we rarely do a self-inventory to see to what extent we’re unknowingly working against that goal. Is the problem exclusively that “*It’s nearly impossible to find committed people*”? Here are some common reasons why pastors find it hard to replace themselves with people they disciple/train:

- Pastors sincerely want to serve the people in their churches, and that servant-heartedness sometimes forgets that giving others opportunity to serve is one of the most loving things a leader can do. Jesus explained that the pathway to significance is through the servants’ quarters. Pastors who do not want to “bother” others and ask for their help are unintentionally barring the doors to those rooms.
- Pastors are sometimes worried that the delegated task will not get “done right,” which is to say, *exactly like the pastor would have done it*. Perhaps because of faulty notions of authority, some pastors have come to imagine that they really are authorities on every subject and type of activity from decorating to worship, to retreat planning to budgeting, to graphic design, etc. Aren’t we glad God does not espouse, “If you want something done right, do it yourself”?
- Pastors have been burned by previous experiences with delegation, and they are not eager to be disappointed all over again. It only takes a few dropped balls by volunteers to

condition pastors not to trust the quality or quantity of others' work. Actually, most of the disappointments in delegation happen because leaders: Miscast people in unsuitable jobs; fail to give enough information or support; choose not to deal with pre-existing attitude problems; or, unintentionally prevent people from really taking ownership of the job.

- Many pastors confuse delegation with dictation. If a leader spends all the time to think a job through, and spell out how it is to be done, the leader has already missed the point of delegation. Jethro's advice for how Moses ought to delegate ministry to others contains a simple, but often overlooked detail: Let others be the front line; let them be the first to deal with situations, and whatever they decide they cannot handle should be brought to Moses—not the other way around.
- Pastors become too busy to look for disciples and enlist more workers. Since it takes longer (initially) to adequately delegate than it does to do a job themselves, pastors, who are already crunched for time because of all the things they are doing themselves, because it is quicker, have a hard time justifying the “lost time” that delegation and follow-up require. Eventually, the church ends up only able to produce what one extremely busy leader can accomplish.
- Pastors can fear losing importance if many other people start doing lots of great things. Pride urges leaders to keep the credit (thereby the work) for themselves; the truth is that unless they have a pride problem themselves, people will respect a leader who delegates significant responsibility far more than they will regard a leader who does not.

If, as church leaders, we can admit that much of the reluctance our people have toward meaningful service and involvement in our church is due to our attitudes, then we will see much more breakthrough than if we simply continue to *blame them* for not helping us more.