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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

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What Leadership Style Works in Our Church?

Dave wanted to be a good pastor, and the right pastor for the church. But daily he felt like a square peg being pounded into a round hole. Unfortunately, different factions in the congregation held different views on his leadership. Some church members wanted Dave to bring an exciting new ministry vision and direction, others wanted to feel more emotionally engaged in church life, and another group of members wanted a comforting shepherd who focused on taking care of their spiritual needs. Dave, and all groups within the church, operated on unshared assumptions about pastoral leadership.

Leadership methods abound in the business and secular nonprofit world, but do these understandings enhance our insight into leadership in local church ministry? Leadership in the congregation is more complex because it must be the right style of leadership not only for the church itself, but also for the surrounding community in which the church is located. Still, whether we are considering secular or pastoral leadership, most leadership theories share the view that leadership is distinct from management. One definition clarifies the distinction with this image: "Management is efficiency in climbing the ladder of success; leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall."

Pastoral Approaches to Leadership

Leadership means that someone directs, inspires, or motivates others. Generally the person is out front, leading the way with big-picture ideas, more possibilities, or practical solutions. A recent national study asked pastors to assess the extent to which they used three common leadership approaches. A random sample of worshipers in each congregation answered the same questions about their pastor's leadership style. The results show that pastors often rely on more than one of these overlapping approaches or strategies.

Transformational leadership. Pastors with this leadership approach define and determine a common

ministry vision. The pastor creates a sense of loyalty and excitement among members by connecting them to that vision. As a result, church members feel some ownership in this vision and work to achieve the church's goals. Transformational pastors offer intriguing new possibilities and help worshipers think about problems in new ways.

The national survey revealed that *worshipers* see their pastor exhibiting *more* transformational leadership traits than the leaders do themselves.

Servant leadership. Pastors employing a servant leadership approach tend to focus more on the needs of individuals—worshipers, lay leaders, and church staff—rather than on a common vision of the church as a whole. This type of leader believes that helping others meet *their* goals promotes the church's overall ministry effectiveness. The servant leader involves worshipers in all congregational decision making.

The national study found that the majority of pastors describe themselves as altruistic, servant leaders. But again, *worshipers* describe their pastor as *more* often showing servant leader qualities than do pastors themselves.



CHOICE OF LEADERSHIP STYLE,
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Motivational leadership. Pastors taking this approach say that their role is to create an environment that motivates, encourages, and prepares members to take action. Worshipers experience this style of inspiring and equipping leadership as collaborative.

Fewer worshipers say that their pastor's style has motivational attributes than do pastors themselves.

Only one in ten pastors draw on all three approaches. Rather, most pastors' responses reveal that they lead with a primary approach; some also put a secondary approach in play.

When Pastor and Members Agree on the Match

Some members in the national study admitted that they couldn't identify their pastor's leadership style. Further, fewer than four in ten worshipers agree with their pastor's own assessment of his or her leadership style. Does it make a difference if members and the pastor describe the pastor's leadership approach in a similar way? When pastors and worshipers share a common understanding about the leadership style for the congregation, several positive research results emerge.

1. *Worshipers have a more positive outlook about the future than members do in other congregations.* The majority of members look forward, with enthusiasm, to the church's ongoing ministries. They believe that the best years of the congregation lie in the future. Their positive outlook about what the future holds means that they more readily embrace change.
2. *Worshipers share their faith with others.* Worshipers more readily talk with others—outside the church—about their faith. As they talk with others about how faith shapes their lives, they also invite others to attend their church's worship services.
3. *The congregation grows in worship attendance.* A good leadership fit signals that many other aspects of the church are flourishing. New attendees are attracted to strong and healthy congregations.

How Is Leadership Style Linked to Conflict?

Church discussions and decisions sometimes lead to conflict. Three quarters of the pastors in the study report that their congregation experienced *minor* conflict recently. What was the reported conflict about? Pastors mentioned their leadership style (31%) and church finances (27%) most often.

More serious conflict can be found in churches where lay leaders say that they take the primary initiative in making decisions and planning programs.

One in three lay-directed churches reported *major* conflict that resulted in members or the pastor leaving. In a pastoral leadership vacuum, various members may attempt to take the church in assorted directions, resulting in conflict that the pastor cannot resolve.

In churches that are *free from major conflict*, one or more of the three pastoral leadership approaches—transformational, servant, and motivational—are identified by members. True leadership minimizes conflict because it creates a shared direction for the congregation.

The Bottom Line

The Right Questions for Pastors. Take an hour to reflect and make notes on your leadership approach. Consider how your current approach might differ from the strategies you've used in the past.

Next, ask three to five people who know you well to describe your pastoral leadership style. Listen, take notes, and ask for clarification or examples when needed. Later, compare your self-description with what you learned from others' observations. Does their description match yours? What can you learn from any discrepancies in the descriptions?

The Right Questions for Lay Leaders. Ask a small group of lay leaders and long-time members to discuss their insights about church leadership by responding to these queries: Do we want our pastor to motivate, organize, and equip *us* for ministry, or do we want a pastor who takes the lead in all the ministries for us? Can our pastor have a new vision for the congregation or will some members interpret that new initiative as an inappropriate agenda? Do we publicly support the pastor and other leaders during difficult times of substantial change?

As you think about the church's current needs and your pastor's gifts, do you see a good match? From your perspective, what are the key pieces for understanding the puzzle of a good match?

1. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 101.
2. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012), 101–12. Download a free guide with group exercises (<http://www.uscongregations.org/pdf/Leadership-That-Fits-Your-Church-Leader-Guide.pdf>).