

High-level Leadership in Difficult Times

Trisha Taylor

Congregational leadership, even in the best of times, is a difficult calling. When a church is struggling with conflict and anxiety, it can feel almost impossible. Some leaders are likely to absorb the negative feelings and end up feeling depressed or discouraged. Others move to deflect them and become angry and combative.

In her little book *Extraordinary Leadership*, Dr. Roberta Gilbert describes high-level leaders as those who cycle through a series of intentional behaviors designed to help them respond to difficult situations without being pressed into certain reactions by the demands of others. They continually watch, think, connect and reflect.

1. **Watch.** Like a general on a hilltop observing troop movements, it is the leader's job to remain above the fray and watch the system to see what is really going on. Instead of being caught up in the emotional reactivity of the group, the leader is able to look for patterns in the way people behave and look past simplistic cause-and-effect explanations for that behavior. Instead, he or she will be able to observe the complex webs of relationships in the congregation and make decisions that take into account that complexity.

Creech describes this process in another way: "When I began teaching my daughter to drive this year, I realized how much you're watching and taking in as you drive on the freeway. You're constantly looking ahead, behind, down the road so that you can make your own decisions about what is going on around you. In leadership, if you aren't watching what is going on, you may find yourself having to react to something you didn't see coming."

We often hear, "The only person I can change is myself." It is questionable whether we actually believe this is true since we spend an enormous amount of time trying to change others. A high-level leader is most interested in his or her own behavior and patterns. Gilbert writes, "The primary effort goes to self and learning to relate better—not to changing the group." Therefore, a high-level leader is not only watching the patterns and behavior of the group but is also focused on his or her own.

2. **Think.** Science tells us that as our emotions become intense, our ability to think clearly and make good decisions diminishes. As a result, in tense situations, we feel emotionally overwhelmed and make poor decisions that we later regret.

Surgeons, athletes, and others use the power of rehearsal to prepare for those challenges. A basketball player may imagine himself shooting free throws. A surgeon may mentally walk through every step of a surgery many times before ever picking up a scalpel. Creech says, "If I'm going into a difficult situation, like a tense meeting, it is helpful to rehearse and to ask myself important questions—How do I want to be with these people? How do I want to behave? What might happen? How will I respond?"

It is the leader's job to think through the predictable ways that the group relates and ways to alter those entrenched patterns. It is also the leader's job to think about his or her own contribution to those patterns and ways to change himself or herself in the emotional moments.

It is one of the leader's most important tasks is to identify the shared values and deeply held principles of the group and think about ways to ensure that they are respected and expressed, even in the face of emotional reactivity. Creech reminds us, "To think about this ahead of time makes it more likely that we will actually do what we want to do."

3. **Connect.** Once a leader has carefully observed what is really going on and has thought through constructive ways to behave, he or she must take on the messy work of actually engaging the people in the emotionally difficult situation. This is where the leader practices doing what was decided earlier.

However, natural self-protective instincts tell us to move away from people with whom we feel angry or hurt or threatened. We try to avoid contact with them or we stay emotionally disconnected when we are forced to be around them.

High-level leaders, though, intentionally stay in calm contact with everyone in the system, including those who elicit negative feelings. Creech points out that although we may feel an instinctive need to distance ourselves, that impulse is usually counterproductive. "I have to remind myself that there is no real danger to me," he says. "Then I can make the phone call, have the conversation, send the email." He adds, "Sometimes it's best if the connection isn't related to the issue. With a church member, it may be better to ask about their grandchildren than about their doctrine of salvation."

Staying connected, especially when it is difficult to do so, is also one of the highest-level spiritual interventions that a leader can make. Jesus requires us to stay connected with everyone in our lives, including our enemies, at least through loving prayer. Creech adds, "Staying connected, without attacking or blaming, gives me a chance to have an influence on the relationship. You can't influence what you're not connected to."

4. **Reflect.** In the midst of connecting with other people and relating differently to them, the leader is also continually looking in the rear view mirror. Creech says, "Seeing things in retrospect and reflecting on them is what all professionals do, whether it's Tiger Woods thinking about a shot or a coach watching film on a game or an attorney reviewing a case. Professionals ask, 'What did I learn?' 'What can I do better?'"

High-level leaders are also high-level learners, looking for ways to ensure that they are always living out their most deeply held values. Creech reminds us that this kind of prayerful reflection is essential. "These are the places where I learn," he says. "To just go over it in my mind and feel the feelings doesn't really help much. Reflection is where the learning happens."