



Field Guide to Three Leadership Problems

From Shut Tight

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There are three kinds of leadership challenges that have devastating consequences in churches: general, harmful, and self-preserving. Rather than attempt to provide any clear division among them, this discussion will explore these issues and distinguish them in terms of magnitude and intentionality. Even before one reaches the category of general challenges, there are entire categories of peccadilloes that human beings put up with in one another that fall outside the bounds of this project. For the purposes of this project, general challenges are defined as human flaws, character traits, and foibles which—when left unaddressed—create difficulties, hinder growth, and compromise the work and ministry of a church. Emotional, social, relational, physical, mental, and administrative weaknesses in a pastor are broad examples of such general challenges. Harmful leadership problems are those personality flaws and characteristics that can be described as compulsions and dysfunctions,[1] which cause injury or damage to others.

Self-preserving leadership practices often result from both general and harmful leadership issues. These can be defined as secrets, patterns, and behaviors that often cause or are rooted in shame. Those involved in such practices specifically do not wish them to be discovered and actively work against anything or anyone trying to uncover them.

General Leadership Challenges

Well-meaning and effective leaders often have a general leadership challenge (GLC), creating difficulties in their church. Their role as spiritual leader and head of the organization make it difficult for members to address such “cabinet” difficulties, which can exacerbate the church’s problems and keep a loving community from helping its leader. This combination of human flaws in the leader and intimidation felt by the members is what make GLCs a real problem.

GLCs are normal personal difficulties or weaknesses that human beings have and which have potential to become conflicts if unaddressed. These may be personality issues like being insensitive, critical, or egotistical. GLCs may be related to emotional issues like experiencing depression, anger, or burnout. They tend to manifest visually through a leader’s job performance as a lack of vision, putting in less effort than is needed, using old and tired methods without exploring current thinking on important subjects, or poor management skills. Sometimes GLCs are due to an inability to exercise tolerance. These can take shape as a personal bias—for instance, intense hate of traditional or contemporary worship—an overwhelming political bias, or personality dispositions that impede getting along with certain elders or staff. In essence, a GLC can be almost any kind of character trait that is ignored rather than humbly acknowledged by the leader. However, it is not always just the leader’s fault that they go unaddressed, for all believers—both leaders and spiritual flock—need the Body of Christ to grow (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:26-27).

Members may feel intimidated about approaching leaders regarding a character challenge. Spiritual leaders often feel comfortable doing so, because they perceive they hold that role as a result of their own spiritual maturity, advanced training, and personal sense of call. Members who do not see

themselves as spiritually or emotionally equal with leaders, have little or no training, or doubt their own maturity may not feel the same sense of call. However, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only when the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out.”[2] Members have the opportunity to care for their leaders by helping them address their issues and, in doing so, assist them from becoming harmful leadership problems.

When this “ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming” is not carried out, a pastor and the congregation together can create a general leadership challenge. For example, in one church a senior pastor was deeply frustrated with decisions being made at the national denominational level regarding doctrinal issues. This led him to engage in private deliberations with his church leaders about taking the church out of the denomination.[3]

The congregation loved its charismatic leader. He was truly their spiritual authority. When he expressed strong concerns and distrust about the denomination, the congregation did not question him. Church leaders had a habit of not questioning his authority or decisions. While some members shared his theological concerns, certainly not all did, perhaps not even a majority. Yet, eventually, nearly all of the church leaders and three-quarters of the congregation abandoned the church, its history, community, facilities, and remaining member, to follow the senior pastor to a new denomination.

Over the many months that led to the split, the task of seeking clarity and transparency may have felt to members as if they were questioning the pastor’s actions or motives. If members had believed it appropriate to question the pastor or disagree with his perceptions of the Presbytery, perhaps more voices would have been heard and consequently yielded a different decision. This division left those remaining with feelings of confusion, fear, and uncertainty about the future. Members of the church who remained feared the Presbytery wanted to take over their church. Behind their anger and frustration seemed to be a deep concern that their church would not survive. It took several months and many meetings for the seeds of trust to be restored. It took years for the church to stabilize and regain some of its confidence in itself and the Presbytery. Healthy congregations with transparent relationships do not go through events like this, because they have the tools to deal with dissatisfaction, conflict, and other general leadership challenges that surface.

When working well, the relationship between pastor and people can build the strongest churches. Reggie McNeal describes the phenomenon this way: “Spiritual leaders who are fairly intact in their self-esteem can build community. They breed health in their relationships because they themselves possess psychological health. The opposite is also true; dysfunction breeds dysfunction.”[4] Members and leaders of churches, due to the nature of life in Christ, have the opportunity to live life together in a loving community, each there to care for, serve, and help develop the others. In this setting, passionate pastors are able to live transparently, knowing that other members will support them as well as encourage them in their areas of weakness. In this way, the entire congregation can fulfill and participate in what the Apostle Paul described when he wrote: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

When GLCs compromise a church community, everyone suffers. Members do not exercise their Spirit-led role of supporting their pastor and participating in spiritually leading their own church. Pastors and leaders continue in their unhelpful patterns and miss out on the transformative change God wants to do in them. Ultimately, the surrounding world loses some of the witness and ministry of Christ that might

have been there had the church been able to live fully into the vision and path that God might have laid out for it.

Some GLCs only may require technical fixes, while others need adaptive change. However, only through identifying the “cabinet” problem can this happen. Churches today face the real possibility of having the choice Robert E. Quinn describes as “confronting the deep change or slow death dilemma.”[5] Chillingly, he describes two senior leaders who, buffeted by demands were tired and facing personal burnout. Quinn writes: “Both of these executives recognize that a deep change is needed in their organizations, both have opted to do nothing. They have chosen short-term personal survival over long-term collective responsibility.” With membership and attendance in decline, even in healthy churches, to do nothing and assume things will be fine appears not to be an option. Quinn goes on to say that many people eventually suffer from the executives’ unwillingness to address their organizational problems and consciously leave them to worsen. Likewise, for churches, worse situations present themselves if general leadership challenges go unaddressed and move toward becoming harmful ones.

Harmful Leadership Problems

A harmful leadership problem (HLP) is a personality trait in people in authority which causes damage to themselves and others. HLPs arise from what Gary McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima describe as “the dark side.” That dark side consists of the “inner urges, compulsions, and dysfunctions of our personality that often go unexamined or remain unknown to us until we experience an emotional explosion.”[6] In contrast with GLCs where the pastor or leader may be aware of personal shortcomings, leaders with HLPs are often oblivious to them. Here is one case in point. A group of elders held a meeting with their pastor to confront his destructive behavior. They began the conversation telling the pastor they loved him but that they had certain concerns. Then, they carefully laid out their well-planned and rehearsed descriptions of issues, frustrations, concerns with, and specific behaviors they had experienced from the pastor. Even when confronted directly with his issues, this pastor could not readily see them. The report received by others from the pastor after the meeting was that, while he had been blind to his actions and resulting consequences, what he learned from the elders was this: “They love me.” Rather than hear the concern and embrace the effort to change with the help of his elders, the pastor heard only what supported his own self-perception. Any opportunity for counseling, mentoring, or other informal support from the Presbytery was missed.

McIntosh and Rima list issues that surface from the dark side as “insecurity, unhealthy codependence issues, feelings of personal shame, deeply sublimated anger or fear” and state that they “wreak havoc in our lives and leadership and eventually endanger ourselves and others.”[7] Common to people in all walks of life, these issues can be addressed, resolved, healed, and the individuals made stronger for it. What cannot be done is suppress, manage, or control them indefinitely. Eventually, they seep to the surface of life and wreak endangerment, which can be seen in society and in news headlines on a regular basis.[8]

The damage from HLPs occurs when individuals do not process their issues in healthy ways. McIntosh and Rima cite one example from a church that demonstrates the point effectively. In 1995 a pastor of a very large and well-known church, with over five thousand in attendance and a \$13 million building campaign, performed a lewd act on an undercover police officer in a city park and was later

convicted.[9] The shocking fact regarding the event is that two consultants who had worked with the pastor throughout the rise of the ministry felt his behavior was not a total surprise. It seems others recognized some element of his “dark side,” even if he could not or would not acknowledge it. This particular problem, the unhealthy acting out of sexuality, while common in today’s society went on to become not only a harmful problem but criminalized behavior, because no one effectively confronted the issue earlier in the man’s leadership and character development.

Harmful leadership problems can become so severe and entrenched that they come to characterize the leaders themselves. When this happens, the problematic issues can show up in various areas of life. Some common labels used to describe leaders who knowingly have taken on the identity of their “cabinet” issues are compulsive leaders, narcissistic leaders, paranoid leaders, codependent leaders, and passive-aggressive leaders.

Compulsive leaders need to maintain total control. These leaders may look orderly in all areas of life; but on the inside, “they are an emotional powder keg.”[10] They have strong emotions that threaten to be expressed explosively if set off somehow. In a church, these leaders need to micromanage every detail of their organization. For example, a pastor may insist on approving every song, prayer, or announcement that goes into a worship service and then want to decide what curriculum is being used in Sunday school classes.

HLPs in this form may appear as a striving for excellence, but in reality, it is a need to wield power. Harm to others comes from excessive criticism and critiquing as well as the experience of being scrutinized and distrusted. In the example just provided, a worship leader might suffer frustration, self-doubt, anger, or bitterness under the pastor’s disapproval of song choice, while the Sunday school director might feel oppressed and undervalued if not trusted to choose appropriate materials for the department the church has entrusted to him or her. Members may feel uncomfortable challenging these leaders because, even in their compulsiveness, these same leaders seek to do their best for the Lord.[11]

Narcissistic leaders have the false sense that their importance to the organization is greater than it is. They want, and even need, constant attention and admiration from others. Harm is done by their “interpersonal exploitiveness, in which others are taken advantage of in order to indulge the leader’s own desires or for self-aggrandizement.”[12] Healthy people do not like to be used for another person’s gain. This is painfully true when the abuser is a spiritual leader who seems to need to enhance personal importance at a member’s expense. Members can feel uncomfortable challenging these leaders, due to all the good the leaders appear to do for God in other areas of ministry.[13]

Paranoid leaders “are desperately afraid of anything or anyone . . . they perceive to have even the remotest potential of undermining their leadership.” These leaders are insecure in their leadership and show it in their reactions to people who threaten that leadership, knowingly or unknowingly, whether the leader’s perception is real or imagined. Regardless with whom they deal—members, colleagues, friends, or even family members—their response can run the gamut from guarded to suspicious to hostile.[14]

An elder at a church was called into the office of the pastor he worked closely with. She asked him why he was undermining her ministry. He had been supporting her as best he could, even attending meetings at inconvenient times, so that she knew she had his support. He had no idea how he might be

causing detriment to her ministry. Only after receiving his repeated assurance did she acknowledge she had misread his behavior. This example shows how paranoia can skew a pastor's perception of an otherwise positive reality and push away the people most supportive.

Harm also can come when paranoid leaders respond jealously to congregational approval of associates and other fellow laborers. Paranoia can woo leaders to treat others with distrust, and such leaders often possess an unwillingness or inability to build close relationships with members.[15] Members might not challenge these pastors for a long time, because the leader's reaction to their questioning is met aggressively.

In a similar manner, codependent leaders have an internal set of "oppressive rules that prevent the open expression of feelings as well as the direct discussion of personal and interpersonal problems." Codependency is "the forming or maintaining of relationships that are one-sided, emotionally destructive and/or abusive." [16] Spiritual leaders who are codependent often fail to address inappropriate behaviors in the church. They do not want to hurt someone's feelings even when that other person's behavior is obviously wrong.[17] These leaders are hurtful when they refuse to protect their congregation from flagrant deviant actions in others, allowing them to continue their harmful behaviors. Members may not want to challenge these leaders, because the leaders try to be helpful and forgiving.

Passive-aggressive leaders tend to avoid or resist the performance of tasks.[18] Instead, they can procrastinate or dawdle and become forgetful, stubborn, or intentionally inefficient.[19] An example is that of a pastor who was given an assignment to develop a new ministry for a group in the church. She planned leadership meetings, invited members to share ideas and concerns, reported on the planning team's progress, created goals, and organized strategies; yet, no single new program or meeting started. Nevertheless, she defended all the work she was putting into the new ministry with self-justifying comments, complaints about unfair expectations, and comments to co-workers that suggested a critical attitude toward her supervisor. In such situations, passive-aggressive pastors are "prone to short outbursts expressing intense emotions, such as sadness, anger, and frustration. Most of their aggression lies just within the bounds of what is legal and socially acceptable and yet is still provocative." [20] An example might be that of a leader who has outbursts towards others, and then says he is kidding, or uses inappropriate language occasionally but not enough for others to gather the courage to confront it.

Passive-aggressive leaders find goal setting and plan implementation difficult, because such actions clarify exactly what they are supposed to do and leave no room for error or misunderstanding. They are often happy and satisfied but inconsistent in reactions. In their wake co-workers wonder which personality will show up at any given moment. Such leaders harm others when they derail conversations and plans, explode irrationally, and leave others on edge. Members timidly can worry when the next outburst will occur.

These five categories serve as examples of the kinds of problems that can lead leaders to harm the church they have been charged to shepherd, often while being unaware of their own behavior and certainly of their own underlying motivation. The point here is to recognize that such leadership challenges exist in churches and can be difficult to confront. Even though these examples aptly describe the problems, when members experience these "puddles" in their real-life setting, it is difficult to name the "cabinet" issue. Although members may hope that leaders "wake up" and discover they are the problem in church, the opposite seems to occur. They consciously or unconsciously may resist a

discovery process that threatens their dark side, because it would reveal the weaknesses and problems they do not want identified or cannot see in themselves. If positive change is going to occur before challenges become destructive and cause public conflict, members need to be prepared to uncover even the deepest leadership issues and begin to address them.

Self-Preserving Leadership Practices

Self-preserving practices are the most egregious form of problematic leadership. When engaged in self-serving practices, leaders withhold important information from the congregation until their unhealthy and destructive habits are discovered. These leadership practices are the best kept secrets in the church. Leaders may create environments where questioning is not allowed. They can draw a protective group of staff and elders around them to insulate themselves from examination. They even might create a session-based system with the elders, where all decisions are made by the leader and a few trusted others giving forgone approval.

At a town hall meeting, divorced women break down in tears as they realized that their beloved pastor who led an important healing program had been having a long-term affair. The betrayal was devastating. It was even worse, because no one had ever suspected a thing.

The pastor's self-preserving practices had been so locked in place that even those closest to her, her friends, staff members, Presbytery peers, and church members—for many years thought she was above reproach. Details came to light only after the pastor left the church. The church went through years of processing with interim leadership, and ten years later it still has not completely owned its need for change nor has it implemented all the policies and practices it committed to put into action as a result of this process.

The behaviors of self-preserving leaders can go unnoticed for years; and even when they are discovered, they might not be obviously bad to everyone. This may seem surprising. Usually, issues like extramarital affairs, embezzlement, and sexual abuse are clear once they are seen; but, this is not always the case. The example of the above affair demonstrates this. The pastor never was charged. Even more surprising was how easily members of the church dismissed the inappropriate behavior as normal.

In this way, behaviors of self-preserving leaders can lead to a leader's dismissal, disgrace, and removal from service or even incarceration, legal action, and civil suits. It is for these reasons that such leaders do not willingly participate in discovery processes and go to great lengths to cover up "cabinet" issues. An example of dismissal and disgrace comes from the Presbytery. A different pastor had a brief sexual encounter with a member of his church. It was a mistake. He knew it. He sought to apologize and make it "right" with the member while keeping it secret. Eventually, he lost his job, his standing in the denomination, his source of income, and his public reputation. Yet another leader is described as the "evangelical pastor who fondled a teenage boy while he slept and touched a young preacher while sharing a hotel bed." In a similar vein, the Los Angeles Archdiocese suffered a \$660 million financial settlement for priests engaging in self-preserving practices worthy of civil punishment.[21]

Perhaps more surprising are behaviors that do not lead to a leader's dismissal, even though they are experienced and witnessed openly. Such behaviors include an example of abuse of power and manipulation by a pastor who was ultimately removed, not for abuse of power but for management

problems. A pastor who engaged in multiple affairs performed spiritual abuse to many members while preaching sermons on grace and forgiveness but never mentioned or modeled repentance and purity. He was never confronted during his time at that church. These can be considered as egregious demonstrations of ungodly behavior and inappropriate. These behaviors are deeply hurtful to members and congregations, because they are antithetical to the call of Christ for pastors and leaders (cf. John 13:34; 2 Corinthians 13:11). These behaviors flow from and demonstrate the power of human over human, in rebellious conflict with the power of God in God's people for wholeness, love, and mutual respect.

Self-preserving leaders use these behaviors to defend themselves from discovery by others. One pastor was so powerful and controlling that no one dared to confront or contradict him. For example, if a child made a noise in a worship service, the pastor's quick and angry glare made it clear to everyone in the small sanctuary that such outbursts were unacceptable. If an associate pastor made any mistake while speaking to the congregation, he feared a tongue lashing from the pastor after the service. For more than a decade, members will say they had experienced abuse of power and had seen perfectionism from that pastor in worship services. Nevertheless, this pastor was held in high esteem and led unquestioned by members, staff, elders, or Presbytery officials.

Even after the hidden behaviors of self-preserving leaders are revealed, many members still defend and excuse their leaders. One wonders why a leader with such behavior would be revered and beloved and at the same time feared. The words of James help to describe the existence of such a paradox: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?" (James 3:9-11).

Discovering and addressing challenges like any of those described earlier can seem overwhelming or even impossible. When concerns are raised directly with leaders, those leaders may ignore, resist, or undermine efforts to address them. Many who have lived with or worked with a person with any of these characteristics can attest to the reality that identifying a leader's problem does not necessarily make it possible to address it. Examples from individuals from churches with leaders like these demonstrate the need for preparation and a communal effort from the Body of Christ. They also demonstrate the ineffectiveness of a strategy based on education or knowledge alone.