

Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

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DTR: Supervisor or Teammate?

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 was watching a television show recently when a young woman being interviewed talked about needing to have, from time to time, a “DTR conversation” with her boyfriend of the moment. That brought back memories of similar dreaded DTR conversations that my sons and their friends had for themselves.

For those not familiar with this concept in the dating world, “DTR” stands for “define the relationship.” Typically, after a young man and woman have “dated” or “gone out” (two other terms that are loaded with meanings and sub-meanings in various cultures) for a while there often arises the desire among one or both participants to define the relationship – to disclose to one another what their intentions are for their future together, if any. Oftentimes, these conversations are traumatic. However, sooner or later, it is hoped, one of these conversations will end positively, and engagements, weddings, and enduring marriages ensue.

In my work with church leadership teams, I have found that many could use a DTR conversation. The most frequent source of conflict I find in church leadership teams is unmet expectations, and unmet expectations flow from a lack of shared definition of their working relationships – undefined relationships. This is especially true when I discover unhealthy conflict and tension in the relationship between pastors and church governing boards (I'll use the term “elders”), but it can also occur among pastors or elders and staff. Having a shared understanding about the working relationships between pastors and elders, a DTR conversation, is clearly something to talk about.

My bias for a healthy, productive working relationship between elders and pastors is that they are teammates, not adversaries. Yet, many pastors and elders with whom I meet describe their working relationships as more adversarial than team-like. When I press into this, I find that neither pastors nor elders want to be adversarial; they just seem to have defaulted into behaving in adversarial ways.

Years ago, Stephen Covey noted in his book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* that how we see our world impacts how we behave which impacts the outcomes we get. He called this the “see-do-get” cycle. In short, if we want to have different outcomes, we need to behave differently, and to effectively change our behaviors, we need to see things differently.

I have found that, in almost every dysfunctional pastor-elder conflict, the elders have taken on the role of supervising the pastor. By defining their position in the relationship as supervisor, they tend to look for and find deficiencies in the pastor's performance. Unfortunately, there is no end to the number of shortcomings one can find in their pastor – no pastor ever has or ever will have all of the traits, skills or characteristics required of the “perfect” pastor. When meetings are dominated by subordinates (pastors) giving reports to or asking permission of supervisors (elders) or supervisors (elders) holding subordinates (pastors) accountable for performance, it's no wonder that the working relationships over time deteriorate until the pastor eventually leaves or is dismissed.

I want to propose a more beneficial way for us to see the relationship between pastors and elders. I suggest we should see our relationship as that of teammates.

Teammates are united around a single purpose – to achieve their mutually agreed upon goals. To win. A team is made of people having different types and levels of skills, strengths, and weaknesses, yet they all work together in a synergistic way – working together they achieve more than they could by excelling in their individual roles. Teammates don't hide one another's weaknesses; rather, they understand them and compensate for them. Teammates play for the team, not for themselves. Teammates support one another – they don't tear one another down.

We all have things we do not do well. Pastors and elders have weaknesses. No matter how often or forcefully we badger one another, mature adults seldom if ever become good (let alone excel) at anything they are not already good at doing. A visionary pastor who excels in communicating God's Word in a compelling manner may find he is unable to effectively coordinate strategic operations or set goals. An elder who is at the top of the vocational food chain regarding strategic thinking and accountability systems may be unable to create or communicate a compelling vision for the church family's future or overcome reluctance toward public speaking. These individualized “deficiencies” in skills, abilities, and personal characteristics do not disqualify someone from service – they illustrate the necessity of working together as a team. No one is good at everything. The ear cannot see; the eye cannot hear. The body needs its varied parts to work together in order to be healthy.

Here are some starters for your own pastor/elder or even leader/staff DTR conversation:

- Do we actually want to be teammates, or do we prefer a supervisor/subordinate relationship?
- How do we behave during our meetings (as a group and individually)? Do we work together on substantive ideas and issues, or do we critique one another's performance? What do we need to do differently?
- What are the things we (elders and pastors) do well? What are some things we don't do well that we would like help in doing or would like someone else to do for the team?
- What are some behaviors we do that make our relationship more characteristic of supervisor/subordinate than teammates?
 - Elders: Does your pastor say or do things that result in you feeling like you (or the board) are ministry impediments to be overcome rather than ministry teammates?
 - Pastors: Does your board say or do things that result in you feeling like you are a subordinate rather than a valued colleague and teammate?
 - How might you behave differently in order to achieve a different result?

- Do we (pastors and elders) discuss ideas before they are presented as proposals? Presenting proposals to a board forces them to act as approvers rather than as collaborators and teammates. It also can limit buy-in by the board (after all, it's the pastor's idea, not ours). Do we first share ideas, and then use what we learned from one another to create a draft to discuss among teammates, finally using that draft to create a decision for team buy-in and approval? Surprises always stifle teamwork. Pastors and elders should both be in the business of bringing up ideas – remember, we're teammates.
- Make a list of specific behaviors that will facilitate pastors and elders becoming teammates, and then hold one another accountable to do them.

Most church bylaws assign their boards a legal responsibility to supervise pastors. I am not suggesting abrogating that responsibility. I am suggesting that being teammates in ministry requires the supervisory aspects of the pastor/board relationship to be exercised far less than the teammate aspects of the relationship. Seek first to be teammates; act as supervisors when necessary.

Most pastors I speak with want their board members to be their teammates. Most elders I speak with want to be teammates with their pastors. When both parties want the same thing in a relationship, but they aren't consistently getting it, it's time to DTR.

That's something to talk about.

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