

Lessons in leadership

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [December 15, 1999](#) issue

Among the congregations I know, two challenges loom especially large for leaders: maintaining a clear focus amid competing agendas, and bringing about needed change when people are resistant or at best ambivalent about change. With that context in mind, here are ten rules of leadership, more or less in the order in which I learned them.

1) Give responsibility back: Early in my ministry I would listen closely when people said, "The church should be doing this," or "The church ought to do that," and I would immediately put the idea in my pastoral backpack. After a while the load became so heavy that I collapsed. I began to learn to give responsibility back. I found myself learning to say things like, "That's an important need all right. How do you think you can respond to it?" If I wanted to be even more blunt, I would say, "I am not especially interested in hearing what you think the church should be doing, but I am very interested in hearing what you believe God is calling you to do."

2) Expect trouble: I found myself puzzled that new ideas or challenges to the status quo proved so upsetting to some people. I thought, "Gosh, I'm not an evil person. Why are some people so angry, even vicious?" I laid my complaint before a friend, who said, "If you aren't making some enemies, you're probably not doing your job."

Most clergy want to be liked. But if we make being liked the overriding rule for our ministry, not much is likely to happen. This is not to indulge a persecution complex or to delight in opposition. It is to recognize the paradoxical wisdom of the aphorism, "No good deed goes unpunished." It is to recognize that in the church, just as in the world, power is zealously guarded, and not all that glitters is gold.

3) Value small steps: The long-term vision may be one of fundamental change, but you get there by looking for and valuing small steps along the way. Sometimes very small steps. For example, you may hope to see your congregation develop a full-orbed teaching ministry for adults, giving as much or more emphasis to adult education as to the Sunday school for children. Keep the vision alive, but look for

small steps—for example, the church board studying a relevant book, key leaders beginning to share the vision, a special task force grappling with the ideas, and individuals in the congregation who long for serious biblical study openly articulating their hope. The Exodus did not just happen one day. There were a host of steps, over a number of years, that built toward it.

4) Plan: Both long-range, strategic planning and an annual calendar planning can help a congregation as well as clergy to focus energies and avoid getting distracted. Planning that is done well will begin with the question, What are we trying to accomplish? Periodic strategic planning (every five years is about right), followed by action and accomplishment, heightens congregational energy and self-confidence. On the other hand, nothing dissipates congregational energy more than discussing an issue year after year without taking action.

5) Identify the vital few: Part of good planning is asking the question, "What are the vital few things we must do in order to get the job done? Often congregations try to do too much and resist asking, What is really critical? What are the vital few things we must do if we are to be a faithful Christian congregation? The "vital few" question can be employed with boards and staff, as well as with the congregation as a whole. It helps to sort out the major from the minor, to create a sense of being mission-driven. Most groups and congregations are better off trying to do less and doing that well than trying to do a lot and doing it poorly.

6) Don't overvalue consensus: Many people take great pride in saying, We do everything by consensus here. That often means, We never take a vote. Sometimes consensus is the best way to operate and really does occur. More often, it ends up meaning that the long-winded win, or that veto power is held by those who resist change. Not every decision requires or should be made by a vote. But voting does help a group move forward. Waiting for consensus means disempowering those who are willing to take risks, who in many cases are precisely the people you want to encourage, not discourage. After a vote is taken, leaders need to work for cohesion, reminding all parties of a unity and identity that transcend the particular issue.

7) Count the yes votes: This strategy is another way of empowering the risk-takers. Sometimes there is not a need to take an up-or-down vote on an issue. Simply let the interested and enthusiastic go ahead—that is, count the yes votes. Rarely will a majority take part in a new ministry at the outset. Counting the yes votes enables the creative minority to take action.

8) Create a new working group for a new job: Five years ago the church I serve began the groundwork for a sanctuary renovation project. If this project had been sent to the administration, property, finance, worship or other established board, it would have languished and died. When it comes to significant new directions or coloring-outside-the-lines work, established boards are good at saying no. If you want the idea to live, create a special task force or committee. It is likely to be more invested in the work than an existing board would be and much more likely to bring the project to fruition.

9) Change by addition, not subtraction: It is always easier to get support for adding a project than for eliminating one. Even the most moribund program will have its loyalists. If you try to kill it off, you will mobilize the supporters and sap energy from new ventures. You'll get where you want to go more quickly by focusing on the new project. If and when the new ministry takes off, people will gradually gravitate toward it, and in time the need for the old forms will cease to exist. People are much more likely to let go of the old when they have something new to embrace.

10) Be persistent: Change, no matter how much needed or how valid the motivation, happens slowly and engenders resistance. Those called to leadership should expect conflict and resistance; be prepared to value it and to learn from it, and to persist as gracefully as possible in the face of it. When it is clear that the leader will be persistent, the dynamics do change. Don't give up too soon. It takes about five years for a new pastor to be trusted and accepted as the pastor of the church, and seven to eight years before his or her efforts begin to bear fruit. If your time line is a lot shorter than that, congregational leadership will prove to be a disappointing line of work.

These ten lessons have been brought home to me. Other ministers will have a different set. What is urgent is that clergy think of themselves as leaders and share with one another what they are learning as they lead and are led.