

People Management:

The Tough Side of
LEADERSHIP

BY DR. KENN GANGEL

In a *Harvard Business Review* article entitled “Management Time: Who’s Got the Monkey?” written by William Oncken and Donald L. Wass, one study found that 42% of the time of managers surveyed was spent dealing with office conflict. In fact, the authors say, “Most managers spend much more time dealing with subordinates’ problems than they even faintly realize.” Of course in the church, this problem should not exist—but it clearly does.

I. WHAT TYPES OF DIFFICULT PEOPLE DO CHRISTIAN LEADERS ENCOUNTER?

A. Angry People: We call it “rage” now, but anger has been around since Cain killed Abel. We’ve given it several adjectives so we know what we intend to say—road rage, domestic rage, workplace rage. What causes anger? Obviously sin, though most in the secular world do not admit to its existence. Immaturity also causes anger. Who among us has not seen an infant, unable to speak, fully fed, diapered and pampered, yet unhappy with his surroundings, balling up his fists and screaming with a round, red, and very angry face. When adults show their anger they merely demonstrate how juvenile they are inside. **One disqualifying character flaw in Christian leadership centers in the lack of self-control or restraint.**

But sometimes anger comes from obvious and logical crises in our lives—frustration or even loss. In 1998 for example, 770,000 people were laid off their jobs in the United States. Many of them, perhaps most of them, became very angry at that time. R. Brayton Bowen interviewed some of those people and reports, “Once you become a victim of downsizing, you need to feel that anger, go into a closet and explode, throw a chair against the wall, whatever you want to do—but feel that anger, let it out, just let it rip. Then hide it! You’ve got to let that anger work for you without showing it. But the corporate community is fooling itself if they think the masses out there are not angry and that they all love their jobs” (29).

Hardly a biblical solution of course, but at least it identifies the problem. In every one of these problem cases you’ll notice that **I ask you first to look to yourself.** If

we practice any kind of toxic leadership we complicate the problem and perhaps even create new problems. If that issue persists no cures will work because **your positive response to anger consists of additional coaching, training and restraint with constant emphasis on biblical mandates regarding godly behavior.** Proverbs 29:22 warns us, “An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression.” And in the New Testament, “*Be angry, and do not sin*: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil” (Eph. 4:26-27). Paul paraphrases Psalm 4:4 indicating that there may be times when Christians will be legitimately angry for a short period of time because anger diminishes or even extinguishes Christ’s love in us. The day should not end on that anger.

B. Complaining People: Let’s ask the same question: What causes complaining? Usually if you track your way back through the muddle you’ll discover that complainers hold the **wrong job**, with the **wrong group** mix, or belong to the computer age which has built **few people skills.** Constantine von Hoffman tells us that “Organizations that are growing fast—and those with a demanding performance environment—often develop a leadership vacuum. The vacuum lets one strong-minded person run roughshod over everyone else.” Just as with anger, we need to check our own status of complaining. Leadership studies have a new term for this—**emotional intelligence.** Daniel Goleman calls it “the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships” (38). A high EI produces competence, confidence and compassion. A low EI produces incompetence, fear and selfishness. Leaders can be trapped in that triplet as easily as their followers.

How do we solve this problem? Since I’m stuck on three words, let me try another set: know, grow, and show. **Know the Word of God; know how to handle people; grow in your spiritual life** and in the capacity of your emotional intelligence; and **show others your compassion and concern.**

No competent leader allows either of these problems to fester for a long period of time. Anger and complaining can finish your leadership and erode your ministry as rapidly as anything other than overt sin in your own life. I have a strange vibrator at home which is supposed to increase blood flow, reduce tension and even aid in weight loss. You sit, stand or lie on it but you do not run, jump or wave your arms. The motto of the company

derives from an interesting parody on an old line: “Don’t just do something, stand there.”

C. Underachieving People: Here again we ask our three questions and always in the same order—what causes people to underachieve? In the broadest sense, **poor education** plays a major role here. We’re not talking about super-star athletes who can’t speak English, but people who dropped out too early or did not continue learning after formal education came to a close. I recall many talented women in my classes who either dropped out of school either at the undergraduate or graduate level in order to support their husbands. That might not be popular in the 21st century, but it was very common in the 20th.

That aberration creates a husband who may finish a master’s degree or even a doctorate married to a very bright woman who dropped out of college after her freshman year. Such a combination may work very nicely for about 20 years but when empty nesting begins the difference in spousal education really begins to show.

Lack of education may run parallel with the **lack of training** though they differ greatly. **Training applies specifically to learning how to do certain tasks.** If you ask a person to teach a middle school Sunday school class, he or she will be competent to the extent that you have provided training for that particular task. **People who move into ministry positions for which they are not ready and for which they are not trained create immediate frustration for themselves and almost instant problems for their leaders.**

At the age of 29 I served as registrar on the faculty of a small college in Kansas City. The dean asked me to his office one day to tell me that he was leaving the following year and recommending to the president that I be appointed to the deanship. As the youngest faculty member I thought that highly unlikely, but that’s exactly what happened. At the time I was working on a doctorate at Concordia Seminary with a major in homiletics and a minor in Greek. It immediately occurred to me that neither of those fields would serve me if my future lay in college administration. So I capped that program with a third master’s degree and entered the University of Missouri to earn a Ph.D. in college administration, and I have been parked there ever since. If you have not been prepared for what you do in your church or organization, do not expect to lead other people.

The major factor here is trust. If you can’t produce two-way trust in the ministry environment which

you serve or direct, then none of these problems will go away. In my recently republished book *Coaching Ministry Teams*, I wrote “People cannot follow someone they do not trust. But trust works two ways. Leaders generally do not release authority and responsibility to people whose credibility for competence and reliability may be shaky. *We enhance team relationships when we distribute leadership across the organization and provide empowerment to others*” (157).

II. HOW DO LEADERS CAUSE DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR?

We don’t like to think of ourselves this way. We leaders absorb the bumps and punches while we keep smiling. Probably the most toxic behavior among leaders, even professional pastoral staff, can be found in the problems of **ego** and **autocracy**—they go hand and hand. In Romans 12:3-8 Paul discusses the role of authority in the church. Verse 3 provides a foundation for any kind of leadership: “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” Four times in this verse Paul used various forms of the word *phroneō* which means “to think.” The obvious play on words emphasizes the servant mentality of leadership so clearly described by our Lord. **Servanthood is voluntary subordination**, precisely what Jesus did with and for His disciples. But **meekness is a virtue in which Christian leaders measure themselves by God’s standards.**

Another behavior that keeps us from true biblical meekness is our childish insistence on always being right. We tend to take too many church issues personally, as though all our worth is wrapped up in what we know and what we can do. Such a posture isolates us from the very people we must serve.

A. By Avoiding Conflict: Yes, leaders cause difficult behavior by **avoiding** conflict. Not that we should be out there looking for conflict, but that we should fear neither its reality nor the necessity of dealing with it. How can we develop that kind of readiness?

First we have to **assume that conflict will come.** You don’t have to create it; there will always be someone else to handle that. People management can bring difficulty but conflict does not have to be negative. Perhaps the

word *difference* would be a significant improvement. **Forget win/lose, lose/win or win/win.** How about a tie? Betty and I play a lot of club tennis which is played like women's professional tennis, in three sets rather than five like the men. But we have reached an age at which three sets sometimes seem too tiring. But what can we do? Each team has won a set so we would leave the courts tied. That's right. Split sets provide a very good way for friends to end a tennis match.

The third guideline tells us to **avoid assuming we know what's happening.** In a book on *Communication and Conflict Management* which I co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Canine, I wrote, "When a message has been decided on, it must be verbalized or symbolized in some way so it can be communicated to other people. Information theorists refer to this as *encoding*. Encoding is futile unless accompanied by an adequate process of *decoding* and two things are significant here. First, if the originator of the message wishes the receiver to decode properly, he or she must take pains to encode the message clearly in a form that will be understandable to the *receiver*. Furthermore, the sender must be somewhat confident that the receiver has the wherewith all to carry on the decoding process" (25).

When we assume a certain problem exists and attack it on the basis of that assumption, we often bump our heads on a hornet's nest because we didn't look long enough to find it.

B. By Defining a Problem as a Person: We reach different meanings when saying "Bill is driving me crazy; he will wreck our entire church," As opposed to saying "Bill seems to have a problem with his anger; I wonder if I can help him in any way?" Frequently we can't do much about Bill, but we might help with his anger. How do we handle it? First, **get it out in the open** by agreeing on the rules of discussion and acting promptly once the problem is discovered. No, I'm not renouncing my suggestion that we lead with restraint because restraint does not mean doing nothing. We must **stay calm**; we must **watch the language** we use; and we must **persist until we reach agreement**. By "language" I am not referring to profanity, but rather how we word things. Consider the difference between "You can't be serious!" and "Let me see if I understand your position." Trying to out-shout shouters helps nothing.

C. By Misreading Feedback: How easy for a leader to say "My reality is *the* reality and my job is getting you to see it." We all know that feedback is crucial to

communication so why don't we do it? Jamie Higgins and Diana Smith tell us "When you are on the receiving end of feedback, it can be hard to remain open and receptive. Giving feedback isn't any easier. You may worry about making the other person defensive; you may fear damaging an important relationship. When it comes to feedback, who knows whether it is better to give or to receive? Neither is a picnic" (DDP 85). Defensiveness is always negative behavior. **When we begin to think that mistakes are crimes to be covered up, punished or both, we are of no more use as leaders.**

III.

HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE?

According to Nick Morgan, "Executive coaches counsel that it does indeed take a crisis to make people want to change their behavior—or even listen to a coach. So in your communications, pick the "points of pain"—the missed deadline, the botched proposal that came back rejected—and focus on them. Recognize that you need to save your breath for the moments of greatest need" (DDP, 123-124).

A. By Managing Negativity: Start by abandoning the idea that leadership requires a great deal of mystery and secrecy. It requires transparency. We know people have to develop trust and they can't do that as long as they think we hide information they should know. The old "need to know basis" belongs in the weird world of the CIA not in the church. **One of the major positive traits of leadership is predictability.** A second step toward managing negativity is to **remember that helplessness breeds hopelessness.** If your problems result from frightened, disfranchised people, you need to deal with it.

One more thought. Don't let conflict get personal. Don't allow negativity to displace the mission. This is not a battle between you and Bill; the issue has arisen because you are both involved in accomplishing the mission of a given ministry.

B. By Acting Promptly and Politely: Address only problems that you can describe. If you are not sure what's really going on, don't plunge in. Moses learned that quite early in his life (Ex. 2). When you decide what to deal with, now you need to **admit and discuss underlying causes.** Perhaps Neill never gets the church bus to places on time because it desperately needs a tune up.

Handling any problem behavior requires **establishing accountability**. If people think they don't have to acknowledge your authority or listen to what you say, that may be a larger problem than the one you think you face. Finally, and I don't need to remind you of this, **begin and end every session with sincere and specific prayer**. In your prayer, name yourself, name the person you're confronting, name the problem and drop them all in God's lap.

C. By Ending Each Year With Evaluation and Goal Setting: Somewhere along the line people who serve in churches have gotten the idea that volunteers cannot be evaluated. This wrong-headed conclusion has led to indescribable strife in many congregations simply because it allows problems to fester year in and year out for a decade or more. We hope somebody will move, or a new pastor will come in who can take care of this, or some other lame excuse. **Good leaders evaluate their people at least every year and any year's review deals with goals mutually agreed upon at that time. Please understand that the only valid basis for evaluation is goals that have agreed upon at the beginning.**

You certainly know the rule "Praise in public—reprimand in private." Beverly Ballaro suggests that "Even when the review is weighted toward the critical, it makes psychological sense to start out on a positive note. Acknowledging, front and center, an employee's achievements to date makes him more receptive to the recommendations for improvements that follow. Tying the accomplishments to specific challenges set forward previously—in the employee's last evaluation, for example—provides objective, tangible evidence of progress. It also creates a sense of fair play, as the employee understands in advance the specific criteria by which he is being assessed" (DDP 110).

Finally, keep a dated paper trail. A great deal of this will be done in person not by email or notes, but it's always a good idea to follow up a personal discussion with a written confirmation of what has been agreed. In a day when litigation dominates our society, no one is exempt and the best protection consists of a clear written record that you have done what is right.

Let me end by saying with emphasis that **none of this implies a willingness to put up with irresponsible behavior**. I have had to deal with irresponsible behavior in everyone from my young children to veteran professors with earned doctorates. We'll go miles of stress and effort with cooperative responsible people, but we draw the line

rather quickly on negative complainers who only want to hurt others. And eventually, if you stay in leadership long enough, you'll have to fire somebody. Don't shirk leadership responsibility by failing to release a person who can't be managed.

RESOURCES

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