

# Overcoming a Reluctance to Lead



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## The Uncertain Leader

*Clarity—not certainty—can give us the encouragement we need to lead.*

by Andy Stanley

Uncertainty is a permanent part of the leadership landscape. It never goes away. Uncertainty is not an indication of poor leadership; it underscores the need for leadership. It is the environment in which good leadership is most easily identified.

Where there is no uncertainty, there is no longer the need for leadership. As Jim Kouzes puts it, “Uncertainty creates the necessary condition for leadership.”

It took me several years to figure this out. As a young leader I was tormented by the assumption that I should know what to do in every situation. *If I were a good leader, I would reason, I would know exactly what to do. After all, I am the leader!* Leaders are supposed to be able to stand up at any given moment and give direction with absolute certainty. Or so I thought.

Time and experience have taught me differently. There will be very few occasions when you are absolutely certain about anything. You will consistently be called upon to make decisions with limited information. That being the case, your goal should not be to eliminate uncertainty. Instead, you must develop the art of being clear in the face of uncertainty. The art of clarity involves giving explicit and precise direction in spite of limited information and unpredictable outcomes.

Imagine that you are coaching a football team. It is fourth and eight. You are six points behind and five minutes remain on the clock. What do you do? Kick or go for it?

With limited information and facing an unpredictable outcome, you do what every coach in that situation does: you draw upon your knowledge and intuition and you call a play. You don't shrug your shoulders and say, “We don't have enough information.” You make a decision and send everybody into formation with specific instructions. And when the ball is snapped, you find out whether or not you made the right decision.

That kind of clarity requires both confidence and humility. Confidence to move boldly in the direction you have determined. Humility to acknowledge that at best you are making an educated guess.

In the realm of sports we see no conflict between uncertainty and clarity. We are accustomed to coaches, captains, and catchers giving clear signals in the midst of uncertainty. We have seen the chaos that ensues on the playing field when a signal isn't clear. But in the worlds of business, politics, and ministry, uncertainty makes us uneasy. We hesitate. We become less specific and more general in our directives. Our people are unsure of what we expect. We yell “hike,” and people run in whatever direction they feel is best.



If you're not careful, uncertainty will sand the edges off your clarity. The result will be chaos.

Leadership is all about taking people on a journey. The challenge is that most of the time, we are asking people to follow us to places we ourselves have never been. There aren't any photographs—we are left with word pictures, metaphors, and illustrations. There are no maps to guide us—we are left to cut a trail. Yet as we move forward into the uncertainty before us, we sense the need to turn occasionally and assure those who follow.

This is the tension every good leader lives with: negotiating uncertain terrain while casting a clear and compelling vision. There is always uncertainty. But uncertainty underscores the need for clarity.

The more responsibility you assume as a leader, the more uncertainty you will have to manage. The cost of success as a leader is greater uncertainty, not less.

This is why it is imperative to learn to thrive in uncertain environments. They don't go away. Your capacity as a leader will be determined by how well you learn to deal with uncertainty.

As a senior pastor, I deal with more uncertainty than anyone else in our organization. I tell our staff, "I'm responsible for the combined uncertainty of every department in the entire organization."

To make matters worse, increased responsibility means dealing with more intangibles and therefore more complex uncertainty. It is the difference between leading a landscaping crew into a yard to do a job and sitting at the helm of a landscaping business that employs 25 landscaping crews and trying to determine the best way to market your services.

Overseeing a single yard is mostly about tangibles: shrubs, trees, fertilizer, mowers, arrival, and departure.

Determining how to market a landscaping business is almost completely intangible. It introduces a degree of uncertainty that requires a different kind of leadership.

## **Deciding Despite Dissent**

When we started North Point Community Church, our leadership team suggested that our adult education be built around a network of small groups that met in homes.

This was in contrast to the adult Sunday school model we had all grown up with. We expected some pushback on this issue. Most of the folks helping to plant the new church had grown up going to Sunday school. It was all they knew. But we felt that a campus-based adult Sunday school program was not the best way to accomplish our mission.

Every time our leadership gathered, the issue of our small-group strategy came up. Some key leaders were not convinced that this was the best route. Others assumed we



were adopting this strategy only until we had our own facility. People were quick to point out that other churches had tried home-based groups with only limited success.

For a year we listened. It's important to have "unfiltered discussion," to hear everyone's perspective. We did our best to answer questions and build consensus. We studied what other churches were doing. We piloted about a dozen groups to work out the kinks in the system.

But after a while I realized no new insights were being brought up. We were repeating the same arguments to each other. It was time to bring the discussion to a close.

The moment of truth came on a Wednesday evening in a rented facility next door to our property. All of our key adult leadership was present to discuss our plan to move into our soon-to-be completed facility. Toward the end of the meeting a woman raised her hand and shared her concern about our small-group strategy. She was genuine, but her question was one I had answered a dozen times before.

In the past I had not taken a firm stand on this issue. I was only about 80 percent certain that our small-group strategy would work, but I knew we had to give it 100 percent of our effort if it was going to succeed.

This time I put diplomacy aside and was very direct. Understand, these people are my friends. These folks had supported me through the most difficult transition of my life. They were volunteers. These men and women had sacrificed their time and financial resources to ensure a good start. But in spite of the uncertainties, it was time to be clear.

When the woman finished, I smiled and quickly reviewed the discussions we had been having for the previous year. Then I said, "After tonight we are not going to discuss 'if' anymore. We are moving forward. From now on I need you to focus your energies on 'how.' There are many unanswered questions. None of us has ever been part of a church that was organized around home groups. We have a lot to learn. Feel free to question our implementation, but not our direction. As of tonight, we go forward."

That was seven years ago. Currently, more than 5,000 adults are involved in small groups. The men and women who were in attendance that evening became the champions of our small-group ministry. Once it became clear which play was called, everybody got on board.

Were we certain of the outcome? No.

Were we clear about our direction? Absolutely.

Were we certain that this decision was the right one? No. If we had waited for absolute certainty we would still be talking. But a decision had to be made. A clear decision. And that decision, made in the intangible realm of ideas and projections, was eventually judged in the real world of attendance.



## Four Keys to Clarity

Uncertainty is not your enemy. Uncertainty provides you with job security now and unimaginable opportunities in the future. But all of that hinges on your ability and willingness to press on in spite of your surroundings. Here are four practical suggestions for enhancing clarity in the midst of uncertainty.

**1. Express your uncertainty with confidence.** In leadership we're always tempted to pretend to know more than we really do. We fear that people won't follow us unless we seem all-knowing.

Two things always happen when we pretend. First, we close ourselves off from the input of others. Second, we expose our insecurity to the people we have asked to follow us. The sharp people around you will know when you are bluffing. Pretending erodes respect much quicker than an admission of uncertainty. Uncertainty exposes a lack of knowledge. Pretending exposes a lack of character.

So how does a leader confidently express his uncertainty? My brother-in-law is a successful real estate broker in the Atlanta area. His mother and father started their company 35 years ago. When Rob first got into the business, his mom gave him a jewel of a phrase that he has used ever since. It is the perfect example of confidence in the face of uncertainty: "I don't know, but I will certainly find out."

I will follow a leader who doesn't know but is committed to finding out. So will you. I will not follow a leader who pretends to know and does nothing to quell his ignorance.

Here are some phrases for you to file away for future use:

- "I don't know right now, but I am confident we can figure it out."
- "I don't know right now, but when the time comes to do something about it, I am confident we will have an answer."
- "I don't know, but with folks like you around, I am confident we will come up with a solution."
- "I don't know. I have never done this before. But I think we are up for the challenge."

Don't pretend. You are not a leader because you know everything. Omniscience is not a prerequisite. But confidence is. Express your uncertainty with confidence. When you do, you will instill confidence in those who have chosen to follow.

**2. Seek wise counsel.** Leadership is not about making decisions on your own. It is about owning the decisions once you make them. If you don't know, ask. If you aren't certain, find out what others are thinking. Consensus builds confidence in the face of uncertainty. When those we respect give us a nod of approval there is an immediate surge of confidence.

**3. Measure your success by the scoreboard, not the playbook.** Every good coach goes into the game to win. About that he is perfectly clear. And every good coach



has a strategy, a plan. But every good coach is willing to scrap his plan in order to win. The goal is to win, not to run specific plays. Coaches measure their success by the number of points on the scoreboard, not the number of plays they successfully execute.

Leaders, like coaches, are forced to abandon their plans at times in order to deliver on the vision. The uncertainty of the landscape will require constant reassessment of your plans. The leader who refuses to scrap or revise his plans rarely reaches his destination.

**4. Be willing to act decisively.** In the World War II thriller *U-571*, Matthew McConaughey plays the role of submarine Lieutenant Andy Tyler, who is denied an opportunity to command his own sub. As it turns out, it was his commanding officer, Captain Dahlgren, who encouraged the Navy not to promote Tyler.

In a stirring exchange, Tyler challenges his superior officer's decision. He assures the captain that he is qualified. Not only is he able to perform every job on the sub, he goes on to insist that he would be willing to lay down his life for any of the men on the crew.

At that point, Captain Dahlgren, played by Bill Paxton, looks up at the young lieutenant and says, "I'm not questioning *your* bravery. Are you willing to lay *their* lives on the line?"

Tyler is stunned by the question. Before he can respond, Captain Dahlgren continues:

"You see, you hesitate. As a captain you can't. You have to act. If you don't you put the entire crew at risk. Now that's the job. It's not a science. You have to be able to make hard decisions based on imperfect information, asking men to carry out orders that may result in their deaths. And if you're wrong, you suffer the consequences. If you are not prepared to make those decisions, without pause, without reflection, then you got no business being a submarine captain."

As Tyler leaves Captain Dahlgren's quarters, the look on his face says it all. Peering at leadership through that lens has caused him to doubt his readiness to lead.

Uncertainty will not be your undoing as a leader. However, your inability to give a clear directive in the midst of uncertainty might very well be the thing that takes you out or causes you to plateau early in your career.

Uncertainty is simply a fact of leadership. Uncertainty calls for clarity. Be *clear* even when you are not *certain*. Lead confidently. Once a decision is made, move forward. If your decision proves to be wrong, own it. You will survive a few bad decisions. You will not survive a lack of clarity.

*—Andy Stanley is senior pastor of North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia.*

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## Discuss

1. How much is clarity—or a lack thereof—affecting our confidence in our leadership abilities right now?
2. What are some practical ways we can obtain the information we need to clearly understand our situation?
3. Why might we resist letting others know we don't know answers to questions? How can we work through that resistance?

## Four Keys to Clarity

Rate yourself in these four areas to see how well you enhance clarity during uncertain situations and bolster your own confidence in the process:

- I express uncertainty with confidence, allowing people to see that I may not know an answer, but I will find out.

I don't do this well	1	2	3	4	5	6	I do this well
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- I have identified wise counsel that I can use to find out what others whom I respect think.

I don't do this well	1	2	3	4	5	6	I do this well
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- I constantly reassess plans, and willingly scrap or revise those plans when the information before me suggests as much.

I don't do this well	1	2	3	4	5	6	I do this well
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- I willingly act decisively, delivering clear directives in the midst of uncertainty and accepting responsibility when things sometimes go wrong.

I don't do this well	1	2	3	4	5	6	I do this well
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## **Courage for the Doubting Leader**

*Leaders understand ambiguity is inevitable in ministry but press on anyway.*

by Ben Patterson

*Reluctance affects leaders at every level. Here, veteran minister Ben Patterson offers his insights and encouragement for leading through uncertainty.*

I have learned that *leadership* doesn't always equal *certainty*. Naturally, we are able to press ahead when we have no doubts. But we live as imperfect people in an imperfect world. True leadership sees the inevitable ambiguities of ministry, yet has the spiritual sensitivity and resolve to advance through them.

Here's how I've learned to minister despite uncertainty.

### **Picking Your Fights**

The older I get, I'm more sure of less, and I'm less sure of more! But one thing I've learned is that certitude has a price. The good and wise leader has a clear idea of what issues are worth paying that price (and I suspect it's a fairly short list) and what issues aren't. In my ministry I've found that, though I may have strong convictions about a subject, it doesn't mean it's always necessary or even advisable to express my certitude in public.

So the issue boils down to two questions: When do I want to be perceived as certain, and when do I want to avoid that perception?

I want to be certain about fundamental doctrines. All but one of Paul's 13 epistles are written to churches or pastors, and he returns again and again to the theme of preaching a pure gospel: "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14).

The church in America today is tossed back and forth, so it's vital that we help steady the ship.

Then again, I don't speak *ex cathedra* about programs or policies. The Scriptures contain no doctrine of "pastoral infallibility," no mandate to equate your word with God's. But our stature can tempt us, from time to time, to draw a line in the sand about a particular (and personally heartfelt) program or policy of the church, saying, "This is what God wants, so choose ye this day whom ye shall serve." If any problems arise, however, your credibility suffers. People know better.





I find it helpful to be clear about my expectations. Recently I had an engaged couple in my office for counseling, and as always I asked them, “What are your expectations about the relationship? Things will go smoother after the wedding if you voice your expectations now.”

In the same way, I’ve always approached my church callings as wedding engagements: both parties enter the relationship with expectations, which ought to be expressed up front.

I also try to remember the difference between vision and timing. In one church I served, we went through two building programs like clockwork. When a third building project presented itself, my confidence was soaring. We jumped in with both feet, put out brochures, did stewardship meetings, and went whole hog to get the project built in two years.

I was sure about it and talked often and confidently about God’s vision for this new building.

But the building didn’t get built in two years as predicted. Years later, my successor in that church is just now getting that project together again.

Was my vision wrong? No, but my timing was. Instead of its being built in two years, right now it appears the Lord had five to seven years in mind.

## **Strategies for Straddlers**

One season during my high school football days, our coach installed an incredibly high-powered offense—any professional team would have been proud of its complexity. We gave it our best shot, but the complex system was hard for us to learn. Our school was favored to win the opening game, but when the whistle blew, our guys ran around the field not sure where they were supposed to go and who they were supposed to block. It’s a game we should have won over a smaller high school, but our squad was beaten.

A few days later we sat down to watch a film of the game. On play after play, you could see everyone hesitating on the line of scrimmage. By this time the coach was screaming at us, “If you’re going to make a mistake, at least do it aggressively!” Over the years my coach’s words have stuck with me. Sometimes in ministry, we’re not sure what we’re doing, and we hesitate, letting circumstances control us.

Or worse: in some situations pastors have given up altogether. I was visiting one church where only 50 people were scattered across a sanctuary that seated 250. The congregational singing was weak and half-hearted. I wondered why the pastor, who was leading the singing, didn’t say, “Let’s all get up and move closer together.”

Yet as I sat through the service, I started noticing other signs that the pastor had simply given up. The board where the hymn numbers are posted was empty, the sanctuary needed fresh paint, and the sign outside didn’t list the times of the services—dozens of little things that said, “I’m too tired for this, and what difference does it make anyway?”



It's easy to get discouraged and give up when you're faced with uncertainty. But it's not all that difficult to adopt strategies of leadership that help project the confidence of a Churchill (a confidence church members want and need), even when on the inside you really feel more like Hamlet.

***Let us reason together.*** Few topics are harder to preach than predestination. Even the apostle Paul had to shrug his shoulders on this subject and say, "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" (Romans 11:34). So once when I preached a sermon on predestination, I began by admitting, "I really don't know if anything I'm going to say is true, but this is a doctrine that believers need to deal with, and I'm going to share with you a progress report about my own current thinking on the subject."

Though the hard-core Calvinists were disappointed with me, most of the congregation were glad somebody admitted the subject was open for discussion. "All I can do is give you my best interpretation for now," I told them, "and I make no promise that if I preach again next year, I won't have a new point of view. But we need to come to grips with this issue because making no decision is in itself a decision."

Throughout my sermon the tone of the message was, "Here's what I see, what I feel. Let me tell you why I believe this way, why I'm excited about it, and why I think you should be excited about it too. Let me try to persuade you, as one Christian to another."

I would never take this approach with fundamental doctrines, but it works with vital doctrines that don't affect salvation. I am forthright about my interpretation, but I give my people the right to disagree with dignity.

At the same time, I'm under no obligation to lay out all the alternatives to my views, being evenhanded with each, suggesting the congregation choose the alternative that best suits them. That's not leadership; it's an invitation to indecision and paralysis within the church.

I once saw a Christian drama group put on a skit about pastors and their churches called *That's What We Pay You For*. Committee members come to the pastor telling him they're upset that in a sermon he gave them two or three possibilities for interpreting a passage. They don't care for that; they're looking for guidance: that's what they pay him for.

A sermon is not a lecture but an occasion where I am called to persuade people to make a deeper commitment to Christ.

***When the vision gets cloudy.*** A friend of mine took a pastorate at a small church in California that shared a building with another congregation. He was convinced the church should build some equity so that someday it could construct a sanctuary of its own. My friend was willing to go fifty-fifty with the congregation in buying a home to serve as a parsonage, with a large enough yard for church picnics and a big family room for small meetings and Bible studies. The church would build equity, the congregation would gain a sense of identity and esteem, and later the house could be sold for the down payment on a new sanctuary.



However, just as the people started getting enthusiastic, my friend began to get cold feet. Did he want to live in a home that wasn't really his? What about the financial and tax complications of going fifty-fifty on the deal? What if he left the church someday? Would the financial entanglement make it harder to leave? Would the church find it harder to recruit a new pastor, since he might not want to be tied to a parsonage?

He had boldly brought forth his idea, and now his credibility as a leader might be at stake if he pulled back. "The people would have thought I was just jerking them around," he later said. "They would have been reluctant to follow my other ideas for fear of being let down again."

My friend adopted a strategy of passivity. He just stopped bringing the parsonage up at the monthly board meetings. If the lay leadership wanted to pursue it, he was prepared to go along. Yet nobody was charged enough to press ahead. Soon the matter died, and my friend wiggled off the hook with his credibility untarnished.

You can't use this strategy often or on key decisions that are already in motion (e.g., a building contract has been signed). But once in a while it gets us out of a jam when uncertainty strikes hard and for good reason.

In general, I try to follow this guideline: I don't back out of a decision because it's becoming unpopular and causing me grief. I feel free to change my mind, though, if people are becoming embittered or losing their faith over the issue. That doesn't settle by itself my uncertainties, but it does help me analyze them better.

**The realistic cheerleader.** I can't stand cheerleaders who, when the score is 48-0 in favor of the other team, still shout, "Hey, hey, what d'ya know, get that ball and go, go, go!" The players need to hear something like, "We still love you guys!"

Sometimes the church takes a real beating; it looks as if the game is turning into a rout, and as leaders we're not sure whether the team can make a comeback. We're tempted to lead cheers like, "We're looking forward to a great year!" or "God is going to give us the victory!"

What's needed is an honest look at an uncertain situation combined with confidence about what God can do: "I don't know how it'll turn out, but we are looking to God for guidance," or "This has been hard, but we're going to see God's hand in all this." I call it realistic cheerleading.

**Writing it down.** It's astounding this power God has given us of being able to put feelings into words, of giving names to things so we can understand them better and gain the victory. That's why I keep a personal journal; it's a place to lay out all the confusions I feel, all the uncertainties, the angers, and the fears, to confess them before God in written prayer.

For example, take the night I realized the building project I had been so anxious for was going to grind to an unceremonious halt. When I came home, I began reading the Psalms, and I got to Psalm 132:



O Lord, remember David  
and all the hardships he endured.  
He swore an oath to the Lord  
and made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:  
"I will not enter my house  
or go to my bed—  
I will allow no sleep to my eyes,  
no slumber to my eyelids,  
till I find a place for the Lord,  
a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob." (vv. 1-5)

It describes David's struggle to find a place for the ark. He won't rest until he gets it done.

I wanted to build a sanctuary for God. Our church had studied the theology of worship. We had studied the theology of space. From that we had developed a wonderful theological document. And then we drew up plans that expressed perfectly what we believed about worship. I was so excited about it, but it wasn't going to happen.

After I read about David's struggle, I started writing in my journal—two pages in which I poured out my feelings and questions: "Lord, why did you bring us so far in this thing? Everything seemed so clear up to now; it was going so well. But it has stopped! I've been here 14 years, and I wanted this to be an exclamation point to my ministry. Now it looks like an asterisk. Lord, help me—help me to continue pursuing this, or help me let go if I need to let go of it."

In taking up pen and paper, I see the shadows gain shape; I demystify them, give them the human discipline of sentence structure and syntax, and arrive at a way to face the problem.

***Sometimes he speaks.*** We all want to be like Jonah and have God audibly tell us, "Go to Nineveh." No mistake there! Though clear signs don't come as often as we want, I've never been convinced to despair. I am not a deist, who believes God keeps his distance and lets us solve our own problems. Once in a while, especially when we're attentive, God clarifies our uncertainty.

One time, a woman from my church approached me with her doubts about Project Mustard Seed, my program to disciple a small group of men in the church. While I was on vacation in England, I continued to stew over the problem: Should I take the one person's advice to slow down and get to know the congregation better? Or should I reach for the future by training new leaders?

On the final day of our vacation, I toured the annual flower festival in the small Welsh village where we had stayed. As an outreach to the community and a surprise to me, the church that hosted our visit had set up a display with my book *Waiting*, which had just been published in England. And there by a stack of my books was a flower pot with mustard seeds sprinkled all over the top. I wept because, for me, it was such a powerful confirmation of what I felt God wanted me to do.



***The certainty of presence.*** Walter Wangerin’s *The Book of the Dun Cow* is an allegory set in a barnyard with animals as characters (and perhaps the most vivid description of evil I’ve ever read). In the story, the Holy Spirit is represented as a dun-colored cow that appears at unexpected moments. As characters gaze into her liquid brown eyes and feel her warm breath, her presence nurtures and reassures. Only occasionally does the cow speak, but most of the time she’s just there, quietly grazing and observing you with her deep, liquid eyes.

I can’t conclude this section without stating the obvious, because it is the obvious I have to keep reminding myself of: there are no guarantees in life. My family, my health, and my job can be devastated in a moment. But one thing is certain: God is present. And the most reliable strategy to face the uncertainties of ministry is to trust in the God who is always there, quietly gazing at us with deep, liquid eyes. As Psalm 73 puts it:

When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,  
I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.

Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will take me into glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides  
you. (vv. 21–25)

## **Over the Falls**

In discussing the issue of vocation at life’s different stages, Karl Barth notes that younger pastors are usually the ones who boldly plunge ahead, while older men often play things close to the vest—they’ve been through the mill before, or perhaps they have more to lose.

Then Barth asks the rhetorical question, “Does the river slow down as it approaches the falls?”

The answer, of course, is that the river gains speed, rushing fastest at the very moment it plunges over the edge. I want my ministry to pick up speed as I go along. I don’t want to be careless and wantonly make mistakes; I want to use the wisdom God has given me to follow the bends that life presents. But as I face uncertainty, I don’t want to trickle off into some side stream. I want to be like that river, rushing toward the falls—and when I go over the edge, I look forward to falling into the arms of God.

—Ben Patterson is senior pastor of Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California.

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## Discuss

1. How often do uncertainties dictate our feelings about leading? Which ones should give us legitimate pause before moving forward?
2. How comfortable are we with fighting some battles while letting go of others?
3. What are some realistic ways we can push outside of our comfort zones and take some risks?

## Getting Certain about Uncertainty

*How well do you project confidence, even when you may not feel that way inside? Take this assessment to see how well you're leading, despite the ambiguities before you:*

	Yes	Usually	Sometimes	No
I can share what I see, feel, and believe about a situation and allow the people around me the right to disagree with dignity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't back out of decisions because they become unpopular or difficult, but I do allow myself the freedom to change my mind if people become embittered or begin to lose their faith over the matter.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I provide an honest look at an uncertain situation, but combine it with the confidence about what God can do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I keep a personal journal to lay out uncertainties, fears, and angers, using those thoughts as written prayers and reference points for facing the problem(s).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I work to remain attentive to God's voice, watching for verbal and nonverbal messages about how to approach a particular situation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I firmly believe the only guarantee in life and leadership is that God is present.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



## **So Now You're the Leader**

*Those who take on leadership get to witness a miracle: God using them to reach others.*

by Virginia Vagt

Back on the playground, tag was a fun game—fun until the sound “You’re it!” rang in my ear and I felt a rude slap on my shoulder. Being tagged meant feeling a panicky self-consciousness as my friends ran squealing away to the schoolyard boundaries. But the feeling was short-lived, ending as soon as I could catch someone else unawares and pass on the mantle of “It!”

At times, leading Bible studies and church committees can bring on the same feelings. When you first are selected or “volunteered” to lead a group, you may feel you’re squirming under the hot lights of examination. *Can I do this? Will people accept me?*

At least, I felt those feelings when I first began leading a women’s Bible study. Along the way, though, I learned some important lessons about being a new leader.

### **Following a Class Act**

“Sharon’s group”—that’s what we called our weekly women’s Bible study. I remember my pastor inviting her to the front of the church to announce the group. Tall and blond, Sharon reminded me of an Olympic skier. With sunny confidence, she described how a Bible study had changed her life and how she hoped to begin such a study at our church. I wanted to be like her; I wanted to be in this group. The lengthy sign-up sheet in the narthex proved I was not alone.

For more than two years, seated weekly around Formica tables in Founders’ Hall, we earnestly shared our thoughts about Ephesians, then Galatians, the Gospel of Mark, and Psalms. The number of tables grew. We broke into smaller groups and rotated discussion leadership. But Sharon would always close, summarizing our feelings about the text and adding a challenging word of encouragement.

Increasingly, and with pride, I became Sharon’s right hand, organizing materials and making announcements. From time to time I wished I could be in her shoes, I could be the leader, but then I’d see her handle a tough question with grace. I couldn’t imagine myself coming through the way she did, so I was glad for the status quo. Sharon always called it “the Bible study,” but we always called it “Sharon’s group.”

We did until one spring day when Sharon announced her husband’s transfer and their impending move to California. Out there she would undoubtedly start another group. But what would we do? Thinking about her moving, I felt as though Founders’ Hall itself was to be yanked from the church. But Sharon had no qualms about us. It was time, she said, that our group generate its own leadership, that we even branch out and start a second group.





That's how she saw things. But we envisioned our Bible study falling apart. I tried to picture Shelley or Rose as the new leader, and I tried to picture myself. Over the summer we talked about it and prayed about it. But in our minds' eye, Sharon's presence overshadowed us. All we could see was a leadership gap.

On the third Wednesday morning of September, as we stood around our Formica tables, I was the one holding a piece of paper that said *Agenda* and looking at the first item: *Welcome the group*. Listening to the hum of women discussing summer trips and preschool enrollments, I felt cornered. *Why did I agree to this?* I moaned to myself and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. "Buck up!" I said under my breath. After all, Shelley and Rose had told me not to worry, that I'd do a great job. But when I saw those two take seats at a back table, I felt like the person who'd picked the shortest straw.

Yes, last year, with dynamic Sharon to watch, I had wanted to be in her place. Part of me had thought that I could do it, could motivate women to make a habit of Bible reading, that I could be the leader. But as I moved toward the podium, all the welcoming phrases I had thought of seemed muddled and out of reach. *How did Sharon do it?* I thought. *Her voice never quivered.*

The room quieted down. Eyes and still faces began to look up, and I saw what was bothering me most. This was not just any group. These were my friends, and they had never seen me act as leader before. What would they think? Would they keep coming? If they quit the Bible study in a week or two, I would feel they were rejecting me. The moment to start had to come soon. And then, like receiving a lifeline, I saw the high-voltage, freckly faced smile of Becky, my neighbor and old friend. Spontaneously I smiled back. For about 15 seconds she kept up a twinkling eye contact, and that bit of happy interaction calmed me. The words began to flow. Later I thanked both Becky and God for her nonverbal support.

So I did welcome the group that day—not with Sharon's flair, but with sincerity. And all year I went back, and back, and back to Founders' Hall—not always because I wanted to, but because God kept shoving me out the door. He didn't seem to care that I kept comparing myself to Sharon, or that I was worried my friends would reject me. In fact, I think he used those things to frighten me into doing a good job. If I'd had my druthers, I wouldn't have followed a star like Sharon. But after some time, I learned from that experience.

### **What If You Don't Have Charisma?**

One thing I learned is that sincerity can rival charisma—but it takes time.

At first I was surprised how well things were going. Attendance didn't fluctuate much, discussions were lively, and it seemed to me that with every passing week I welcomed the group with more humor and less starch.

But there were grumblings. These women missed Sharon, as I did. And while they didn't want to be critical, their "missing" leaked out. At times, while getting coffee, I





would overhear a snatch of conversation like, "I'm not sure I can keep coming all year; it depends." Or Rose would tell me that So-and-so was thinking of attending another group. While those comments felt unsettling, I didn't act on them, since they weren't made to me directly.

Then, at the close of a morning, Mary said she had a question and asked rather plaintively, "Do you think we'll be able to get to know each other this year?"

I was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, "that making friends here has always been important to me. Will we have more time for that?"

Still puzzled, and embarrassed in front of the group, I tried to answer that yes, I hoped we would deepen our friendships while we learned.

Mary's question rattled me. What did she mean? Why did she feel that friendship making was threatened this year? And why did she have to blurt out her question? As we put the chairs away, I went over to ask her.

"Well," she said with a hesitating smile, "it's just that those typed agendas you hand out and the shorter prayer time make me feel that maybe this year the Bible study is too businesslike for me." My brow furrowed slightly, and she went on. "The Bible study is good, but this year we don't spend as much time sharing problems and prayer requests. That's how I get to know people. That's what I need."

So that was it: I was too businesslike, and that made Mary fear this year would not provide the warmth of last year. Her fears got my fears going: *Do others feel this way? Is the sense of connectedness among these women breaking down?*

Making a mental review of the previous weeks, I decided I probably *had* been too businesslike. Should I start changing? Or should I let Mary and the others get used to a quicker pace? Wouldn't the Bible stand on its own? Wasn't God really in charge of the group? Did my style really matter?

A gnawing answer inside me said, *Yes, my style does matter*. The Bible itself shows us that effective leadership does make a difference. But feeling unsure about how to change, I hollered for help.

## **Do You Have to Go It Alone?**

While I remained the leader, Shelley, Rose, and I formed a leadership team. Sharon had been more of a one-woman show with helpers. I couldn't pull that off, so the three of us began to meet regularly to discuss how to increase the friendship factor and how to handle compulsive talkers. We also prayed for the group.

Some results were cutting out agendas, lengthening the prayer time, and by the end of the year, rotating the upfront leadership between us. I was sincere, Shelley was funny, and Rose was energetic. The team approach spread responsibility for decisions and gave the church three new leaders instead of one.



The friendship factor in our Bible study did seem to build. One week Mary read from her Phillips version of the New Testament. Dawn admired it. So the next week, Mary brought her a Phillips to keep. I thought to myself, *That looks like friendship!*

Other evidence was a grass-roots-organized, once-a-month potluck following the Bible study. At one potluck, we passed around a card for all to sign and mail to Sharon. When it was my turn to sign, amid the “I miss you’s” I read many comments about how well our group was going this year. Seeing those positive words made me feel as good as if the card had been meant for me. From then on I stopped comparing myself to Sharon.

The team approach also helped with compulsive talkers. Sometimes handling these people is like trying to hold back the tide. As a new Bible study leader, I was afraid to hurt their feelings. But after six months of trying everything I could to limit one person’s monopolizing, I felt angry.

Sharon had handled deftly the big talkers and opened up the quiet ones. Not having her skill, Shelley, Rose, and I rotated the job of saying things like “Thank you, Marge. Does anyone *else* have a different opinion?”

## **How Can You Handle Complaints?**

Our leadership team decided that instead of overhearing negative comments, we wanted to bring them into the open. If people felt irritated, disappointed, or bored, we wanted to know so we could respond. Every few weeks, at the end of a morning, we asked questions. “How do you think the study is going?” That was typically answered by a chime of people saying “Great!”

While the answer was fun to hear, the vagueness of the question made it somewhat unproductive. Unproductive until later. While we were putting on our coats or walking to our cars, someone would quietly offer a more constructive comment, such as, “I like the group, and maybe it’s me, but I’m getting tired of Romans. Could we move on soon?”

That was the kind of feedback we were after, even if it came in the parking lot. Then we’d bring that remark back to the group, anonymously if the person wished, and discuss it. We decided, for example, that to help Romans take an early bow, we would double up on the remaining chapters.

After asking, “Is this schedule working?” and “Should we lengthen the discussion time?” a referendum decided we should start and end the Bible study half an hour later. Out-of-town moms of little ones were having a hard time getting there on time.

But the greatest input came after asking, “What should we study next?” After Romans, the group wanted a change from doctrine, and so we moved to the Gospel of Luke. After Luke, the Old Testament seemed appealing, and we studied Proverbs. The rule of thumb that developed was that after six or eight weeks in one part of the Bible, people usually wanted a change of pace.

It may seem that soliciting these questions is asking for trouble. But we found opinion gathering brought out good ideas and led to a greater sense of community. It cut



down on complaints. But the best result was that after coming right out and asking for their opinions, I could stop wondering and worrying about what the group was thinking.

### **What If You Don't Know What to Do?**

It helped me to learn that I could go to *my* leaders for counsel. After two members of the group bitterly argued about the doctrine of election versus free will, I wondered if I should have cut off the discussion.

Later, I talked to one of our pastors about how to diffuse conflict. His advice was “swiftly, but keep smiling.” He elaborated that when healthy discussion turns to a personal attack, it's time for the leader to move the group to a new subject—and then, with a smile, offer to meet later with the angered people to continue their discussion. We haven't seen that kind of emotion in the group since then, but when we do, I'm ready!

### **Are They Friends or Members?**

When Jan and Karen walked in together, late, I took it as an affront; I interpreted their lateness as not caring about me. And when Becky, my super-supporter, decided she had to drop the study to make time for going back to school, I was hurt. Perhaps more stung than hurt.

I didn't bring up my feelings with our leadership team, although I should have. In the meantime, my ego seemed to toughen up. Leadership has rewards, and those rewards began to overpower my fears of rejection from friends.

One reward was seeing a newly widowed woman, who yearned to join our group, slowly become a part of it. At first she felt embarrassed when her grief spilled out during prayer time. Despite hugs and quiet, affirming words from us, that embarrassment would keep her away for weeks. When she finally started to come regularly, we knew that the cards, calls, and prayers for her were paying off.

Seeing her and other new people keep coming bolstered my leadership self-image. After a while it no longer seemed so crucial that my friends always be there, and always be on time. They could still be my friends, and I could still be the leader. They had the right to be regular members.

### **Leadership Is Worth It**

Obviously, leading is full of learning. For all the time consumed and opportunities for rejection and feelings of being on the spot, why would anyone say yes to leadership?

One reason is that unlike the “tagged” person, the leader in any group is most seen, most listened to, and most followed. This visibility isn't just ego boosting; it means getting to see God using your life.

I remember looking around Founders' Hall on the first snowy morning of December. The tentative crowd of September had become a solid group of enthusiastic faces. At that



moment I realized our group had hung together; we had not splintered. Smiling to myself, I remembered how nervous I had felt standing in front of these people. Now I was glad that I had been the one to give the welcomes each week and keep things rolling.

Being the leader is risky, because it means committing to the group before anyone else does. But that December day, as we discussed the wise and foolish builders of Luke 6, the group beamed back to me nonverbal signs that my commitment was well-placed.

So Sharon was right: God does want new opportunities for the church to grow. And therefore, God is in the business of training new leaders. Some have more talent at leading. But deep down, good leaders know that before the Bible studies went well, before attendance started to grow, there were some humbling, fumbling beginnings. So best of all, leaders get to see a miracle happen in their own lives: the miracle of becoming effective leaders.

*–Virginia Vagt is a former consultant who now serves as director of customer relations for Home School Inc.*

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## **Discuss**

1. As we contemplate handling leadership roles, what are some common hesitations that develop?
2. What kind of leadership team can we form to help those of us who are apprehensive about leading?
3. What are some signs that will tell us how God is using our leadership?

*(Over for assessment...)*



## What Are My Strengths?

*Using the assessment below, look at the ten traits described in the article and evaluate how you feel about each one. After you've completed the assessment, talk with your pastor or leadership team about the things that worry you most as you take a leadership role, and discuss how you can work through those worries—either through improving your skills or surrounding yourself with others who possess those skills.*

	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely
1. I often compare my abilities with those of the leader of a group I'm in, and I get excited at the prospect of leading it myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I enjoy standing before a group of people—large or small—and speaking to them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I am comfortable with handling conflict that unfolds in any setting I am leading, whether the conflict directly involves me or not.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I like seeking input from others and carefully listening to what they say.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I am receptive to feedback—even when it isn't positive—to see if it points to needed improvements.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I am comfortable delegating jobs and responsibilities to others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I am willing to seek the counsel of others when I'm uncertain about what to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I do a good job of not taking setbacks, rejections, or criticism personally.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I see greater rewards than risks in taking a leadership position.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Overall, I believe God has given me gifts to use as a leader.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



## **Finding Want-to, Can-do Workers and Leaders**

*The right people and the right roles at a church can ease reluctances to serve.*

by Sue Mallory

Years ago I took on a full-time, volunteer role in my church. Within the first few weeks, I sensed the chemistry going bad between my supervisor (the senior pastor) and me.

For instance, I would state a new idea and receive a lackluster response. When he would ask about the progress of certain projects, he didn't offer any input. But he seemed dissatisfied.

It felt as if he was holding something back.

When I asked him if something was wrong, he admitted, "I don't know how to treat you because you are a volunteer. I can't hold you accountable."

"How about if you just treat me like a paid person," I said, "and let's get on with it!"

He laughed but honored my suggestion.

How does a church find the right people to volunteer and lead? Only by rethinking the entire approach and shifting to a model based on people's gifts.

### **From Volunteer to Minister**

Sometimes the word *volunteer* has the wrong connotation. I *volunteer* at the Red Cross or at the PTA. I *serve* in my church. Any discussion of overseeing lay people in the church starts by recognizing that distinction.

I first served at the church on the stewardship committee. I wasn't excited about it, but my husband was an elder, and he had asked me to help. I filled the role of planning dinners to celebrate Recommitment Sunday. Afterward I felt I had served the church well but was relieved it was over.

Several weeks later, my pastor was talking about the upcoming new-member class, and I mentioned that when I took the class, it was one of my favorite experiences in the church. He invited me to help him welcome visitors in the class, and I said yes on the spot. I found I had a knack for making newcomers feel at home. The morning after the new-member class, I called my pastor to tell him tidbits about people I had met and to thank him for inviting me.

I asked him how new people got connected into the church. He gave me the name of the elder responsible for the ministry and suggested I ask her. I called the elder and asked if I could serve on her committee. Helen laughed and said that was the first time anyone had asked to be on a committee!



That was the beginning of my transformation from a volunteer to a minister. I had found my niche.

## **Fully Engaged Self-Starters**

We also need to distinguish between a volunteer-management mindset and a Christ-centered ministry mindset.

A volunteer-management mindset evaluates the church's needs and finds someone willing to take on the task, with little or no regard for the gifts, talents, or passions of the individual.

A Christ-centered ministry mindset makes every effort to discover a person's unique gifts and calling, and to encourage each person to serve where God has equipped him or her to do so.

Here are some principles worth remembering:

- **Discover members' spiritual gifts.** People keep commitments better when they're in the right ministries.
- **Work God's plan.** The gifts of available workers should determine the types of ministries you operate.
- **Appoint a church matchmaker.** A director of lay mobilization gets people and service opportunities together.
- **Accountability is learned.** Trusting means letting them fail sometimes.
- **Match authority and responsibility.** Give workers power to succeed.

Interviewing a new member, I discovered a young man with a burden to serve the homeless. My role was to connect him with a community agency that had a place for him to serve, to send him off as a representative of the church, and to commission him in worship to be a minister in the community. I resisted the temptation to try to plug him into an opening in one of our church programs.

A ministry mindset starts with the assumption that a local church already has all the gifted people it needs to accomplish the ministries God intends it to have right now.

Bruce Bugbee, who developed a resource for lay ministry, says that mobilizing the laity "is about the right people in the right places for the right reasons." When that happens, people want to succeed just as much as pastors need them to succeed. That makes motivation and effectiveness much easier.

## **The Freedom to Fail**

To reorient a church's mindset starts by assessing how the church currently relates to the people who serve there. The tip off is often what you overhear. For instance:

- "Volunteers just aren't dependable."



- “Using volunteers will cause the level of quality to go down.”
- “What can you expect? She’s just a volunteer.”

That sort of language signals a volunteer-management mindset, which stunts growth and curbs enthusiasm to take on leadership.

Another issue is trust. Does your church communicate that it really trusts lay people to accomplish the ministry?

People who are placed in the right ministries will “live into their commitments.” This can be undermined when a church leader delegates a responsibility only to take it back if it is not being handled the way he or she expected.

Once, during a stewardship campaign, a pastor came to a stewardship committee meeting already in progress. The leader of the committee was not present because of a prior work commitment and had appointed a committee member to chair the meeting. The pastor assumed the lay leader had not followed up on a few details for the meeting. The pastor expressed his concerns to the group and then later made several follow-up calls. Each call proved him wrong. That embarrassed him and offended the lay leader.

In contrast, another pastor trusted several lay leaders to develop a plan to address the needs of the pastoral and support staff. While many of the staff felt anxiety about their roles being redefined by laity, the senior pastor didn’t meddle in the process. He believed in the talent and commitment of the lay leaders, and that the Holy Spirit would work in the process. The result was a plan that honored and protected the pastoral staff, freeing them of much administrative responsibility.

## **When the Work Doesn’t Get Done**

Yes, trusting people means allowing them to fail. Lessons in accountability often are learned from the impact of “what I didn’t do.”

Jim kept our church’s food pantry stocked. Shortly after he assumed that responsibility, he went away on a brief trip, failing to inform anyone. Nor did he make arrangements for others to stock the pantry. Upon his return, he arrived at the church just as we were turning away hungry people who were relying on that food as their only meal of the day.

Jim was stunned; he had assumed someone would cover for him.

I talked with Jim afterward and listened to his surprise that no one picked up the ball. I reminded him that we accepted his yes as a commitment and that we believed in his heart for the ministry and trusted him with full responsibility for it. I reiterated our value for “every member a minister” and that he was the minister responsible for the food pantry.

When Jim left, he said, “I understand, and you can count on me from now on.”





## **When No One Signs Up**

There will always be times when no one's gifts or passions seem to match what needs to be done. What then?

When you must ask people to do something outside their interest, it is important to remember that people serve in the church out of their faithfulness to God, not out of obligation.

Several years ago, our church needed to rebuild its children's ministry. No one stepped forward to lead it, so we asked Sharon, who had the talent, though we knew her interests were elsewhere. We explained our need and asked her for a one-year commitment. With the invitation came our acknowledgment that she preferred serving elsewhere. We offered to redirect her when the mission was accomplished. She said yes out of her faithfulness to the church.

Service to Christ will always be a combination of faithfulness to Christ and stewardship of our gifts. The goal, however, is to grow toward a gifts-based ministry where people serve out of their gifts and passion. At times that means church leaders must be willing to let a ministry die.

One church asked a lay leader to design a workshop on better ways of providing hospitality. Hospitality was defined as "a job"—coffee server, usher, and greeter. People did those things, but with little sense of mission.

The workshop leader suggested a new model, calling for people to commit to each other in prayer for the purpose of welcoming and serving new people more effectively. They would hold each other accountable for the mission. The workshop leader said, "If this committee does not take responsibility for the ministry of hospitality, it will not happen."

The pastor said, "What if people don't respond?"

The question was put to the participants: "Are we willing to let it go? Are we willing to keep doing ministry if people are not willing to take responsibility for it?" The pastor's fears were never realized.

People tend to take responsibility when they are given authority to create ways to accomplish the mission, especially if they know that without them, the ministry will not happen.

## **Lifting Up the Value**

Nothing happens in an organization until someone takes responsibility for it. A critical question is: Who is going to lead your church's lay mobilization effort? Who is going to see that people are recruited, trained, supported, resourced, managed, and celebrated?

Is that the pastor's responsibility?



I would argue not. The pastor's role is to preach and teach the value of gift-based ministry—not just occasionally but repeatedly and in many ways. The pastor's role is also to model the importance of accountability with key lay leaders and, if the church is big enough, with staff. That means calling for ministry covenants and expecting people to fulfill them. This is the stuff of periodic leadership retreats.

A small, declining, racially diverse church decided to make the shift from “recruiting live bodies” to a Christ-centered ministry when its leaders gathered to pray about the future of the church. Over a period of four years, the pastor discussed it with key influencers and leadership boards. He brought in outside facilitators to moderate the discussion and process.

The church prayed for God to lift up a person within the body to lead this ministry. The leaders also committed themselves to grow their people by preaching and teaching gift-based ministry and developing a process to live it out. This year, the first time in many, they had 15 members in a class for discovering their gifts. They've begun seeking leaders based on their unique gifts. The energy and unity in that church are visible.

## **Your Point Person**

So who should be the point person for implementing a Christ-centered ministry?

When I was at Leadership Network, we suggested that a church identify a “director of lay mobilization”—someone with the gifts, talents, and passion to help others succeed, to run a ministry to lay ministers. That person will likely need training and to be connected with peers in other churches to learn what is working elsewhere. In smaller churches, that person will be unpaid. In larger churches, he or she may be given a stipend or a full salary.

One pastor, upon taking a new call, brought with him the value for lay ministries. The church had a large percentage of senior citizens, and he feared their resistance. Much to his surprise, they liked the idea of being valued as gifted servants. Within a year they called a director of lay ministries.

The right people in the right places for the right reasons communicates to your church, your neighborhood, and the world that Christ lives in and through every person. Indeed, gifts-based ministry is ultimately the fulfillment of the Great Commission: God's people living out their discipleship in ways that proclaim that the Savior changes lives.

*—Sue Mallory is the former executive director of the Leadership Training Network. She currently is an executive consultant with Group Publishing and continues to train nationally as an “Equipping Church Consultant.”*

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**Discuss**

1. Do we currently have a volunteer-management mindset or a Christ-centered one? How does this encourage—or discourage—lay leaders and volunteers?
2. How does our church identify our members’ spiritual gifts and passions?
3. Do we trust lay leadership and volunteers to accomplish the responsibilities we give them? How might we strengthen that trust?

**Are We Removing Reluctance?**

Assess how well your church is doing with encouraging and equipping lay leaders and volunteers to make them the most effective:

*1. Our church actively works to discover members’ spiritual gifts.*

<b>We do this poorly</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>We do this well</b>
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*2. We determine the ministries we operate based on the gifts of available workers.*

<b>We do this poorly</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>We do this well</b>
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*3. Our church has a director of lay mobilization that gets people and service opportunities together.*

<b>We do this poorly</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>We do this well</b>
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*4. We understand accountability is learned, and trusting means sometimes letting leaders or ministries fail.*

<b>We do this poorly</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>We do this well</b>
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*5. We match authority and responsibility, giving workers the power to succeed.*

<b>We do this poorly</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>We do this well</b>
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## **When No Risk is Riskiest of All**

*Why reluctance to act may be more hazardous to your leadership in the long run.*

by Terry Muck

In *A Word From the Wise*, I. D. Thomas tells the story of a Georgia farmer living in a dilapidated shack. He hadn't planted anything, so nothing needed to be cultivated. The farmer just sat, ragged and barefoot, surrounded by the evidence of his laziness.

A stranger stopped for a drink of water and asked, "How's your cotton doing?"

"Ain't got none," replied the farmer.

"Didn't you plant any?"

"Nope. 'Fraid of boll weevils."

"Well," continued the visitor, "how's your corn?"

"Didn't plant none. 'Fraid there wasn't gonna be no rain."

"How are your potatoes?"

"Ain't got none. Scared of potato bugs."

"Really? What did you plant?"

"Nothin'" was the reply. "I just played it safe."

The church leader who never takes risks quickly finds: no risks, no returns.

The Bible supplies many instances of this Law of Risklessness. Proverbs predicts the non-rewards the sluggard can expect. Jesus' parable of the talents rests on the futility of trying to avoid all risk. The risks of not taking risks are the riskiest of all.

One study showed that leaders who made few or no major decisions per year, regardless of the type—theological verdicts, institutional judgments, interpersonal choices—were the most likely to have been dismissed from a church at some time in their ministry. Conversely, leaders who were willing to take a stand—even when that seemed perilous—usually found secure footing.

One pastor recounts a budget skirmish: "The board had talked over the budget, and we had made the changes we thought necessary. When the budget was presented to the church for ratification, one board member, who had been through the whole budgeting process and voted for our budget, stood and said, 'I don't see why we have so much money going to outreach. We've never had money for local outreach before. I think we should pay the pianist instead.'"

"I thought, *You're a former pastor! You have to know better.*



“I had to make a quick decision whether or not to say anything. I don’t like getting into an argument in front of the church, but I couldn’t stay silent, so I gave a few reasons for the outreach program. Then I said that paying the pianist was going inward instead of outward. This was the first time in our church’s history that we’d had some extra money to put into outreach, and I thought it important to do so.

“I didn’t know how the church would react. They had been through some hard times, and most had the idea it’s best not to rock the boat. In this case, I had one key element going for me. The pianist this board member wanted to pay was his wife. Even people who didn’t want to rock the boat could see the self-interest. His idea was voted down.

“Afterward many people came to me and said, ‘I don’t think his idea was good. Thanks for taking a stand.’ Only one person objected.”

Taking a risk, paradoxically, may be less hazardous than doing nothing at all.

## **Reluctant Risk Taker**

This doesn’t mean risk taking is something one merely decides to do and does. Even those outgoing souls who thrive on the thrill of risk sometimes have to force themselves to act—and will readily admit to the continual need to sharpen their skills.

For some, though, taking risks seems next to impossible. They would sooner tame a lion than confront a parishioner. For them, it is not a question of wanting to take a risk; it is a question of going against the natural inclinations of their personalities to resist conflict at all costs.

Such resistance is not to be taken lightly—nor demeaned. The third-century Turks tell a fable about a soft-wax candle that was lamenting the fact that the slightest touch injured it. The candle felt cheated by this apparent personality flaw. How the candle admired the rock-hard bricks, impervious to dents and nicks. Seeing that bricks started out as soft clay and only grew hard from heat, the candle had an idea. To acquire the brick’s hardness and durability, the candle leaped into the fire. It quickly melted and was consumed. The moral? It is useless to malign the “disadvantages” inherent in our personalities.

Psychologist Frank Farley, in *Psychology Today*, identified a cluster of characteristics that make up the “Type T personality”—high-profile people who are risk takers and daring adventurers. The roster of Type T’s includes such people as DNA researcher Sir Francis Crick and aviator Amelia Earhart. Type T’s prefer uncertainty to certainty, complexity to simplicity, and novelty to familiarity. They prefer to work in flexible structures and tend to be stifled by the nine-to-five mentality.

At the opposite end of the personality spectrum are Type t (little t) personalities, people who avoid risks. People at this end of the personality spectrum are rarely public figures. Farley thinks big T’s and little t’s are determined largely through genetics, though very early experiences may play a role.



Little t's don't relish decisions, even when the groundwork has been laid and the time appears right. Witness a little-t pastor in action:

"Recently our board considered putting ceiling fans in the sanctuary. We talked about the advantages and the disadvantages. I was for the fans because they're economical. They blow the warm air back down in the winter; in the summer they create a breeze, so we don't have to run our air conditioner as often.

"Some on the board, however, didn't want to risk destroying the appearance of the sanctuary. We have a beautiful cathedral ceiling, and who knows for sure what hanging fans would do to the look.

"After all the discussion, we took a vote. The tally was five votes for the fans, three opposed. A split vote is unusual for our board, but the people who voted against the fans accepted it calmly, saying in effect, 'We voted against it, but that's the decision of the board, and we'll support the decision. Let's get it done.'

"But I haven't purchased the fans. My head tells me they will save money—the facts support that. My head also tells me the fans will be accepted by the congregation. But my gut tells me not to do it, that it's not that necessary. I've thought about why I'm dragging my feet. If it had been an eight-to-nothing vote, I think I'd still feel uneasy. And I can't quite say why. Something is just telling me not to do it. It's a very real feeling, though not quantifiable.

"Actually, I'm causing more trouble for myself. Since the committee voted for the fans, I'm supposed to buy them. If I don't, I'll have to explain why I haven't and then get them to agree *not* to do it. But I just don't feel right about it."

This pastor simply does not have the temperament of a Nathan Hale, the Revolutionary War spy who, when about to be hanged, said he only regretted he had but one life to give for his country. Some church leaders (Hale himself probably would have been a minister had not the American Revolution broken out) have the bravado and gusto of a Hale. Others don't, and struggle with what to do.

Although big T's take to risk-taking more easily, Farley notes that little t's *can* develop the necessary skills. But they need to use the skills in ways congruent with their personalities. They are more likely to learn confrontational techniques through analytical descriptions—by the book, perhaps—than through actual experiences (which they may be too timid ever to initiate). People with little-t temperaments can be taught to take risks; it simply is more difficult for them.

Even people with insecure personalities are risk takers of a sort, although they normally choose risks of a different category. Psychologist John Atkinson showed that two motivations drive people to take risks. One is the motivation to achieve; the other is the motivation to avoid failure. Those motivated to achieve generally take regular, consistent, intermediate risks. Those motivated to avoid failure go to one extreme or another. They either play it unusually safe, trying to avoid risk altogether, or they make



extremely risky moves. The person who sinks his life savings into a speculative stock venture after a lifetime of passbook savings is typical of the avoid-failure personality.

Another reason some of us are reluctant risk takers is outlined by Nathan Kogan and Michael Wallach in their book *Risk Taking*. They found that people with intuitive personalities tend to see the big picture better. They scan long-range implications of success or failure more quickly than others, and thus tend to take risks and force confrontations earlier. Those who have a more rationalistic orientation, on the other hand, tend to focus on the immediate and overlook the need for risk taking or confrontation until too late. Intuitively, Kogan and Wallach see the optimal personality to be a balance between the two.

A third polarity has been drawn between the perfectionist personality and the nonperfectionist personality. Perfectionists are generally motivated by the fear of making mistakes. They are unusually cautious and averse to risk taking. Those with the nonperfectionist personality, on the other hand, are more willing to put things up for grabs. David D. Burns, in his book *Feeling Good*, says, "Show me a man who can't stand to be wrong, and I'll show you a man who's afraid to take risks and who has given up the capacity for growth."

None of the personality experts who study risk taking discount the possibility of people who are predisposed to not taking chances learning to do so. All would agree that training and experience have a great deal to do with a person's risk-taking skill. Those who trade futures on the Chicago Board of Trade, for example, learn to take risks; their living depends on it. Training for such a position involves gaining a good grasp of the statistical probabilities of various situations, learning to analyze one's intuitions, and taking action.

### **Tactics: Short-range**

Few church leaders are trained in risk taking, although decision-making courses are becoming more common in seminaries. Still, they are far down the priority pole in divinity training. Most pastors then, regardless of personality, develop risk-taking skills on the job. Here are some tactics to further pastoral skills and help determine what risks can and cannot be handled.

#### ***Take a reading of the emotional climate of the risk-taking situation.***

Focus particularly on your emotional situation by asking these questions:

- Am I ever a little irrational? Is this one of those times? How do I know? What can I do about it?
- Am I afraid? If yes, of what? If not, why not?
- Am I ready to act? Will I ever be ready to act? What is holding me back?
  - It's equally productive to determine the emotional involvement you have in this particular project. Helpful questions to consider:



- What feeling am I trying to express by taking this risk?
- Will people think better or worse of me if I succeed?
- Do I care what opinion people have of me? What opinion of me would I like people to assume?

***Convince yourself of the need to act.*** Sometimes action needs to be immediate. Make sure you consciously decide to act promptly or else have good, valid reasons for delay. Remember stories like the following:

“One of the elders, a pillar of the church who had been around seemingly forever, became angry over a church financial decision. The board decided to allocate some money to a project Bradley didn’t like. It was obvious to everyone as he left the board meeting that he was very upset. I knew I needed to talk to him immediately, but I believed it was usually good policy to let things cool a little. In this case it wasn’t. The next morning I had Bradley’s resignation as an elder on my desk.

“I prayed over that letter, and the next day I went to his house. We spent the afternoon together, and by the end of the visit, although we still disagreed on the financial matter, he had withdrawn his resignation. We saw that in Christ we can have differences and still have fellowship.

“I will be forever grateful to God for leading me to work it out quickly with Bradley. Over the next 16 months, we became dear friends. We shared intimate times; he became a confidant for me.

“Bradley was a farmer. He had a small front-loading tractor, and one day he was carrying a load of stones in the front hopper. He went up a small grade—probably not more than two feet high—but it was enough to cause the load to shift, and it rolled that tractor over on top of him. He was killed instantly.

“I went out to the house. The medics had laid him under a blanket, still in the yard. His wife was in the kitchen. There was nothing I could do except put my arms around her and cry with her.

“Later I thought, *What if I hadn’t talked with him when he wanted to resign?* I would have regretted it forever. As it is, I can rejoice in the friendship God gave us.”

## **Tactics: Long-range**

In addition, there are some long-term strategies:

***Define your style.*** Ellen Siegelman, in her book *Personal Risk*, has developed an informal self-test that measures risk-taking style. She defines three categories: anxious risk takers, balanced risk takers, and careless risk takers. According to her, knowing your style can help you prepare for a risk. For example, an anxious risk taker needs to push himself to make the decision. A careless risk taker, on the other hand, needs to slow down and do more research before taking action.





**Develop an assertion message.** Michael Baer, a former pastor in Texas, suggests a technique he learned from Robert Bolton's *People Skills*. Professional managers use a simple, brief formula to teach employees basic confrontational technique. It provides a framework for saying what needs to be said without sending the wrong messages. Essentially it is made up of three parts:

“When you (insert the other person's behavior), I feel (explain how it makes you feel) because (give a specific negative effect of their behavior).”

1. The formula gives a nonemotional description of the behavior you want to see changed. For example, you might say, “When you come late to board meetings ...” Keep it specific and do not exaggerate by saying things like “When you are always late for board meetings ...” Few people are always late.

2. State your *feelings* about the behavior. For example, you might say, “When you come late to the board meetings, I feel angry.” This lets the other person know you care.

3. Finally, point out the results of the undesirable behavior. You might say, “When you come late to the board meetings, I feel angry because it causes all of us to get home late.”

The formula is not a panacea but a beginning toward confronting others in situations with potential risk. By mastering the technique, some of your reluctance to confront may be dispelled.

## **What Can You Handle?**

No one loves risky decisions. For some the fear of consequences is worse than for others. Risks must be taken; confrontations must be made. There will be personal and ministry costs, as well as benefits.

The ultimate reason many of us are scared to make a necessary but risky decision is fear of the consequences. What will happen if we make the wrong decision? It's helpful to consider the stories of other leaders who saw a risk go bad—yet found healing and productive ministry on the other side. One pastor's wife, whose husband had lost a battle with an elder, told how they were forced to leave the church:

“I felt a sense of betrayal, a sense that grew on me. After we announced our resignation, we continued to serve from the end of August through December. I read negative feelings into a lot of what people did. If they didn't say anything, I thought they were thinking bad thoughts about us. I became suspicious and withdrawn. It could have gotten pretty bad, but the Lord provided insight for me in a dream.

“One night I fell asleep crying out to God, and I dreamed of dried cornstalks in my garden. Ordinarily in the fall I cut those stalks into pieces. In my dream, the Lord gave me a choice: I could cut up the stalks and leave them on the ground, or I could till them into the soil, nourishing it for next year.



“I saw clearly that those cornstalks were like my anger. I could leave the pieces lying on the ground to pick up and throw at anyone who came near me. Or I could plow them under and use this experience to help me grow in the future. I learned that painful experiences could be something nourishing to me and others through me—if I let them. Or I could keep those pieces of pain and anger in my life and allow the resentment to remain. I remember making a deliberate choice that night: ‘Lord, I want this painful time to nourish my life, but you’re going to have to help me because I’m too angry to do it myself.’

“God has indeed helped that process. The pain was real, and I wouldn’t want to go through it again. But God does help make everything work together for good.”

*—Terry Muck is professor of missions and world religions at Asbury Theological Seminary.*

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## **Discuss**

1. Am I a big T or a little t? How does that come through in my desire and ability to lead?
2. What are some smart ways we can try something different while making sure the attempt is for a good reason?
3. What is one current situation we face that will become a problem if we don’t take action?

*(Over for assessment...)*



### **What Can I Handle Personally?**

Think of a potentially risky situation or opportunity you face, and then spend a few moments reflecting on the questions below. Using the spaces provided, briefly answer the questions. Pray over the responses and how God can use your current state of mind to help lead in that situation or opportunity. Discuss the answers with a colleague, spouse, or friend:

1. Will taking this risk make me satisfied if I am successful? How do I know? What else would satisfy me? Do I need to risk for that?

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2. Do I allow myself to feel hurt, sad, angry, anxious, or joyous?

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3. Am I aware of my moods and how they influence my actions? Do I recognize my feelings?

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4. Can I take a rejection in this case? If I am rejected, how will I act?

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5. What are the limits to the amount of emotion I can show without adversely affecting the body of Christ?

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## Further Resources

*Books and resources to help you encourage your leaders and workers.*

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://BuildingChurchLeaders.com). Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- [“Developing Leadership”](#) Assessment Pack
- [“Leading with Confidence—Women Leaders”](#) Gifted for Leadership
- [“Cultivating Active Church Members”](#) Practical Ministry Skills
- [“Volunteer Motivation”](#) Practical Ministry Skills
- [“Injecting New Life”](#) Survival Guide
- [“Secrets of Recruiting and Keeping Volunteers”](#) Survival Guide
- [“Motivating Leaders”](#) Training Theme
- [“Mentoring”](#) Training Theme

[LeadershipJournal.net](http://LeadershipJournal.net). This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

**Next Generation Leader: Five Essentials for Those Who Will Shape the Future** by *Andy Stanley*. An updated version of the 2003 book focused on mentoring young leaders as they venture into unknown places of leadership. (Multnomah, 2006; ISBN 978-1590525395)

**Leading from the Second Chair** by *Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson*. A book that raises awareness about the need for strong church leaders in secondary positions. (Jossey-Bass, 2005; ISBN 978-0787977399)

**Empowered Church Leadership: Ministry in the Spirit According to Paul** by *Brian J. Dodd*. This book sets aside worldly definitions of leadership and success, instead encouraging leaders to become empowered for their roles through the necessity of prayer, fellowship, partnership, servanthood, and listening for God’s direction. (InterVarsity Press, 2003; ISBN 978-0830823925)

**Meeting the Moment: Leadership and Well-Being in Ministry** by *G. Douglass Lewis*. A look at the complexities of ministry leadership and practical ways to respond. (Abingdon Press, 1997; ISBN 978-0687072866)