

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Sharpening the Saw

Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at www.efcawest.org. Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

I used to mow my lawn – I had a gasoline-powered lawn mower that cut my lawn really well. Over time, I noticed that my lawn tended to brown up nicely after it was mowed. The ragged tips of the blades of grass just didn't look healthy. Eventually, the engine needed service, so I took my mower to the repair shop for a tune up. The repairman hoisted the mower onto a work bench, tilted it back, and took a look at its underside. He turned to me, and asked this question:

“When was the last time you sharpened the blades?”

I hate looking or sounding stupid, even when I am. I understood that lawn mower blades need to be sharpened from time to time. What I failed to recognize, however was that although I was continuing to mow the lawn and thought I was doing it well, the blades had become dull and were no longer cutting properly – they were bludgeoning the blades of grass. The proof was in the ragged brown tips on the blades of grass that I was causing because the blades had lost their cutting edge. I thought I was doing well, but I was damaging the grass.

There is a leadership application to this story, and that's something to talk about.

In my work with church leaders, I often encounter teams that are not doing well. One of the diagnostic questions I usually ask is whether they do anything together to increase their knowledge, effectiveness, spiritual depth, or leadership capacity. Almost without exception, the answer is that they do not.

Author Stephen Covey introduced me to the life principle of sharpening the saw in his best-selling book *“The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.”* He uses the metaphor of sharpening the saw to illustrate the need for people to continually renew themselves in mind, body, soul and spirit in order to continue to be effective in their lives. People do not auto-sharpen – to be sharp we must intentionally do something to sharpen ourselves. We don't stay sharp through continuous work – we stay sharp by intentionally pausing from our tasks to sharpen the saw.

Why is it that so many of us behave as though we believe we are “auto-sharpening” even as others around us so clearly see that we are not? I believe the answer is that we become distracted from pursuing the important work of intentional growth as individuals and as teams because of the urgent demands of other things. The urgent always seems to derail the important. We get too busy to attend to our sharpness. We put it off until later. And “later” is always, well, later.

How might we as church leaders and shepherds of God’s flock be more intentional about sharpening our saws? While there are many life dimensions where we need to renew, my focus in this month’s article is on growing as church leaders. Here are some ideas that may guide your conversation.

- Most leadership teams have found that trying to build relationships, focus in prayer, and grow together in their faith and practice cannot be done effectively by merely adding these items to an already full agenda of other things to do. EFCA pastor Larry Osborne, in his book *Sticky Teams*, suggests having an additional meeting, a “shepherds meeting,” where leaders can focus only on these important things without getting derailed by the urgent things that are waiting for them later in the agenda. Important things are seldom accomplished in a hurry. Can’t see yourself scheduling another meeting? You might consider dedicating one meeting every quarter, or once every four months, for the purpose of coming together to sharpen the saw.
- EFCA has launched a new theology podcast. These presentations can be used for personal theological growth and maturity of church staff and leaders, and can also be used as the basis for a group study by leadership teams. It is available now in the podcast app on iPhone (search EFCA Theology Podcast), on Android podcast apps like Pocket Casts and Podcast Republic (search EFCA Theology Podcast) and on the Web (including mobile browsers) at efca.org/podcast. Many elders lack theological training. This is an excellent tool to support ongoing theological training for church leaders.
- Consider having a book or two each year that the leadership team reads and discusses together. What are some of the important writings that we could read together that might help us grow in our faith, knowledge, leadership skills, nurturing of the soul, or spiritual health? If you want some help with book ideas, contact me at the email address at the bottom of the page.
- Consider studying together the statement of faith. The EFCA statement of faith lists ten theological convictions. Has your leadership team ever studied them together? The book *Evangelical Convictions – a Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America* is an excellent guide for such a study. It is available through Nextstep Resources (www.nsresources.com) or Amazon.com. Consider s a year of studying together to grasp the significance of the statement of faith.
- The entire content of the 2016 EFCA Theology Conference on the Doctrine of the Church, held in January in Des Moines, Iowa, is now accessible on-line by going to <http://go.efca.org/theology-conference-resources>. This site contains audio recordings of all the presentations as well as notes and other materials presented at the conference.

It has often been said that “what got you here won’t keep you here.” I’m not sure that’s true. I suspect, at least as it pertains to leading and caring for God’s flock, that what got you here will keep you here, and that’s the problem. If we don’t keep growing, and if we don’t continually work to sharpen ourselves, we will stay where we are. That’s called stuck.

I have a hard time imagining church leadership teams having to discuss whether or not to sharpen their saws together. It seems to me that the conversation should be about how, not whether, we will do it together. And that's something to talk about.

Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.