



One Common Board Leadership Mistake

By Al Ells, M.C.

Many churches and non-profit organizations have a Board of Elders, Trustees or Directors responsible for governance. The Board usually hires and fires the Senior Leader and upholds a fiduciary responsibility for the organization. Things normally work well until there is a problem in the organization. Phil, Senior Pastor of a thriving suburban church came to a crisis point with his Board over a staff member's behavior and the Board's response, leading them to make a very common ethical mistake.

“One of the staff members grumbled to a Board member about me, and I don't like it,” complained Phil. “He said I have no vision for the church and that other staff members are discontent. The Board Chairperson is now asking all sorts of questions about the church and my leadership. I want to know who talked and set him straight. He shouldn't be doing end runs to the Board. But the Chairperson says not to worry, that staff is ‘just trying to help’ and that it's for the good of the church.”

What should Phil do? Is the Board Chairperson right in keeping the informant's identity confidential? Should staff members be able to lodge complaints to Board members about perceived weaknesses in the Senior Leader that are hindering or damaging the church? How do Board members find out what's really going on? How does an organization protect its Senior Leader from

insubordinate staff members and trouble makers? What would you do if you were a Board member and someone approached you?

This is sticky territory. Each party to the conflict has valid concerns but obviously someone's right and someone's wrong. The Board has final responsibility to examine the issue and their own behavior and set a precedent for the future. Here's what I suggest they do – develop and adhere to a *Code of Ethics for Board and Staff behavior*.

Ethics are rules of conduct or behavior recognized in respect to a particular group. For example, many state and federal laws set standards of behavior for Boards of Directors of non-profits and churches that require, among other things, that Board members conduct themselves in the following manner. (I've added scriptural references for their Biblical basis).

1. **In Good Faith:** All responsibilities, activities and decisions of Board members must be done with good intentions. (Luke 6:44, Galatians 5:22-26)
2. **Duty of Care:** All responsibilities, activities and decisions must be done with the care an ordinarily prudent person in a like position would exercise under similar circumstances. (Romans 12:8, James 3:13-17)
3. **Duty of Loyalty:** All decisions are to be made in a manner the individual reasonably believes to be in the best interests of the church not an individual. (Galatians 5:19-21)
4. **Duty of Unity:** Unity of action and spirit are required. Individual Board members only have authority acting as a group or if delegated authority by the whole Board. The Board speaks with one voice or not at all. (Psalm 133:1; Eph 4:3)

In working with Boards of Directors over the years, I've noted these additional common practices of effective Boards of Directors. Take

special note of the third step below. It addresses the problem Phil encountered with his Board of Directors.

1. **Duty of Confidentiality:** Board members do not share Board decisions or conversations with others (including spouses) unless the Board gives approval. (Proverbs 11:13; 20:19; 26:20)

2. **The Board only has one employee.** The Senior Ministry leader reports to the Board and all staff report to the Senior Ministry Leader unless other arrangements have been made in advance and agreed to. (Exodus 18:17-27)

3. Duty of Appropriate Process.

- a) Staff concerns should be directed to the staff person's supervisor and should follow the organization's formal grievance process.

- b) Board members may not investigate dialogue or entertain staff-initiated conversation about church and staff issues with staff members unless prior approval of the Board has been obtained and the Senior Ministry leader notified prior to the conversation.

- c) Board members are subject to the authority of the Board Chairperson. (Ro. 13:1, 2; 1 Peter 5:5; 1 Cor. 1:10; Matt. 18:15-17; Acts 21:24b ;)

If Phil and his Board of Elders had formulated a Leadership or Board Code of Ethics, his problem may have been prevented, especially if they had developed a policy of 'appropriate processes'.

When guidelines for communication and conflict resolution are not in place, individuals usually resort to triangulation: the dynamic wherein one individual will not communicate directly with another but

involves a third party, which splits the relationship causing loyalty problems. This violates the healthy Biblical injunction of 'going to your brother' resulting in more offense instead of resolution.

A sample of a Church Grievance Procedure can be found [here](#).