Evaluating evaluations

by Carol Howard Merritt

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Before I went into the ministry, I was a business manager. Scuttling papers back and forth on my desk, I dreamed of seminary. A headache grew between my eyes every single day. As I downed the aspirin, I couldn't wait to train for my "real job." I had no idea that being a business manager was preparing me for my calling. I didn't realize that one of the biggest complaints pastors would make was that they didn't get instruction in running a business. Reading budgets, making investments, structuring debt, motivating employees, negotiating salaries, making sales—this was the very experience that I was receiving and it would help me more than I could imagine.

Now I do a lot of consulting with the Center for Progressive Renewal, so I keep up with the news in the business world. Unlike some church consultants, I don't think that churches are businesses. We have different cultures, goals and missions. Businesses are vehicles for making money. Churches are gatherings that encourage us to love God and love each other. While business models tell us to put energy into our greatest strengths, church reminds us of "the least of these." While business models rally us to win and succeed, church whispers, *the last shall be first and the first shall be last.*

Plus, the average life span for a publicly traded company is only 15 years. We have churches that have been in existences for hundreds of years. For church to long to be like business is akin to a tortoise longing to be like a gnat.

But churches can use the tools of business. Businesses spend a great deal of time and resources into researching many of the tools that we need. And excellent pastors have learned to grab onto wisdom from all corners of expertise—art, music, poetry, literature, marketing, technology, education, social work, psychology, sociology, and business.

The big news in the business world this week is that IBM has quit using the annual review process for its employees. It had been in place for ten years, and it was

costing too much, proving too arbitrary, and stressing too many people out. Managers found that negative reviews made their employees unproductive, so many were grade inflating their staff. Jealousy and competition erupted in the workplace. Having 12-month goals did not allow for the employees to be nimble enough to respond to the urgent needs of the fast-paced tech industry.

All of this made me perk up, because churches often have an odd relationship with their review process, if they have one at all. Here are some common problems:

- Churches don't have any job descriptions, so pastors have to figure out the expectations of the congregation through complaints or mistakes. And then the tail starts wagging the dog.

- The expectations of every member of the congregations are so high that one pastor cannot meet all of them. But she tries. And then she breaks down with exhaustion.

- Every member of the congregation has a job description in his or her head, but no one has looked at the one on paper since the pastor was hired ten years ago.

- The pastor has a particular passion or problem that he wants to pursue, but can't because it's not one of his duties. He becomes frustrated.

- The pastor exceeds expectations—there's growth in membership, attendance, vitality and income—but she is never given any increase in salary above an occasional cost of living increase. She looks for another position because she doesn't know her congregation appreciates her gifts.

- The responsibility for growth of the congregation is focused solely on the pastor. The church doesn't understand national patterns in congregational attendance and membership, or their own responsibility to invite friends. So they fire the pastor because of the dwindling attendance, in order to hire another pastor and… the attendance still dwindles. So the congregation has diminishing attendance *and* members who are angry about the last pastor getting the boot.

- A pastor is completely unproductive, but no one can do anything about it, because the job descriptions are not clear and no one can hold him accountable.

- A pastor is only responding day-to-day crises and duties and has no chance to think about the long-term vision.

- A pastor responds to the "squeaky wheel" instead of being able to put the larger job into perspective.

- The reviews are not handled by experienced Human Resources professionals, so they can be a barrage of nastiness and insults. A good pastor can become discouraged, unmotivated, and look for another position because she has been treated poorly.

So could it be time for churches to rethink their evaluation process? IBM did it by crowd-sourcing the employee suggestions. Could we do the same thing? It seems we need a process that

- Clearly defines the expectations of a muddy job, so that the church doesn't expect the pastor to be the savior of the universe;

- Allows for flexibility so the pastor can respond to passions and difficulties that arise;

- Maintains accountability and feedback;

- Understands that different employees are motivated by different things; and

- Happens more often than once every year.

What would that look like?