

Empowering Team Leaders in the Smaller Church

By John H. Spurling

Late Friday night the pastor turns to his wife and says, "I'm worn out; I can't go on like this. There's just too much work to do and too little of me to go around." Other pastors are trying to carry a leadership load that God never intended for one person to carry, not to mention an entire staff.

A few years ago I was facing the same dilemma with the same frustrations. As the new pastor of a church of 70 in a small Illinois town, I felt the tension between my deeply held convictions about building a team ministry and the reality of congregational expectations regarding pastoral leadership that had been formed over decades. Faced with these challenges, I was determined to broaden our leadership base through empowering others in the church and building an authentic team ministry.

Lack of financial resources for adding paid staff was never perceived as negative. In fact, it was one of our greatest assets—it forced each of us in that smaller church to ask himself or herself, What can I do? What contribution can I make? Through our efforts to follow Jesus' leadership model in training the Twelve, we witnessed a wonderful move of God as that small-town church grew from 70 people to almost 300 in average Sunday morning attendance in less than 3 years. Under the leadership of a new pastor, the church continues to grow and expand the witness of Christ throughout its community.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EXPANDING CHURCH LEADERSHIP

One controlling factor that is central to any genuine move toward nurturing an empowered team ministry is a deep-rooted conviction that such efforts follow biblical principles. One could argue that throughout Christ's ministry an ongoing theme was His commitment to empower others and partner together in the ministry.

Caution must be exercised, however, in any attempt to shift our church structure away from the more traditional hierarchy model to an empowered team emphasis. First, we need to properly understand the essence of what the term *empowerment* means and then how it is applied within the concept of a shared or team-ministry approach. As one key leader writes: "Empowerment means removing bureaucratic boundaries that box people in and keep them from making the most effective use of all of their skills, experiences, energies, and ambitions. It means allowing them to develop a sense of ownership over parts of the process that are uniquely their responsibility, while at the same time demanding that they accept a share of the broader responsibility and ownership of the whole process."¹



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If we are committed to building a team-ministry model in the smaller church, then we are challenged as leaders of local churches to invest in the lives of those around us and empower them to function more effectively within their strengths, gifts, and passion. This is the launching point for developing an authentic team ministry. Unfortunately, the idea of creating these highly functional ministry partnerships in the church has often failed to embrace the core issues that are necessary to move lay leaders (or a pastoral staff) from the reality of individuality to the potential for authentic team ministry. Our challenge as leaders is to strive for the common commitment and high expectations called for in Christ's empowerment strategy for New Testament leadership in the church. The following principles focus on a few of the challenges facing pastors today in building team leaders.

Committing Leaders to the Mission, Values, and Vision of Their Church

One common denominator found in churches that authentically embrace an empowered team-ministry focus is a high level of commitment by the leadership as it relates to the church's own sense of mission, values, and vision. Before a church can aggressively move toward developing empowered team leaders, there needs to be an initial process whereby these fundamental matters are crystallized. The result of this will be that personal "ownership over parts of the process...[and] ownership of the whole process" will reside in the hearts and minds of every church leader.

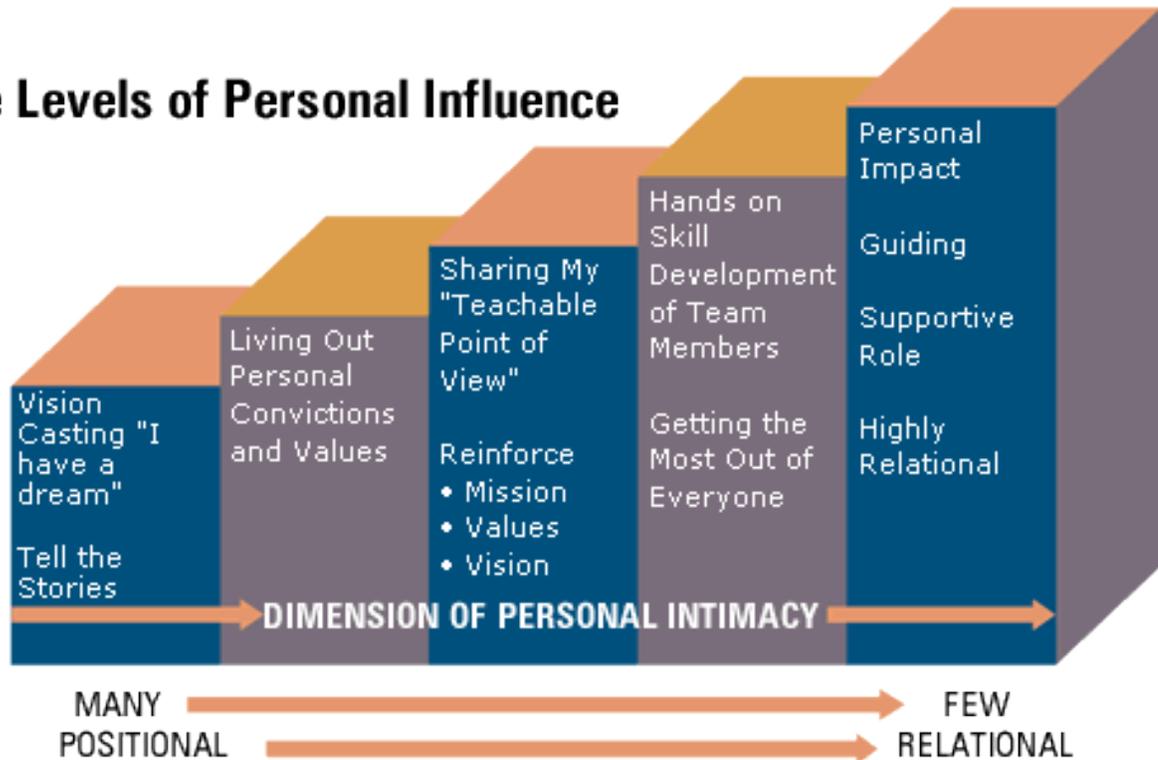
As the church comes to a deeper understanding of its beliefs regarding the biblical mission of the church, its set of ministry values, and specific vision for the future, it is crucial that each leader (paid and volunteer) possess deep commitment to these three expressions of ministry. They form what I call the core of effectiveness and are at the heart of any effort to develop an authentic team-ministry focus in the small church. Failure to secure genuine commitment around these three concepts ultimately will compromise any well-intended efforts to move church leadership toward empowerment and shared ministry.

Shifting the Pastor's Leadership Focus

The movement in ministry focus from a narrow to a broad-based team leadership model will call for certain adjustments in the leadership style of the pastor. At the heart of this leader shift is the need to focus less on telling and doing and more on coaching and mentoring. Pastoral leadership within an empowered-team model seeks to inspire and influence leaders and potential leaders within the church.

I identify five levels of personal influence that capture the essence of the leadership challenge facing pastors who seek to invest in helping transform church leaders and potential leaders from a committee member to a team player. Pastors need to influence others through: 1) proclaiming biblical truth regarding empowerment and team ministry; 2) modeling these convictions as we live among our people; 3) training church members to better understand and appreciate the unique contribution each person can make; 4) coaching members by providing hands-on skill development and guidance in the transformation to an authentic team concept; and 5) mentoring certain individuals through more personal intervention in a highly relational manner (see graph below.)

Five Levels of Personal Influence



Leadership Principle: Our Influence Must Be Felt At All Five Levels

The key idea for leaders to capture is this: Our influence is to be felt in the lives of other church leaders and potential leaders at all five levels. Greater amounts of our time should be given toward expanding our leadership influence as both coach and mentor within the emerging framework of empowered team ministry.

Investing in Leadership Development

Leadership development is the final principle regarding empowering others as authentic team leaders. This gets to the heart of true change within our church organization: the need for a consistent effort to develop healthy, functioning team leaders in every area of ministry. Empowered team leadership does not happen automatically. Authentic team leaders generally do not emerge from within the church on their own. The final principle calls for a creative strategy to build leaders who will in turn build other leaders and expand the scope of personal impact.

Here we are challenged with the need to provide a variety of opportunities for leadership training to touch the lives of those near us. This is especially important since the true quality of our leadership is best measured by observing the habits, values, and behavior of those church leaders who serve with us. Within the leader/follower relationship there is the ongoing need for both formal and informal leadership training. As leaders, it is important for each of us to think through our efforts to intentionally and consistently empower other leaders as we see ourselves as leaders/teachers who maximize every opportunity to invest ourselves in building the team.

CONCLUSION

Pastors and other leaders in the church today face new challenges and confusing problems. Feelings of inadequacy and frustration often become difficult to suppress. God never intended for so many pastors to find themselves overwhelmed and overworked. But what can we do, especially if we are in a smaller church where finances are limited and strong leaders may be difficult to find? Perhaps we need to renew our commitment to increase our investment in the lives of those within the church and ask God to help us see the potential for authentic leadership within them. Then as we partner together, under the umbrella of true accountability, we can build an empowered team that will change lives and impact our community for the cause of Jesus Christ.



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ENDNOTES

1. Warren Bennis and Michael Mesche, *The 21st Century Organization* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 1995), 36.
2. Ibid.