

Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

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Transparency, Confidentiality, Secrecy – When to Have What?

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.

Several years ago, there was a crisis of confidence and trust within my church family. Without going into unnecessary details, it involved pastoral infidelity, eroded the confidence in leadership of many within the church family, and resulted in multiple changes in the composition and leadership behaviors of our elders.

One of the first issues the newly constituted elders undertook was the process of addressing issues of trust – in order for church leaders to effectively carry out their service of leadership, they must have the trust of the congregation. When all is well, trust is fairly easily maintained. But, when the wheels have come off the leadership wagon, trust usually must be earned all over again. It's easier to maintain trust than to earn it again after it has been lost. In my experiences throughout life, when trust has been lost, it is never given back – it must be earned again. It's not resumed from the point of interruption – it's a complete do-over.

A major part of our elders' strategy to earn the trust of the church family was to demonstrate transparency in our leadership. In doing so, it forced me to come to grips with two issues leaders often face that cloud efforts to be transparent – confidentiality and secrecy. This month's article examines transparency, confidentiality, and secrecy as it relates to church leaders.

The metaphor I prefer in dealing with issues of transparency, confidentiality, and secrecy is that of a window. As leaders, whether staff or elders, our deliberations and decision-making processes usually occur behind the scenes. Those who follow don't know what happened behind the scenes. When trust is high, this is seldom a problem: but, when trust is low or compromised, followers oftentimes begin to wonder about what has been going on outside their view. It's been my experience that when followers begin to wonder what their leaders are doing and why, and they are not provided with answers to their questions (or, better yet, provided information prior to them having any questions), they tend to make up something – and these uninformed, make-believe answers are seldom complimentary toward their leaders and, more often than not, simply untrue.

It is the responsibility of leaders to clearly communicate and to provide followers with information they likely will want to or need to know – we should not expect followers to be content with our silence. Most everyone wants to know where we are going, why we are going there, and how we plan to get there.

Transparency is like an open or clear glass window into leadership's decision-making processes. Leaders let followers know what was decided, why it was decided, and how it was decided. This is not to be construed as an invitation for followers to second guess, demand their own way, or otherwise interfere with the leaders' responsibilities and authorities to lead. Rather, it is extending an opportunity for followers to fully understand leadership decisions. Most church leadership decisions that I have been involved with over the years easily qualify for transparency.

Confidentiality is like a translucent pane of glass in the leadership team's window. Think of the frosted panes of glass common in exterior bathroom windows. Some light gets through, but those outside do not have the ability to see all the details clearly through the window (and for this we are all thankful). To push this metaphor a little further, note that a person outside may have a strong desire to see through the window and perhaps could be convinced in his own mind that he needs to see through. Yet the pane remains translucent and the details blurred. It is the responsibility of those having access to confidential information to maintain its confidentiality.

Access to confidential information generally entails a two-step process. First, there must be a determination of a *right to know* – does the person who is requesting access or to whom access will be granted have a right to know the confidential information? Second, there must be a determination of a *need to know* – does the person who has a right to know also have a need to know? Remember, churches are NOT government entities, so laws such as the Freedom of Information Act do not apply (there are laws related to corporate governance that apply to churches – consult legal counsel in your state for that information).

What makes some information confidential? First, some information is confidential by law. Employee medical information, tax information, personnel files, privileged communications between a confessor and clergy, and individual donation records, to name a few, are generally confidential. Second, some information is confidential because of the negative impact it could have on others by its release. For example, pastor-search information related to any specific candidate(s) is generally confidential. Deliberations during elder meetings are generally confidential (meeting minutes should include decisions, not the content of deliberations). Membership interview information and disciplinary inquiries are generally considered confidential. The church mailing list and member addresses, phone numbers and personally identifying information are likely confidential (unless waived) and should be protected.

Very few, if any, church leaders intentionally create closed decision-making systems, intending there to be no release of any information to anyone. That would be like building a room having no windows or doors. So, secrecy is like a window that has been covered. The pane may be clear or translucent, but the window has been covered so that nothing can be seen from the outside. The blinds have been drawn closed. Secrecy is covering up information, and it is often intended to prevent personal or corporate embarrassment. Secrecy is a fraud that leaders perpetuate upon their followers. It's the leadership equivalent of padding one's reputation at the expense of one's character. In my personal

experience and through that of other churches, I find that secrecy is often an afterthought based upon guilt and/or fear, whereas confidentiality is typically based upon principle or law. Something is confidential because it should be; something is secret because we want it to be. This subtle difference has huge trustworthiness repercussions. Keep in mind that we can delude ourselves by labeling information confidential when what we are actually doing is trying to hide behind secrecy.

Having set the stage by defining terms, here are some issues that your leadership team may want to talk about.

1. What is the current level of trust shown by our followers to their leaders? Is the trust-level trend increasing or decreasing in recent years?
2. Do our staff and leaders *intentionally* exercise transparency? In what ways? How do we keep the church family apprised of information related to mission, vision, strategy, finances, staffing, etc.? What do we know that they should also know?
3. What information should routinely be considered confidential? How do we protect confidential information? Is the information still confidential if we share it with our spouses? (Note: Occasionally, but rarely, we identify confidential information that the elders will not share with their spouses so as to protect our spouses from inadvertent disclosure or from having to bear a burden they may not be equipped to bear).
4. Looking back at our church's history, are there indications of secrecy? If so, what might be the root cause(s) for it? What might tempt us to resort to secrecy, and how do we guard against it?

Transparency, confidentiality, and secrecy are key concepts that leadership teams should understand. Conflicts involving these concepts usually arise during a time of crisis, when emotions are high, and we are prone to making mistakes. Where should you draw the lines in your church family regarding transparency, confidentiality and secrecy?

That's something to talk about.

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