

SEVEN STEPS TO BUILDING A TOXIC CULTURE

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Yes, you've read the title correctly – 'Seven steps to building a toxic culture'. Of course, I'm not suggesting that you build a toxic culture... I'm simply wanting to use the above title to help us explore how it sometimes happens without people being aware of it. And in case you think this couldn't possibly happen in local churches – I could give an example or provide evidence for each one of the seven steps below from churches that I have known.

For the purposes of definition, culture has been described as something like 'the water in which fish swim': a combination of values and beliefs, behaviours and attitudes, the stories we tell, the behaviours we reward and so on. Put simply it's 'the way we do things around here'.

However accidentally it may be shaped and formed, commentators on leadership agree again and again that culture is as – if not more – powerful than vision and strategy, and that the prayerful ambitions of many a local church has been undermined and thwarted because of the existence of a toxic culture.

So here goes... Let's identify seven steps for you to avoid (!) in order to build a healthy, Kingdom-honouring and Gospel-releasing culture.



1. BUILD A CLOSED DECISION-MAKING SYSTEM

Over the years I have met too many leaders who appear not to take advice from anyone – who are not able either to invite or rejoice in ideas from the outside and who only appear to be interested in their own opinion. It's obvious that – at a vision, strategic and ministerial level – this will inevitably limit the reach and flourishing of a local church. But it's also more dangerous than that. Leaders who do not have an innate sense of openness and accountability to others can easily become like a compass that has lost its true sense of magnetic north.

Question: How can you consciously (and in appropriate ways) invite comments and suggestions from others on the issues and ministries in which you are currently involved?



2. ENSURE THAT THE WISHES OR 'NEEDS' OF THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP ARE SEEN AS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE RIGHTS OF OTHER INDIVIDUALS

An example: the administrator in the church office may be asked to work late in order to get something done because 'it needs to be finished'. However, if such a pattern becomes the rule rather than the exception, this might indicate that the culture is failing to honour the administrator (or people like them) and the obligations and relationships they have outside and beyond the church office as well as within.

Question: If asked, would your church leadership colleagues (paid or unpaid) feel that you expected them to go the extra mile (a) occasionally, (b) frequently or (c) nearly always?

3. IT'S OK TO USE CRITICISM AND FEAR TO MOTIVATE

I know a number of church leaders (ordained and lay) who could be described as 'teflon leaders' – when something goes wrong, blame for it never sticks with them. In practice, they appear to have a natural and easy way of placing the 'blame spotlight' on someone else. People working in such a culture will soon be motivated by the fear of blame.

Similarly, in a church where the key leaders reprimand others for failure (or failing to live 'up to the mark') rather than stand with and walk alongside people, a culture of fear and worry will be nurtured.

Question: How would you know or tell if people in your church were (even to a small degree) motivated by a culture of fear?

4. ALLOW TURF WARS

Anyone reading this article is likely to be familiar with the apocryphal stories of late-into-the-night church council conversations about who owns which cupboards in the church. And if that is not indicative enough of 'turf wars' within the church, you may recognise the accusation of 'favouring' within the church. Sometimes it's the 'youth' that we apparently favour; other times it's the needs of the worship band or the demands of the Mothers' Union. (Apologies to all exemplified in this previous sentence; I am not stereotyping, simply hoping to make a point).

Question: What can you intentionally do to avoid accidentally creating favourites?

5. PRACTISE 'ONE-LEGGED' DELEGATION

Churches often boast of shared responsibility and lay leadership. However, it is the sad reality that a number of church leaders find it easier to delegate responsibility than they do to delegate the necessary and accompanying authority.

An associate vicar told me he had been delegated the responsibility of overseeing Alpha but was then criticised by the vicar openly at a PCC meeting for changing the venue for Alpha meetings. I remember the worship leader who was given the responsibility of choosing hymns and songs for Sunday services but then criticised for the choices being made.

I'm not suggesting that it is easy to delegate both responsibility and authority, I'm simply suggesting that the church in which this challenge is not explored and worked through will have a culture in which leadership is frustrated, people are reticent to offer leadership, and, ultimately, of leadership paralysis.

Question: When delegating do you clarify what authority does and does not go with the delegated responsibility?

6. ENSURE YOU STIFLE CREATIVITY AND ENTREPRENEURIAL ATTITUDES

Healthy churches are 'fertile'; places where, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, ideas and initiatives appear – in worship, witness, mercy ministries and intercession. Sadly, there are too many leaders who struggle to embrace this creativity, perhaps because they feel it is out of their 'control'. Others resist ideas because their existence does not massage their own ego, and they find it difficult to welcome them as a complement to the skills and ideas that God has given to others.

Question: How do you actively encourage creativity and where do you find it difficult to embrace the new ideas of others?

7. DEVELOP A GOOD BLIND EYE

One of the appalling discoveries over the last few years is how the church as a whole has turned a blind eye to some totally unacceptable abuses in the past.

However, it's not just in regard to abuse that a 'blind eye' culture is unhealthy. There are other (smaller) lapses that are toxic to the Kingdom culture of the church. Irregular financial arrangements, double standards of ethical decision making, wilful disregard for health and safety, sexist, racist or other inappropriate comments are sometimes excused with the saying, 'That's just them'. What is even worse, in some churches, is that it is the senior leadership who are guilty of such lapses. I might be old-fashioned, but I do wince when I hear clergy swear in public, am massively perturbed when conference speakers tell lewd jokes, and am genuinely surprised by some of the financial 'laxity' which I occasionally come across. I think we need to rediscover our 'What Would Jesus Do?' wrist bands.

Question: Have you one or two people who you know would be willing to challenge you over ethical, financial or other 'lapses'?

CONCLUSION

Cultures can be toxic or Kingdom-releasing and Gospel-honouring. I hope and pray that your steps might always be away from the former and in favour of the latter.

