

MORE BUT NOT LESS THAN A CORPORATION: WHAT LARGE CHURCH STAFF LEADERSHIP CAN LEARN FROM THE CORPORATE WORLD

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As smaller churches grow into larger churches¹ they face different challenges than they did earlier in their evolution. One of these challenges is the size of staff these churches must employ. There has been much written over the past few decades about management of staff in the corporate world, but what principles, if any, can be applied to the church context to create stronger staff cultures?² Is it appropriate for a church to look to the corporate world at all in these matters? When a church is smaller, the demands on staff culture and staff management are simpler and less complex than in larger church organizations. Larger churches face specific issues such as establishing a consistent culture across many different departments, creating buy-in to the organizational mission and vision in the face of many different perspectives and priorities, and keeping a large and multi-tiered staff engaged and productive. These and other unique staff challenges require a specialized set of skills in leadership and management. This paper will explore how current best management practices and approaches from the corporate world are critical in leading the staff of a large church organization well and will examine how many of these principles align with biblical principles of leadership.

Effectiveness And Efficiency

In his foundational book, *Management*, Peter Drucker explains how effectiveness and efficiency are important, but different concepts: effectiveness is doing the right things, while efficiency is doing things right.² This is an important concept for the large church. While an argument could be made that churches of any size need to keep these principles in mind, the complexity of the large church makes them absolutely critical. Before

¹ For this paper a “large church staff” will be defined as one which has over 25 staff, most of them full-time and multiple departments areas each with their own teams of staff. The designation “large church” is admittedly relative and reflects the Canadian context I am writing from.

² Peter Drucker, *Management* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 32.

examining specific leadership and management principles, it is important to look at the unique issues facing large churches where effectiveness and efficiency are not dealt with, because these issues create the problems that leadership and management must solve.

Effectiveness Creates Alignment

If the large church doesn't pay enough attention to effectiveness, it can suffer from mission drift, where the various interests of the organization pull in different directions and allow the focus of the organization to become scattered. This is a particular challenge for the large church, in that the large church has a more developed staff of specialized interests. Staff members placed in the departments of a large church can have very specific goals and foci. Because of the size and specializations of such a staff team, individual staff can become less concerned with how their decisions and execution might affect a broad range of people and outcomes outside of their narrowed area of focus. Their specialization allows for an excellence and production largely unavailable to the smaller church, but it also runs the risk of creating myopic staff members and teams. It is a double-edged sword that, when extrapolated across many departments in a large church staff, can create pressure to move away from the founding or central mission and vision. The answer to the question of "what is most important?" is a complicated one with many different interests in the large church staff. Without a strong focus on effectiveness, the large church can easily spread itself thin, become bloated with too many objectives, and produce less and less of what is most important.

As various interests pull the large church staff in different directions, a clear vision of where the organization is going can be lost. This lack of clarity about the vision of the organization centrally can result in a staff team where there is confusion about how to make decisions and set priorities. Staff and department groups who no longer orient themselves around a unifying set of priorities may fail to make decisions in a way that lines up with broader organizational objectives. Therefore, providing a clear focus on effectiveness, what should be done and what should not be done, communicates a way forward for a staff team so that there can be alignment throughout the organization.

Four Dangers of Ignoring Efficiency

Conversely, if a large church doesn't pay enough attention to efficiency there are four potential pitfalls. First, with a larger staff comes the potential to exponentially increase production. But if efficiencies are not found, this more complex staff can become stalled and production slowed due to bureaucratic red tape or the difficulty of navigating the various interests and collaborations necessary for high achievement. A large church staff needs to be systematized and organized in a way that allows for the goals of the organization to be met with the least amount of confusion and wasted energy as possible. Simply having the wrong organizational structure can create roadblocks to achievement such as the creation of unnecessary processes, inaccurate data collection, people in the wrong roles based on their greatest strengths and weaknesses, or lack of clarity around decision making.

A second potential pitfall facing the large church that loses focus on efficiency is the loss of its ability to continue to scale. Managing growth means innovating for change. Most likely the systems and procedures in place at one stage in a church's growth cycle are not the right ones as it grows. Building a staff structure that scales with growth is crucial for the large church, or it runs the risk of plateauing and ultimately declining. Future growth is only possible if the systems and structures used to organize staff and their work have within them the capacity for growth. If they do not have this capacity, growth is impossible. But it takes a keen awareness of management to recognize how and when to innovate to provide the room for growth.

A third potential pitfall is the limited capacity of individual staff. In a large church organization, each staff member must be able to contribute more than his or her own personal capacity to allow for growth. Extending capacities can be accomplished through creating synergies among staff, combining efforts to create higher ceilings of performance, or replicating staff roles out into volunteer teams, where the power of numbers can greatly increase capacity. Without this sort of organization and management, the potential of the large church will peak at the personal capacity of its staff.

A fourth potential pitfall for the large church staff that fails to focus on effectiveness is that it can suffer from a lack of data that shows whether the results match the goals. In this kind of church, there are few measurables and there is little empirical feedback that informs decisions. Without a focus on

whether things are being done the right way, things will be done the wrong way because decisions may not be based in good and accurate information. Instead, hunches and historical precedents can influence the mechanics of decision making, resulting in less effective systems. A large church staff in this scenario might understand where they need to go, but they will have no mechanism by which to judge whether they are getting there.

Leading and Managing Well: Achieving Effectiveness and Efficiency

Both scenarios, lack of effectiveness and efficiency, need to be faced in the large church for it to be healthy. This need for both effectiveness and efficiency is no different from any organization in the corporate world. But to face these challenges, the large church needs a high level of both leadership and managerial skill because, as Drucker also points out, effectiveness is dealt with by leadership and efficiency is dealt with by management.³

Leading Well

The first of these two skills is leadership. In examining some of the current thinking around leadership principles and best practices, it is apparent that the corporate world has much to offer the church and that many of these principles find a biblical parallel. The three leadership principles that will be examined are the ability to clarify vision based on having the right people on the team, leadership that is based in a high level of humility and keeping a clear staff culture.

Clarifying Vision Based on the Right People

In his foundational book on leadership, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins explains that one of the most critical things that the greatest organizations do, and by extension the greatest leaders of those organizations do, is create clarity of purpose and direction based on having the right people. He explains that first organizations need to begin with “who” and then worry about defining “what.” The reason for this is that “great vision without great people is irrelevant.”⁴ Collins’ premise is that it does little good to create a

³ Peter Drucker, “Managing for Business Effectiveness,” *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org/1963/05/managing-for-business-effectiveness> accessed online July 15, 2018

⁴ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 42.

comprehensive vision and then try to find people who can fulfil the vision, because the means of the organization may need to shift and if everyone is on the team solely to go one way, they won't be the right people to go another way. Having the right people on the staff team allows the organization to be nimble.

This premise is applicable to the large church staff context. For leaders of the large church to be able to take the church where it needs to go, they must have people on their teams who are willing to go wherever the church needs them to go and where God calls them to go. What is important to differentiate here is the ultimate vision of the church, that is, the Great Commission to go and make disciples, and the specific organizational vision of a church in its context. The local church may exist as the biblical people of God, organized in a way to live out the Great Commission, but how that happens and in what cultural context makes the vision of the church organization unique. This vision must be adaptable to the realities and challenges that it faces. Imagine a church that organizes its staff to reach young families and children as a top priority in a community that has a very high demographic of young children and families. Over time, the face of that community may change, and those children may become teenagers, changing the landscape of the community's demographics. Unless the decisions and strategies of the church in that community can adapt to that new reality, the church may lose its effectiveness.

The large church must retain its ability to adapt and be nimble, because everything it has become, its complex systems and staff structures, will attempt to weigh it down and work against quick change. The leaders of the large church must protect the ability of the organization to be nimble as the complexity of the organization increases.

Humble Leadership

The second principle of leadership to be discussed is humility. Collins addresses this concept in, *Good to Great*, as what distinguishes the "Level 5 Leader" from every other leader. Collins found in his study that the leaders with the large egos contributed to the demise or continued mediocrity of their

companies.⁵ Collins isn't the only writer promoting the importance of humility as a key to successful leadership. In his book, *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek discusses how egocentric leaders create a culture of "mistrust and paranoia."⁶ Current thought suggests that leaders who are focused on power, on exerting their will, and on taking credit destroy organizational cultures through their actions and personas.

This is not to say that the humble leader should be meek and spineless - according to both Collins and Sinek, the opposite is true. The humble leaders do not lack a strong will, but they compliment their strength with a humility that deflects praise. These leaders are willing to do the "dirty work" because they do not view themselves as above it. These are the type of leader that creates a strong and committed staff culture. Having a strong and committed staff culture is paramount to having an effective staff.

The application for the church is clear in this sense. For the large church to thrive, their leaders must fight against the temptation to focus the accolades on themselves. They must work diligently to deflect the attention and praise received away from themselves and toward others. This is a special challenge for the staff of a large church for a number of reasons. As a church becomes larger, the staff becomes faceless and less known to the congregation. As the church grows, more of the spotlight and attribution of success fall on the senior leader. In this context it is imperative that the senior leadership intentionally give recognition to others, both to protect themselves from becoming egocentric and to avoid feelings of resentment from the staff. Humility also is a challenge for the large church because people tend to attribute leadership skill to narcissistic behaviour and many of the attributes common in those who aspire to be the leaders of big organizations tend to stand at odds with humility.⁷

The Culture Setter

The third leadership principle to be examined is that of the "culture setter." A research study reported in "The Culture Factor" argues that it is imperative for the leader of the large church to set the culture for the staff.

⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁶ Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 137.

⁷ Collins, *Good to Great*, 36.

Leaders must clarify the unique values that define their team, and then work to fiercely protect those values within the staff culture.⁸ Many senior leaders fail to intentionally build culture and either delegate it to Human Resources or ignore it altogether at the expense of focusing on strategic work and decision-making. But doing this fails to recognize that investing in a strong staff culture helps the senior leadership foster the kind of people who will thrive in their specific work context. When a strong culture is built, it can come alongside of the strategic vision of the organization and provide power and a higher level of achievement.

For the large church this need for a strong culture is much the same. As previously discussed, one of the challenges of the large church is that it must not drift in mission. Creating a strong culture where every member of the staff team is rowing in the same direction means that less work needs to be done on course correction, and more latitude can be given to staff and their teams to make decisions that will most likely reflect the values and vision of the church organization itself. The large church also deals with plateauing at the capacity of the systems and staff it has assembled. If the staff are able to carry the culture of the church and its senior leadership in themselves, the potential capacity of the systems and staff expands because they are able to function at a high level more autonomously.

Dangers Facing Senior Leaders

In each of these leadership principles there is a danger facing the senior leader of the large church. As the church grows, and staff visibility narrows, there is a temptation for the senior leader to become more egocentric. But the three corporate leadership principles also push back against that temptation as a key to leading a large church staff well. It is important to note that the principle of humble, servant-oriented leadership is a foundational biblical principle exemplified by many biblical leaders, from Abraham to the Apostle Paul. It ultimately finds its essence in Christ and the Trinitarian relationship, which is a biblical model for decision-making based in humble mutual submission.⁹ If large church leaders take the biblical perspective of humble,

⁸ Boris Groysberg, Jeremiah Lee, Jesse Price, and J. Yo-Jud Cheng, "The Culture Factor," *Harvard Business Review*; <https://hbr.org/2018/01/the-culture-factor> (accessed online, June 15, 2018).

⁹ Patrick Lattore, "Leadership," in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, eds. Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 567-572.

servant leadership to heart in their own vocations, current corporate leadership thinking suggests that this is congruent with the organizational leaders who get the best results in the marketplace.

Managing Well

But leadership principles are only one side of the coin. Not only does the large church need to be clear about what things should and should not be done, it also needs to organize itself and manage for efficiency. The three current management strategies relevant to a large church context that this paper will examine are management style diversity, managing to strengths, and production based strategic planning.

Management Style Diversity

The first management strategy is management style diversity. Many managers attribute their management style to their personality or natural make up and like to operate naturally, believing that will be most effective. But recent research questions this assumption. Daniel Goleman suggests in the *Harvard Business Review* that the best managers use the different styles of managing as multiple tools in their tool belt, each style serving a specific purpose. He identifies six styles: coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and coaching.¹⁰ Not all these styles were found to be positive; some were found to be negative if used as a default management style. However, the best managers were able to draw on each of these different styles depending on the situation.

A diversity of management styles is applicable to the large church staff structure. It recognizes that not every situation requires the same approach and not every staff member needs the same treatment. Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman in *First, Break All the Rules*, agree with this conclusion.¹¹ Managing the number of people on a large church staff requires great skill in providing each one with what they need based on their specific context. The large church is a complex organization with a large staff, and many

¹⁰ Daniel Goleman, "Leadership that Gets Results," in *HBR's 10 Must Reads on Managing People* (Kindle), loc. 43.

¹¹ For more, see Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), Chapter 5.

interconnected staff relationships. A single management approach would fail to recognize the complexity of the staff team and structure.

The Uniqueness of Each Staff Member

The second management strategy is somewhat related to the first. It is recognizing the uniqueness of how each staff member is used in the organization. Buckingham argues that to get the most out of the team, a manager identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each team member and then puts each in a position to leverage their greatest strengths and minimize their biggest weaknesses.¹² In a small church with a small staff, this principle is difficult to apply because of the generalist nature of the people who make up the team. Each staff member in the small church staff needs to handle multiple roles and multiple functions, whereas the staff of a large church can afford to be more specialized into their skill set and strength areas. Aligning each team member with their strengths is critical in leveraging the potential of the large church staff.

One of the challenges to this approach is that it runs against the line of thinking often prevalent in church contexts, that everyone has a potential to do anything God wants to use them to do. What do you do with the person who feels called to preach when they have very little communication skill? What do you do with the person who feels called to lead a ministry, but who lacks the natural ability to lead a team administratively? Corporate management principles suggest that managers avoid falling victim to the trap of seeing everyone as having unlimited potential, which often can be seen as synonymous with Christian principles of grace and patience. Upon examination, however, the corporate approach mirrors Christian teaching. God has made everyone different and different for a reason. Like the various parts of a body, each person has a unique set of strengths to bring to the team.¹³ Leveraging those strengths together is the key to creating the greatest impact and is crucial for the specialized teams of a large church staff.

Production Based Thinking

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rom. 12:4-6a; Eph. 4:11-12.

The third management strategy is production based decision-making and strategic planning. Drucker notes that one of the jobs of the manager is to make “the work productive and the worker achieving.”¹⁴ He also names “measurement” as one of the five key tasks of the manager.¹⁵ Drucker suggests that it is not enough for the manager to put people in the right place, motivate them in unique ways, and play to their strengths. They also must use measurable data to properly assess if the approaches and techniques being used are producing the agreed upon goals.

In large churches with a complex staff and many different departments all working as separate but interconnected parts, it becomes imperative for the managers to constantly analyze to determine if the various systems and techniques being used are producing the desired results. It can be easier for the staff of small churches to see the straight lines from action to result because of the lack of complexity in the system and because the senior leader can see everything being done. It is more difficult for a large church staff to have an accurate feel for how the system is working without constant empirical data. Results based data collection helps keep accountability to common goals. For example, if a large church decided to implement a discipleship strategy with a goal of 75 percent of the congregation participating in a midweek discipleship group, the best way to tell if the various stakeholders on staff are performing to that end is to track the measurable number of attenders and group participants. Without this data it becomes difficult to know if the various staff involved are hitting the mark or if they or the systems and approaches need to change.

Again, seeking empirical data can present a challenge in the church context. Results often are seen as a cold and corporate way to make decisions. Inspiration often is preferred. Inspiration attributes the results to God’s will and takes the pressure off the people who make up the church staff team. The problem is that this way of seeing things uses a construct of the will of God as a crutch for making difficult decisions. This way of seeing things is akin to that of the man who buried the talents. He said that if God had wanted them multiplied, they would have been multiplied before he dug them up. The church must not deflect its responsibility to do everything it can to fulfil its

¹⁴ Drucker, *Management*, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

mission. Seeking empirical data is not incompatible with attributing the results to God. Rather, it acknowledges that while the results are ultimately in God's hands, each church staff has a responsibility to do the best with the talents - ingenuity, creativity, intelligence, and skill - that God has entrusted to them.

Data analysis also finds tension in the church because of what the results of empirical decision making can mean for the use of human resources. Many churches mistake caring for an individual with allowing them to stay in a position on a church staff for which they are not suited. Keeping that staff person in the position without tangible results is not always an exercise in grace and compassion. It may keep staff people from accomplishing what God intended for them. Refusing to make a difficult personnel decision in this case is doing a disservice to that individual and the way God could use them in some other means and to greater effect. Churches should not fall into the trap of pitting people against results.¹⁶

Management Skill Over Charisma

Finally, another roadblock to large churches incorporating effective and efficient management approaches into their staff teams is that churches can value charismatic personalities over skilful managers. Often, large churches are built on the personality of a charismatic leader at the top and they may begin to believe that they should staff the entire organization with charismatic personalities. But ignoring skilful managers in the pursuit of charismatic personalities is problematic for large church staff teams because the larger that the church staff grows, effective and efficient management becomes more crucial.

The Bible as a Leadership and Management Book

The examples of leadership and management throughout the Bible must not be over read. The Bible is not first and foremost a modern leadership and management guide for the Western world. It is important to avoid bad biblical leadership analogies or to look for leadership models in the

¹⁶ There is simply not enough space in this paper to examine the idea of measurable data within a church context. While admitting that the author recognizes that not all things the church is called to do are measurable (Eph. 4:13-16), it is none the less the responsibility of church leadership to be good stewards of their resources by measuring what they can. It is the opinion of the author that there are creative ways to measure many real indicators of discipleship, and other aspects of a church's mission and vision.

Bible where they do not exist. For example, important leaders throughout the Bible such as Moses and David are presented as fallible human beings and not portraits of biblical leadership around which to construct leadership models. That being said, biblical principles drawn from these and other parts of the Bible can and should inform leadership and management in the church. As has been demonstrated in this paper, many of the most successful approaches to leadership and management used in the corporate world have parallels to biblical principles.

The Responsibility for Spiritual Development

While the Bible may not be a guidebook in leadership and management, understanding the biblical nature of the work of the church staff and of leaders of large churches is important. Large church leaders and managers do not simply lead or manage others who have been hired to follow them. The staff of a church is ultimately following God's direction and leadership. The leaders and managers of the large church staff are not intermediaries; rather, they help others find direct access to God.¹⁷ Even though all Christians are called to point people to God, leaders of a church staff experience this in a different way than leaders in the corporate world. The result of a church staff being followers of Christ first and foremost is that leaders and managers play a role in the spiritual development of their staff. They may not always be responsible for the direct discipleship of their staff, but they play a role and should ensure that discipleship is happening. One cannot separate the corporation of the church from the church itself. The church is, after all, a corpus, a body, the body of Christ.

The large church is something more than an organization in the corporate world. The leaders and managers of a large church staff should focus on efficiency and effectiveness. They should use techniques that can help quantify production and results. Additionally, the unique identity of the church as the body of Christ means that the leaders and managers of large churches must also be of high Christian character. "We lead out of who we

¹⁷ R. Paul Stevens, "Leadership, Church," in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, eds. Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 572-579.

are in Christ.”¹⁸ As they lead their staff to direct contact with God, church leaders and managers also must be in tune with God to understand His mind and will, because the practice of discerning God’s vision is a practice of Christian leadership.¹⁹ Accordingly, large churches should not be seen as any less than an organization in the corporate world; rather, they are called to be more.

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¹⁸ Lattore, “Leadership,” 567-572.

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