

# ‘OUR LEADER NEVER ASKS US TO DO ANYTHING, HOW CAN WE HELP THEM LET GO OF CONTROL?’

BY EMMA SYKES

As this cry suggests, excessively controlling leaders can be disempowering, limit the gifts, skills and talents of others around them, and be a poor witness to the New Testament understanding of every member ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Corinthians 12). It can also be damaging for others, for the organisations and churches we work and minister in, and for ourselves as leaders. And yet, to exercise no control at all would be equally detrimental, leading to a lack of boundaries, no sense of direction and a culture of feeling uncertain and unsafe.

‘Control is not in itself a bad thing. In times of crisis, when the consequences of not being in control would be disastrous, exerting control is appropriate, necessary and good. However, wanting to be in control can be a highly destructive disorder.’

The Undefended Leader, Simon P. Walker (Piquant Editions), p.46



So how do we respond appropriately to an excessively controlling leader? And how do we recognise when our own oversight and leadership shifts from healthy control into excessive control? To help shed some light on these questions I want to offer seven tips for those responding to controlling leadership and five warning signs for leaders to help them recognise when healthy control starts to shift to unhealthy control.

## Responding to Controlling Leadership

### TIP 1: RECOGNISE THERE IS ONLY ONE PERFECT LEADER... AND THAT PERFECT LEADER IS JESUS CHRIST

He and he only is the head of the Church. We need to be Christ-like in all that we do but we are not Christ. Therefore whatever weaknesses and blind spots we see in those that lead us, we will also be challenged by our own. In whatever sphere of influence we are in it is helpful to remember they we are entrusted as shepherds of God’s flock, serving as overseers, out of willingness, obedience and servant-heartedness (1 Peter 5:2-3).

### TIP 2: PRAY FAITHFULLY... FOR THE SITUATION, YOUR OWN RESPONSE TO IT AND FOR YOUR LEADER

Paul instructed the church in Thessalonica to ‘be thankful in all circumstances’ (1 Thessalonians 5:28).

- What are the qualities you see in your leader that you can be thankful for?
- How have you observed them deal well with situations?
- What would a faithful prayer for your leader look like, to help them deal with the challenges they face.

- What would be the best outcome for the whole of the church?
- Pray for self-awareness. Is your heart in the right place?

**TIP 3: BUILD RELATIONSHIP AND TRUST... IT IS MUCH EASIER TO GENTLY CHALLENGE YOUR LEADER, WHEN YOU HAVE A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP**

Trust is built through regular communication, being diligent and reliable in the areas you have been entrusted with, making good decisions and having a positive attitude and not breaking confidences or talking about your leader unhelpfully behind their back. Relationship can be built not just through being trustworthy in this way, but also through connecting with one another outside of the 'daily business' by sharing common interests and connecting in different ways.

**TIP 4: LEAD YOURSELF WELL... WE HAVE MUCH MORE INFLUENCE OVER OUR OWN ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS THAN WE DO OVER OTHERS**

So ask yourself, am I diligent and trustworthy in the areas that I have been given responsibility for? Am I willing to come under the authority of others? How do I model collaborative and enabling leadership with those around me?

**TIP 5: ASK GUIDING QUESTIONS**

This can be a helpful way to raise issues and start discussions in a way that is less threatening for all. So instead of making a statement, 'You never let anyone get involved with the Baptism preparation course' turn it into, 'How can we involve more people in the Baptism preparation course?'

**TIP 6: SPEAK UP WHEN NEEDED, STAY QUIET WHEN NOT**

Prayer and careful reflection can help us to decide when to speak up and when not to. When you do speak up and get a positive response and see gradual change, then work hard to be supportive and encouraging.

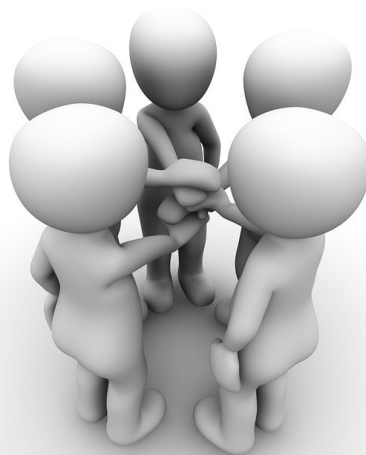
**TIP 7: BEWARE OF 'POISONS'...**

The temptation of certain attitudes that, if left unchecked, can turn a difficult situation toxic. For example, jealousy 'I should be the one in the spotlight', pride 'I could do this better', self-pity 'I do all the hard work', or cynicism 'I've seen it all before, nothing changes.'

## Identifying Controlling Leadership, the Warning Signs

It's often a lot easier to see the speck in others people's eyes than recognise the plank in our own, and so as leaders how do we recognise when our own leadership style becomes too controlling? Here are five warning signs:

1. You notice that people around you struggle to share ideas, they are hesitant when sharing feedback and seem to be apologetic when they want to say something. Do you genuinely invite comments and are you prepared to take on board others' ideas?
2. You have succumbed to what Chris Green describes as '[The fatal danger of a leader's self-love](#)', submitting to the same temptation that Diotrophes did, 'who loves to be first' (3 John 1:9). In other words his leadership style was driven by radically misplaced affection, putting love of self first, rather than the desire to serve Christ through serving others. Have you become 'the only leader in the room'?
3. You never make mistakes, everything around you is carefully ordered and managed with little room for spontaneity or risk. When was the last time you took a risk or made a mistake?
4. You struggle to delegate to others, telling yourself that you don't have time to delegate, or that you are worried standards will slip. How can you enable and equip others to develop in the gifts they bring for the sake of the kingdom?
5. You are part of every decision and on every committee and group the church has. You find people come and ask your permission for every small decision. How can you empower others to make decisions without you?



**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. What strategies do you use to exert control in your leadership?
2. How do you respond to those who exert too much control in leadership?
3. What examples of genuinely empowering or collaborative leadership have you seen? How can you make steps to be more collaborative and empowering in your leading, and being led by others?