

Leadership Must-Haves for an Ever-Changing World

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Many clergy confide that they're oversaturated with information to the point where our bandwidth is full. It feels like we're overworked, but still viewed as underachieving simply because there's no time to do it all or learn everything. We schlep ourselves to a one-day training, sit in the back of the room with friends and trade text messages about the presentation, then take CEU certificates and training materials home to sit on a shelf.

When our mental gates are down, we cannot learn, no matter how much new information and valuable training is given to us.

How to Get Off the Hamster Wheel

Thankfully, there is a framework and mindset that leaders can develop to meet these challenges. Consider the leadership qualities outlined below, designed to help every deacon, elder and pastor develop and grow to effectively meet the shifting landscape around them.

To be an effective leader today, you must be:

1) Adaptive

There are countless leadership articles online that extoll the virtues of being an adaptive leader. Read them and you may come to believe that being adaptive is about being flexible when it comes to dealing with new ideas or changes at your workplace.

In one of my first ministry settings, the common mantra among the leadership team was "Be flexible so you can bend but you will not break." This mantra became an easy cover for conducting ministry programs without plans for sustainability or measurements for success. It also encouraged us to accept last-minute change without question. Our overly flexible, yet unquestioning culture led to brilliant ministry program proposals that became one-time projects, leadership burnout and fewer opportunities for success.

Bottomline: Adaptive leadership requires a strategic and thoughtful approach to understanding where your congregation is now, where your congregation needs to go and how you can get there. Clergy who are adaptive can extract their congregation's core values, determine the best path to the future and then begin to bravely lead the congregation to that path well into the future.

2) Curious

The proverbial expression "curiosity killed the cat" is an old cautionary phrase used to warn people from asking unnecessary questions and to be satisfied with unfulfilling answers. In our rapidly shifting social and political landscape, we may feel oversaturated with new information. Our responses may turn from "Why?" to "What now?"

My favorite questions always begin with "why," because they invite us to pause, reflect and consider alternatives. A "why" question opens us up to discovery, exploration and reaffirms our Wesleyan commitment to "move on to perfection." Curious "why" questions also give us the freedom and humility to investigate, wonder and consider what else could be going on under the surface.

I remember sitting through tortuous church finance meetings and hearing the same defensive responses at every one. These defenses became increasingly animated, loud and threatening. Not surprisingly, they produced the desired effect of retreat and silence. I knew there was something else going on. After asking curious questions, I found that the defensive responses related to a number of things, from compounding fears to recently losing a loved one to cancer. This gave me a way to address those fears with compassion, love and an invitation to heal.

Bottomline: Curiosity is not just asking a question, it is a leadership skill that can help us discover the root of the problem and explore new ideas. Curious questions open us to imagine possibilities, cross bridges and offer alternatives to fearing others and most importantly, in ourselves.

3) Interculturally Competent

At the age of 12, I preached my first trial sermon on The Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20 during a local Youth Speaker's tournament. I spoke about being called to preach God's good news to all the world and going to places that made me uncomfortable.

Decades later, that sermon and Jesus' commission to "go into all the world and make disciples of all nations" is still extraordinarily relevant for all of us. We have many opportunities to encounter and celebrate cultural diversity from the pulpit to the pews and beyond in our communities. Yet, our nation, our denomination and our local communities are experiencing great cultural rifts and disagreements, making it harder for us to fulfill Jesus' commission. It's easy to become uncomfortable with the prospect of "going into all the world and making disciples of all nations." Who wants to be caught in the crosshairs of cultural conflict and found unintentionally saying or doing the wrong thing? So instead of leaning into intercultural competency, we develop a tendency to take several steps back.

Bottomline: Intercultural competency is a capability to shift perspectives and appropriately adapt behaviors to cultural commonalities and differences around you. Everyone has some degree of this capability and all of us can develop that capability with intentional learning and practice. Leaders who develop their intercultural competency capabilities are better able to equip their congregations to value cultural difference and lead responsive and relevant ministries that bring the Good News to all in their communities.

4) Self-Reflective

Clergy are an over-evaluated group of professionals. We receive annual evaluations from our District Superintendent, our Staff-Parish Personnel Committee and a near-constant flow of evaluation from our congregations through feedback, suggestions and critiques.

How do we process these evaluations? We tend to absorb these critiques and then repeat them to ourselves, giving ourselves a steady stream of self-criticism and negative self-talk. Many shove them into the back corner of their consciousness and do their best to forget about them. Still others sift through them, focusing on every wrong thing they've done without considering every good thing they've done. We need healthy ways to process the feedback without rejecting it or contorting our true selves to meet everyone's expectations.

I once asked a colleague in ministry for help. I was frustrated about not being taken seriously at ministry team meetings. When I asked what he saw, my colleague said my obstacle was the way I came into every meeting. I often rushed in without the documents needed to support my work and

passed out excuses for not being better prepared. After some reflection, I put forth the effort to address my weak time management skill because I wanted my work to be taken seriously. I wanted to show up as a better leader, so I shifted my working style.

Bottomline: Self-reflective leaders strengthen their capacity for emotional intelligence, are able to align their leadership goals with their leadership styles and develop resiliency to stay motivated. Self-reflection is an honest and open look at your strengths, your weaknesses, where you are leading in your ministry and where you are struggling to lead. Practicing self-reflection gives us the permission to identify our hotspots, our triggers, where we have strong proficiency and where we need to find outside help.

5) A Difference-Maker

Each of the qualities above will help leaders be more effective in their ministries. Yet, adopting only one or two of the leadership qualities but not the others makes a leader's effectiveness short-lived or potentially irrelevant in their context. Put them all together and we have a leader who can be a potential difference-maker. A difference-maker is a leader who asks the right questions, can competently interact with difference and honest reflection about themselves. A difference-maker can cast a vision for a future with hope, and lead their congregation through a healthy process of growth and change. A difference-maker will lead their congregation members to become difference-makers in their own communities, connecting neighbors and strangers to the God who saves, heals and provides.

Bottomline: We have a unique opportunity to lead our congregations to become difference-makers. In order to lead them, we must be difference-makers first. Pause for a moment and remember when God called you into ministry. The places and spaces where we minister now are very different from the places and spaces where we began our ministry journey. The world is ever changing, but God's calling remains the same. It is God's calling that helps us be difference-makers in our congregations and communities. Let us become the leaders God has called us to be.

Have questions? E-mail [Doris K. Dalton](#) questions you have about leadership development.