Leadership

Resourceful Leadership: Capitalizing on What is Already There

Books and theories of leadership abound and it is common for churches and leaders to study what works for other organizations or communities of faith. Many times, congregations and ministers mistakenly think that they can import what has worked in our settings or locations and skip some important steps in leadership development. Looking externally may be a place to start, but in our experience, the very best leadership skills and abilities are not those that are external, but those that are internal to the leader and to the congregation. The beginning of good leadership for any pastor or staff minister is self-understanding and understanding the congregation and its context.

My colleague, Chris Gambill, was a missionary in Taiwan in the 1980’s when the Church in South Korea was experiencing explosive growth. The dedicated young pastor of Chris’s church, a Chinese seminary student, spent several days in South Korea studying the South Korean leadership model for church growth. With great excitement, he returned to Taiwan and began to put into practice what he had learned – and it failed miserably. What worked for some Korean pastors in the Korean culture simply did not necessarily work in the context of Chinese culture.

Leadership models, processes, and skills are not always transferable from one person or context to another. Here at the Center, we believe in resourceful leadership, that is, leadership that begins by building upon what a minister and faith community already possess, rather than what they lack. It is about capitalizing upon strengths and abilities; not by asking, “What do I/we need to learn?”, but by asking, “What do I/we already know and seem to do well?” It is not about a congregation becoming LIKE another faith community, but becoming a stronger version of themselves utilizing their God-given capacities.

Know Thyself

For an individual, resourceful leadership means taking stock of natural gifts, capacities, skills and perspectives, and then asking, “How can I capitalize on these abilities?” A second key question then follows, “What does not come naturally for me? What do I need to develop further or compensate for?” Sometimes leaders do need to learn new ways of doing things to compliment what they already know or already do well naturally. We find that tools like the WorkPlace Big Five Profile and Emotional Intelligence testing are extremely helpful for increasing self-awareness. They are especially valuable to young leaders who have less leadership experience and who have had less opportunity to discover their natural strengths and weaknesses.

After taking stock of one’s personality, strengths and abilities, an individual can begin to capitalize on those aspects that are natural and energizing. For example, someone whose WorkPlace Big Five Profile indicates a high level of sociability and a natural willingness to inconvenience himself or herself for other people would likely do well in pastoral care and in relationship-based leadership roles. On the other hand, someone who is reticent and low on tact and who becomes nervous around large groups, would find facilitating large meetings and leading worship alone quite draining. That individual should look for ways to compensate, such as enlisting others to help, finding appropriate training opportunities, and taking extra time to prepare for and recover from certain activities.

Know Your Congregation

The same principles of resourceful leadership – building upon existing strengths and using what you already know – apply to congregational life as well. Faith communities are complicated organisms and...
one style of leadership does not fit all. In the past, denominations tended to promote uniformity in many aspects of congregational life and leadership. However, no one model works well in all places. Resourceful leadership requires recognizing the natural tendencies and giftedness of a congregation and capitalizing on what is there. Rather than invest in generic leadership books, we suggest a minister carefully study his or her congregation and its context.

For example, it would be helpful for a minister to know whether the majority of worshippers are extraverted or introverted. This might influence decisions about elements of worship (or their frequency) such as passing the peace, having lay members read scripture aloud or asking individuals to help lead worship from up front. If the congregation is primarily introverted, the service can be modified or the leader can find those who are more extraverted and use them in more “up front” worship leadership roles.

A component of resourceful leadership is spiritual giftedness. Tools and assessments can help people identify theirs, but that does not mean they will exercise their giftedness or that it will always be effective. Leadership represents a multi-faceted set of abilities. Besides spiritual giftedness, God-given personality and passion are also important. Life context can have a strong effect on congregational leadership as well. In some chapters of life, there may be more openness or opportunity for someone to be an effective leader than at other times. One might assume, for example, that a retired college professor will be an excellent Sunday school teacher. That may not prove true if he or she is raising grandchildren, caring for an aging spouse, or just burned out from years of bearing the responsibility for a class.

One congregation likes to tackle maintenance or building projects together with everyone showing up for a Saturday workday; another prefers to hire a contractor. It takes time for a minister and even lay leaders to know a congregation. It is important for resourceful leaders to be acquainted with a congregation’s past – what has been valued – as well as what is presently energizing and constructive. They need to discover the symbols and rituals important to the congregation. Ministers new to a church should ask multiple open-ended questions. For example, “What can you tell me about your church?” “What do you value most about your experience at this church?” “What do we do best?” Each church is different and leaders need to know the context of a congregation in order to build upon its strengths and compensate for its less developed capacities.

Resourceful leadership is about working with, not against, an individual’s or a congregation’s natural abilities and giftedness. It is about leaders knowing their own strengths as well as those of the congregation, in order to effectively use what is already there. Excellent leaders never stop learning, and certainly never stop thinking critically about their attitudes and actions.
Leadership Action Guide

Summary:

Key to understanding good leadership includes both self-understanding and understanding of the congregation and its context. Noting that one size of leadership does not apply to all settings, this module values the gifts, skills, and strengths of the individual, as well as the congregational setting, and encourages discovery and development of these for increasing effectiveness.

Focus:

The focus is to give the new minister valuable insights into the identity and character of the church and identify the starting points for exercising leadership in the congregation.

Introducing the Module: (Approximately 10 Minutes)

- Inform the group that the next meeting will include giving attention to the subject of Leadership.
- Provide a copy of the essay for each member of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister.
- Share the Summary Statement and the Focus (listed above) with the group.
- The following assignments should be stated and a handout copy given to the group members:

Assignment for the individual members of the Minister Support Committee: Have each of the members prepare to give their responses to the following questions:

1. How would you describe this congregation in 25 words or less?
2. What do you value most about your experience at this church?
3. What does our congregation do best?

Assignment for the new minister: prepare to share about him or herself by preparing to respond to the following questions:

1. What do you identify as your strengths?
2. What are areas of ministry and leadership in which you would like to become more effective?
3. How would you like to grow as a leader?

Engaging the Module: (Approximately 40 Minutes)

Phase 1

This discussion is intended to address the questions given to the committee members first. Address these questions in order. (Allow for all committee members to share their reflections to question #1, followed by any general comments and discussion, before proceeding to question #2, and so forth).

Ask members to share their responses to the first question: How would you describe this congregation in 25 words or less?

- Allow for members to share their comments.
- Invite the group to state what they hear as common threads and themes in these responses.
- Are there any strong differences, or contradictions?
Ask members to share their responses to the second question: *What do you value most about your experience at this church?*
- As members share their statements about what they value in the church, you might want to record these on a writing board, or flip chart.
- Once these are listed, invite the group to look at this list of values and share how this characterizes the church.

Ask members to share their responses to the third question: *What does our congregation do best?*
- List these items on the board or flip chart as people identify the strengths of the congregation.

**Phase 2**
After these three questions have been addressed and discussed, invite the new minister to share his or her responses that have been prepared. Following the remarks for each individual question, ask if there are follow up questions, or clarifications that the group would like to ask the new minister. (Encourage any affirmations of ways you or the other members have seen evidence of these strengths exhibited thus far).

**Phase 3**
You are encouraged to take one further step with this discussion. Invite the committee members and the new minister to share their observations of how the strengths and identity of the new minister blend with the congregation. The following questions may be used to focus this discussion:
- What does this new minister bring that blends well with this congregation?
- What gifts and strengths does this new minister bring that can be useful and helpful in the growth and development of this congregation, and its needs?
- What does this congregation have to offer the new minister that will promote his or her growth and development as a minister? (Based on the values and strengths of the church).

**Additional Comments**

Option for consideration: The leadership essay identifies two specific tools for self-study and assessment. The Minister Support Committee might consider having the new minister take one of these. The committee and new minister would then look at these results together. The church may already have a practice with its staff of taking a personality or leadership instrument, such as the Myers-Briggs type indicator (MBTI). If so, the tool the church already uses could be used and applied.
Member Support Committee Assignment

You are to prepare to provide your responses to the following questions when you next meet with the other group members and the new minister.

1. How would you describe this congregation in 25 words or less?

2. What do you value most about your experience at this church?

3. What does our congregation do best?
New Minister Assignment

You are to prepare to share about yourself at the next meeting with your Member Support Committee. Use the following questions in your preparation.

1. What do you identify as your strengths?

2. What are areas of ministry and leadership in which you would like to become more effective?

3. How would you like to grow as a leader?