

The Collaborative Leader



If church leaders are serious about developing the ministry of the whole body of Christ, we need to reflect on the way we lead. Here are some questions to ponder.

Am I secure in my relationship with God and others?

Collaborative leadership is challenging. It means recognising we don't have all the gifts required (Ephesians 4:11-12) and therefore leadership is plural. This in turn means encouraging people who are better than us at doing some things, and perhaps swallowing hard at an insensitive comparison. It also means allowing people to do things in a different way to us and resisting the temptation to take the task back. Behind this is security in God, trust in his people, and a self-awareness and ability to manage our emotions.

Am I focussed on the crowd or the 12? (or the 3!)

How does your time allocation compare with Jesus? At times he avoided the crowd. He didn't meet all the needs of the people or heal all the sick. He chose instead to hang out with the twelve leaders he was developing. Sometimes he focussed on his inner circle of three. Like the average rural minister, his time was short and although he worked hard he could not - being fully human - do everything alone. Frankly, the disciples were an unpromising set of recruits. Not all of them made it. But they were the ones he trained to make disciples when he had gone. In the end the impact was extraordinary.

Do I adjust my leadership style for the situation and age range?

Jesus varied his leadership style. At first he was directive: "Come and follow me" (Mark 1:15-18). But once he had a team, he took on a coaching approach: teaching, involving them in his ministry, giving them ministry experience (Luke 9,10). In time he took a consensual approach: 'I no longer call you servants [...] Instead, I have called you friends' (John 15:15). Finally he moved to empowerment with the Great Commission. We need to know where and when to be directive (e.g. if everything is chaotic and dysfunctional) and when to be stepping back and building the team.

It is also well to be aware that different generations may have different expectations. It's a broad generalisation, but the oldest generation tend to expect teaching and direction; baby boomers expect competence and professionalism; Generation X want to be consulted and understood; Generation Y expect collaboration and involvement.

Do I recognise and tackle team dysfunctions?

Trust breaks down and the team ceases to be a safe space. Team members become defensive, unwilling to admit weaknesses or mistakes. Team members fear conflict, so don't engage in passionate debate about issues, giving an artificial harmony at meetings. This can generate unhealthy conflict outside meetings, focused on people and personalities rather than the real issues. In this atmosphere, clear agreements on who is to do what, and buy-in by those who didn't agree to the group decision, is unlikely. This in turn leaves ambiguity, an avoidance of accountability and low standards. Instead of paying attention to results, the main concern for team members is how their personal status and ego might emerge from the whole, uncomfortable mess.

Does this sound familiar? It is drawn from Patrick Lencioni's helpful book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. The message is to recognise the symptoms early and go back to building a foundation of trust and giving permission for healthy conflict on the issues.

Can I lead volunteers?

Leading volunteers is different from leading paid staff. Common Purpose founder Julia Middleton describes the differences in her book *Beyond Authority: Leadership in a Changing World*.

Although written for a secular context, it also applies to a Church context, though I would want to change her summary 'Lead with humility and self-belief' to 'lead with humility and confidence in what you and God can do together'.

Her key points include the following.

- Develop plans collaboratively rather than give instructions
- Avoid strict hierarchies and the instinct to tidy
- Expect vitriol: there will be strong voices against you
- Decide the position from which will you lead: front, back, middle or side?
- Don't be in it for yourself: enjoy the achievements of others
- Be 'multilingual': communicate your passion to different groups in the right language for them
- Build coalitions rather than insisting on consensus
- Minimise time on distractions and diversions: if you can, find someone willing to sort out emotive but less important issues
- Be patient but be ready for the right time
- Get the pace right: slow down to stay together without losing momentum
- Encourage creativity and enjoyment: people keep with leaders who are brave and fun. Count the number of laughs at meetings

Collaborative leadership is demanding. Initially it is more difficult and more time consuming than heroically doing everything oneself. But in the end it is far more rewarding and productive.

Jerry Marshall
CEO, Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre
jerrym@germinate.net
@JerryCAMarshall

This article first appeared in Country Way 74: Developing Lay Leaders, January 2017.