

SEVEN THINGS TO AVOID AS A LEADER

BY CHARLES BURGESS, CPAS LEADERSHIP SPECIALIST

In the past, when embarking on a new role I would ask my predecessor: 'What are the things I really need to avoid?' The answers were often as helpful and revealing as the 'Must do's'. Reflecting on my own experience, and our work with those who lead in churches, here are seven things I think a leader should actively seek to avoid.

1. LOSING YOUR SENSE OF CALL

Some years ago I spoke with a clergy person who, during a period of intense personal pressure and conflict primarily triggered by a major change initiative, said that the one single factor that enabled them to keep going was the strong sense of call they had experienced to that role. Since then I have heard so many similar experiences. They reinforce the need to prayerfully and intentionally nurture our sense of

calling, to keep it alive and fresh. A strong sense of call sharpens our priorities. It also keeps turning us back to a reliance on Christ rather than our own resources and strengths, particularly in those difficult times.

2. EXERCISING UNHEALTHY CONTROL

All leaders must exercise a level of control. The question is at what point does it become 'unhealthy'? If I'm honest, my sense is that many church leaders exercise too much control, which is not only theologically contentious, but over

time, fosters a disempowered church culture in which any meaningful sense of team is stunted, gifts are never given opportunity to emerge, and creativity is stifled. Such a church may feel 'safe' but is probably on a path of slow decline. It's also potentially energy-sapping for the leader who begins to wonder why they increasingly seem to have to do everything.

Fostering a permission-giving culture is tough. It demands from the leader time and energy, personal inner security, practical faith and good leadership skills of discernment and delegation. Even if undertaken wisely, things almost always will get messy because people are messy, and growth will only happen through many failures and mistakes along the way. But over the long haul, an empowered culture releases life.

3. FORGETTING THE PEOPLE BIT

1 Corinthians 13:13 and John 13:34 give a clear steer about kingdom priorities. This isn't primarily about whether we have a strongly pastoral heart or not. It's about whether as leaders we actively enable a culture in which people matter, rather than just programmes: a place where all who want to can grow in their discipleship, take risks of faith and know the support and care of others. It's reflected in the way Christians practically behave towards each other, whether in gathered or scattered contexts.

Experience tells us that creating such a culture is challenging. However, the personal priorities and behaviours we model as leaders are likely to play a significant role. For example, who do we talk to after a



service; do we find a way of publically celebrating the ministries of those who do not have a high profile or are part of the 'in crowd'; does our rhythm of prayer encompass all in the church?

4. FAILING TO ATTEND TO SERIOUS CHARACTER FLAWS

We all prefer to avoid our own character flaws and can often delude ourselves into thinking they don't really impact our leadership. They include a wealth of weak spots and limitations which may surface in, for example, lying, losing our temper, talking disparagingly of others etc. Unfortunately, unresolved serious flaws have a way of leaking out; perhaps through an overheard inadvertent remark or a tendency to lie under pressure. Our effectiveness as leaders is compromised by such behaviour because it erodes trust, and trust in a leader is foundational to much of a church's life and vision. For instance, a PCC is unlikely to function well – to make difficult decisions and deal with conflict well, to enjoy a high degree of corporate honesty and accountability – unless the leader enjoys a high measure of trust. When a serious character issue resists change and healing, it can be helpful to prayerfully work it through with a trusted friend or spiritual guide, which is a cue for the next 'avoid'.

5. FAILING TO BUILD A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

Many leaders speak of feeling isolated and alone. Arguably, local church structures can contribute to this, but it can also be a failure by the leader to place a high enough priority – and therefore time and energy – in investing in a strong support base with friends and family, mentors, spiritual directors and colleagues, and others who can give helpful feedback and encouragement.

A recent Church of England report cites such support as a better predictor of church growth than hours worked. However, often the demanding nature of leadership roles means that without a very high degree of personal, deliberate and ongoing commitment to arranging such support, it simply will not happen.

6. FORGETTING WHO THIS IS ALL ABOUT

'He must increase but I must decrease' (John 3:30). John the Baptist's words set the direction for our compass of personal ambition, but various factors can conspire to reverse it. These may include any combination of: the seduction of a wide public platform; a growing reputation; a sense of self-

importance associated with the role or even 'the collar'; an unhealthy deference from churchgoers and an inflated sense of personal ambition.

Ultimately, as Christian leaders, we first and foremost serve Christ, so left unchecked, any drift towards an inappropriate elevation of ourselves will, over time, mean we will gradually disengage from the vine Jesus speaks of in John 15. Yet we need this deep connection to stand any chance of leading well. If our attachment to the vine is compromised, so is our leadership. This can end badly for the church and individual.

At its root, this is a character issue but one that can be very difficult to discern, often because outwardly, things seem to be going so well. Once again, a support network is vital, including a critical friend who has both the wisdom and courage to help us to discern whether we need to reflect and repent.

7. IGNORING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Many churches have them: the bully on the PCC; the long-standing feud between two church members; the group leader with a significant following wedded to their role but who, in truth, is ill-suited to it. Effective leaders move towards tackling problems, particularly those problems which exert an unhelpful influence over the wider church, or encourage factions and create a toxic culture. But these issues need to be handled with care. There are usually reasons why they have not been confronted previously, and why they have become an elephant in the room.

To begin with, if possible, share the issue and agree a way forward with other trusted leaders, while being shrewd about timing and covering the situation with prayer. Recognise also that a complete resolution may not be possible, but one which lances the toxic boil may be enough for the moment. A leader's willingness to engage with the elephant, providing it is done wisely, will very often release within the church a renewed sense of freedom, life and energy.

IN CONCLUSION

Reflecting on these seven things may help us to avoid them, and to focus our leadership on the One we serve.



FOR REFLECTION

1. Which one or two of these most resonates with you and your context, and why?
2. If you were advising yourself about helpful steps to take in addressing an issue, what would you be saying?
3. What have you learned about who you are, your character and inner drivers, as you have sought to address any of these issues in your own ministry and how have you applied this learning to your leadership?