



## Great Board-Staff Relationships

### Theological Foundations for Great Board-Staff Relationships

Let your board-staff relationship be a true witness to life in God's kingdom. God will bless your faithfulness.

- **Love:** Even in conflict or hierarchical relationships, love and forbearance must underpin our words & deeds
- **Unity:** The urge to 'win' by making another Christian 'lose' is unbiblical. We are all members of the one body of Christ, and one part must not put another part down.
- **Mutual Voluntary Submission:** Insisting on acting independently even when it is known or suspected that other ministries or Christians will be hurt as a result goes against the command to love one another. It is your responsibility to take into account the welfare of other ministries and believers (including the staff and board) and to act responsibly by doing only what is best for the cause of Christ, rather than just the cause of your own ministry.
- **Order:** If different messages emerge from the staff and the board, treat it as a crisis situation. Confusion, rather than order, is likely to result and the ministry will be less effective than it should be. Board and staff must work together harmoniously.
- **Stewardship:** Both the board and the senior leader need to steward their relationship well so that the ministry can flourish and do all that Christ has called it to do. Both parties must treat the other as a precious resource of the ministry.

**Remember:** Our actions preach what we really believe! What do your behaviours teach observers about your faith? Will your faith attract people to Jesus Christ?

### Considerate Boards

Considerate boards take care to help, and not hinder, the ability of their senior staff leaders to fulfill the senior leadership role. The following practices are different ways of showing consideration.

- **Demonstrate Christian Values:** The New Testament contains many “one another” commands, which all apply to the board-leader relationship. Find ways to apply them in your context
- **Respect the Leader:** Leaders develop great expertise in the ministry’s mission, have been called by God to lead the ministry, and have an in-depth understanding of the organization and its operational details
- **Involve the Leader:** Make sure the senior leader has the right to attend and speak at board meetings
- **Be the very best Board:** Board development should be a priority. The board should collectively learn what its work is and how to do it well, and individual directors need development to be excellent directors.
- **Be open to Change:** Expect the leader to propose changes because change is what every organization needs to stay relevant and viable in a changing world. The opposite of change is not status quo but stagnation, so the board should carefully discern which changes are most helpful to continued viability and program effectiveness
- **Be engaged!** Go beyond just attending board meetings. Promote the ministry, volunteer, take part in its activities. Demonstrate your passion for its work

### Considerate Leaders

Considerate leaders do everything they can to help the board do its work well. Since a significant part of the board’s work involves oversight of the senior staff leader, the leader can most help the board by cooperating with its oversight.

*Considerate leaders earn the board's trust*

- Be an expert in your mission
- Think deeply about the ministry and its mission
- Be aware and connected with the external environment
- Stay close to stakeholders
- Don't surprise the board
- Accept responsibility
- Apologize when appropriate
- Provide complete reports
- Don't withhold bad news
- Stay compliant with board policy and directions

*Considerate leaders are humble and clear-eyed*

- Be self-aware and open to critics
- Respect the board's authority
- Commit to finishing well

*Considerate leaders assume the board's goodwill*

- If you feel the board is 'against' you, take a close look at your own behaviour. Boards will generally only wonder about a leader's continued leadership if the leader has become a problem leader.

*Considerate leaders aren't defensive*

- When you feel threatened or nervous about the board's discussion, stay calm and say a prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to direct everyone, including you, towards a good resolution. It is very likely that God will bring a lot of good out of decisions that you initially oppose.

*Considerate leaders provide theological expertise*

- If a decision is one that even secular leaders would endorse, pause to reflect on what twists or nuances your Christian faith might have on it. There may be additional elements that faith brings to the decision, or faith may even result in a completely different decision. Make it your responsibility to keep faith foremost in the board's mind as it makes decisions for the ministry.

### Caring Boards

Caring boards pay attention to the senior leader's wellness and development.

#### *Caring boards encourage the senior leader*

- By expressing appreciation and recognizing significant events in the leader's life and work

#### *Caring boards protect the senior leader*

- By not leaving them to suffer the whims of others on their own. Show solidarity with the leader

#### *Caring boards pray for the senior leader*

- Spiritual support makes it more likely that God's plans for your ministry will come to fruition

#### *Caring boards provide professional development for the senior leader*

- Invest in keeping your leader as an expert in your ministry's field and as the best leader possible

#### *Caring boards expand the senior leader's boundaries*

- Ask questions, provide articles, introduce new relationships, tell stories, and use other techniques to help your leader dream bigger than ever and challenge the limits of what the leader thinks is possible

*Caring boards give the senior leader a sabbatical*

- Three to four months away from work is an ideal length of time for the leader to re-vision, refresh, and recharge, and for the board to test the capabilities of the management team

*Caring boards chat informally with the senior leader*

- Friendly sharing of dreams and concerns without the pressure of the leader making a formal report or the board making a decision, leads to greater sense of unity and mutual understanding

*Caring boards give the senior leader frequent, honest appraisals*

- Affirmation encourages more rapid development of whatever it is the board likes, and correction will nip problems in the bud, resulting in the leader having more time to do good work

*Caring boards build teamwork with the senior leader*

- Eliminate unproductive politicking and other negative behaviours that arise when “Us vs. Them” rules by cultivating a spirit of “We’re in this together as one team.”

*Caring boards compensate the senior leader fairly*

- While most ministries cannot pay as much as they’d like to, pay a fair wage as best you can

*Caring boards help senior leaders help themselves*

- Holistic health is maintained by engaging regularly in positive spiritual, mental, and physical practices. The board can provide helpful employee benefits in these areas or at least encourage the leader to adopt good self-care practices

## Caring Leaders

Caring leaders do what they can to make the board's work easier and less stressful for the directors. There are four primary ways they can do that:

1. **Think Like a Director:** When the leader thinks like a director, reports will be prepared according to what the directors want to know as opposed to what the leader wants to tell. Leaders will anticipate the board's questions and answer them before they are asked
2. **Respect the Board's Authority:** Remember that the directors are directors because God wants them as directors, just as he wants you there as the leader. Regardless of how you feel, they do have final authority over the ministry
3. **Support the Board:** Board's need logistical and administrative support, so ensure they have all the support they need. Help staff members understand the board's decisions and always present a united front with the board
4. **Provide Spiritual Support:** Develop real relationships with your board members and pray for them

## Leadership Reviews

When the board reviews the leader's performance, they have an opportunity to keep the relationship healthy through honesty, and to help the leader become the best possible leader. Annual reviews should affirm what is going well, and make suggestions for the leader's continued professional growth.

- **Predetermine what will be reviewed:** There should never be a surprise at what the board considered in the review. Tell the leader in advance what criteria the board will use in assessing the leader's performance
- **Assess Mission Results:** Could include metrics for external impact based on the Mission or End Statement, the strategic plan or theory of change, the annual action plan, or program evaluations
- **Assess Organizational Health:** Consider financial health, employee attitudes, capacity issues, donor trends and so forth

- **Assess Leadership Traits:** Due to the organization's identity as a Christian ministry, it is quite appropriate to consider how well the leader represents the ministry's Christian identity to others. It can therefore look to the leader's character. It should also consider how well the leader is growing with the ministry and if the leader is still passionate about the ministry's purpose.
- **Set Ground Rules:** The review process should be well understood by all parties, and the directors who will do the review should be trained how to do it well

### When the Leader is a Problem

It is important that the board not let problems fester. If it sees a problem developing, it should address it right away.

- *When trust is lacking*, name the problem and add monitoring
- *When in conflict*, get clear on mission, values, strategy, constraints and priorities
- *To detect underperformance*, create a definition of performance
- *With a domineering leader*, board development and unity is essential

### Saying "Good-bye" to the Leader

An executive transition is one of those things that you don't know when it will happen, but you do know that it will happen. So you should always be ready for one.

*Emergency Succession Plan:* Have a plan for a very sudden, completely unexpected loss of the leader. It should have two parts: one part to cover the first hours and days; and another part to cover up to maybe three months or so. This should be enough time to allow the board to analyze the situation and decide how it wants to proceed

*Respect for the leader:* The lesson outlined a variety of scenarios under which the vacancy could occur. Even in scenarios where the leader has had to be dismissed, continue to treat the leader as a fellow believer in Christ who at one time was determined by the board to have been called by God into leadership of this ministry

*Consider the staff:* Don't forget to think about the staff who are still there at work. Be sure to keep them informed about the transition and to give them confidence in the future health of the ministry and security of their employment