

# Top 5 weaknesses of effective church leaders

[<< BACK](#)

From Volume 2005, Issue 6 - 6 2005

## **Pastors in this study admit they have difficulty dealing with criticism, tension in the ministry, staff management, and other relational issues**

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My research team and I didn't know what type of response we would get to the question: "What do you feel your greatest weaknesses are in the area of leadership?"

Would the leaders of effective churches recognize weaknesses? Would they admit them? Would they be reticent to share their weaknesses if they did admit them?

Somewhat to our surprise, not only did these leaders recognize and admit their mistakes, but they were happy to share their weaknesses with us. If anything, our sense of their comments was that they were too hard on themselves. Sometimes we could not get them to stop talking about their deficiencies.

A majority of the leaders of the churches that reach the unchurched listed 12 weaknesses. The most frequently mentioned weaknesses may surprise some people, but the fact that they were at the top of the list did not surprise the leaders we interviewed. Let us examine the first five weaknesses mentioned among these effective leaders.

### **Pastoral ministry**

Almost three out of four leaders told us their No. 1 leadership weakness was providing personal pastoral ministry. Our definition of pastoral ministry included counseling, doing hospital visitation, and performing weddings and funerals, to name a few of the responsibilities.

"If I get a consistent criticism," a Nevada pastor told us, "it is my failure to live up to the expectations to minister to each person individually. But if I live up to all of their expectations, I wouldn't have time for sermon preparation, personal evangelism, and just plain old dreaming. I constantly live with this tension but refuse to give up time from the other responsibilities."

In our research we discovered that leaders of effective churches spent 10 hours per week in pastoral care, while leaders of the comparison churches spent 23 hours doing the same type of ministries.

"It finally hit me one day," said Tom J., a senior pastor from Oklahoma. "I was doing all of the hospital visits, counseling, home visits, and nitpicky ministry for two reasons. First, I received affirmation for doing it. Second, I avoided criticism for not doing it. Neither is a legitimate reason for doing things the way I was doing them."

He paused for a moment, and his tone indicated a serious reflection. "But you know what really got to me? I realized that I was being disobedient to Scripture. When I try to do all the ministry, I am depriving the people in the church of their God-given call to do ministry."

So why did the leaders of the effective churches say pastoral ministry was their No. 1 leadership weakness? The issue, it seems, is one of balance.

"I am constantly dealing with the tension," Jack M. of Eastern Tennessee told us. "I know my primary calling, according to Acts 6, is to be in prayer and the ministry of the Word. But when the critics tell me I am not caring enough, I wonder if I am too insensitive to their needs. I wish I was a strong enough leader to know just exactly what to do."

### **Lack of patience**

The fifth weakness noted by effective church leaders was that they are task driven. We will look at that issue, but first, let's look at what results from leaders being task driven - impatience. More than seven out of 10 leaders indicated they were impatient to see objectives accomplished. Contributing to this dilemma is the fact that most American churches are notoriously resistant to change. Frank M., a Southern Baptist pastor from Kentucky, exclaimed, "Sometimes things in my church seem like they are moving in slow motion. I am dealing with a situation now where we made some changes in the order of worship, and a woman in the church shouted at me with anger after the service. Being a pastor in this church has really tested my patience."

The mix of an intransigent church with a task-driven leader can be lethal.

"Several years ago, Dr. Rainer, I read your book, *Eating the Elephant*," Frank shared with me over the telephone. "If I learned anything from the book, it was the need to have a long-term view in the church you serve so that you can be patient in the slow process. I'm trying to be patient, but it's about to kill me!"

### **Dealing with staff**

Most of the effective church pastors we interviewed had at least one other part-time minister on the church staff. Thus, most of the pastors in our study had to deal with staff. And seven out of 10 leaders considered their staff leadership skills to be weak. One of the open-ended questions we asked in our leadership survey was worded as follows: "Name some specific leadership decisions you have made in your church that had a negative impact and result." The responses related to bad decisions with staff were numerous:

"I made some terrible staff choices."

"I did not get involved in staff hiring. It was a big mistake."

"No area of ministry frustrates me more than dealing with staff. I feel so inept."

"My worst mistakes in ministry have mostly been related to issues with the ministry team."

"The two greatest conflicts I have had in ministry had to do with firing a staff member and not dealing with a weak staff member."

The leaders of the effective churches clearly voiced their lack of training and preparation in dealing with staff members. "I was never taught how to be a supervisor, mentor or leader to staff," an Idaho pastor told us. "And that's the area where I've made the most mistakes."

### **Dealing with criticism**

Though I no longer serve as a pastor of a church, I have served several churches as an interim pastor. In a recent interim I was sharply rebuked and criticized one Sunday. I made some minor changes in the worship service, and a church member, in an emotional outburst, said I had betrayed the church.

The criticism came in a highly public setting. I think I did a pretty good job of maintaining my composure and, to the best of my knowledge, I was Christ-like in my responses to her. So what is my point?

The criticism bothered me for many days. In my role as a senior pastor of four churches, as an interim pastor of six churches, and presently as dean of a seminary, I have had my share of critics. I guess I have learned to deal with criticism, but I sure have a leadership weakness in that I let it continue to bother me for days, even weeks after the event.

The results of our leadership survey indicate that I am not the only leader who struggles with criticism. Nearly seven out of 10 of the leaders we interviewed noted this issue as one of their own leadership weaknesses. But, as an Evangelical Free Church pastor told us, the great danger is letting criticisms paralyze our ministry.

"I went nearly an entire year," he told us, "making decisions based on conflict avoidance. I got so burned initially with criticisms that I was determined not to rock the boat. Our church had its worst year that year."

When we asked him how he deals with criticism today, he gave us his formula:

- Pray for a Christ-like spirit even as the criticisms are being directed at you.
- Pray for wisdom to deal with the criticism and to have love for the critic.
- Seek God's wisdom to discern if the criticism is valid or petty. If it is valid, seek to change and respond to the criticism positively.
- If the criticism is not valid, move on with your items and plans. Do not be hindered or paralyzed with fear.
- Allow God in his own way and time to deal with critics.

"Reaching the unchurched is spiritual warfare. Attacks and criticisms are to be expected," the pastor said wisely, "but we cannot give up on the Great Commission just because our feelings have been hurt."

### **The task-driven leader**

In our research we saw the self-description of pastors' leadership styles.

A clear pattern emerged. The dominant leadership style noted was "task oriented." We defined "task oriented" as high interest in production and getting things done.

According to the definition, one might not expect this leadership issue to be a weakness. But the leaders we interviewed spoke of a leadership style that was always task driven, sometimes to the exclusion of relational issues.

"I get so focused on a project," Jeremy T. of North Carolina told us, "that I often fail to take people's feelings into consideration. It's good to be task driven, but it's not good to be so driven that you forget about people."

A task-driven leader is typically a successful leader, so the issue, much like the issue of pastoral care ministry, is one of balance. CE

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