

The Session as Congregational Leaders

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Rev. Dr. Peter Coutts, Varsity Acres Presbyterian Church in Calgary AB

What makes the leadership session different from the maintenance-oriented session?

Why is it important today to shift more towards being the leadership session?

Providing an overview of the main tasks of leadership though an outline of the leadership process.

One could call this "leadership 101".

Intro (4 Minutes, plus sharing of leadership definitions)

Thanks for being here for this webinar. I hope you find it helpful.

This 40 minute presentation may appear to you as being very dense with information, but really I am only making 9 points in 40 minutes

You will receive the full script for this presentation

So relax, listen, and take note as needed

I recently compared 8 "authoritative" lists of the character qualities of a "vital and faithful congregation." Among those 8 lists there was only one character quality that was common to all: "faithful and capable leadership."

Vital and faithful congregations require capable and faithful leadership.

This is more and more true with every passing year

And it has been since 1958.

Why?

- Leadership is always contextual, and our two contexts are changing rapidly:
 - Society (beyond the congregation) has changed dramatically
 - Societal change has changed the context that is our congregations

Presbyterian Sessions today have to express leadership more than we've had to for generations.

So..... what is leadership?

[ASK PARTICIPANTS TO SOME OF THEIR DEFINITIONS]

EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US has a personal working definition of leadership (that you hold consciously or subconsciously), and we work out of that definition all the time.

Here are a few bits of definition I like:

“Leaders bring the future to the present” (Bruce Avolio)

- We bring concern for the future into our present reflection
- We choose to take present action for the sake of the future wellbeing of our congregation

“Tackling tough problems—problems that often require an evolution of values—is the end of leadership; getting that work done is its essence.” (Ron Heifetz)

- Leaders are called to tackle the tough, important issues of the congregation
- The values people hold will frame how people understand a problem and will promote the solutions they have for the problem.
- Dealing with deep issues frequently requires reviewing and revising the values & priorities held by a congregation.

“Leadership is influence—nothing more and nothing less.” (John C. Maxwell)

- It is about helping people choose and pursue new aspirations
- Leaders are in the motivation business.

A Leadership Process

So how does a leader go about leading?
How does a Session express leadership?

People have different ideas about that:

- Here is a picture of my books on leadership
- Here is a picture of my books on motivation

There are MANY MANY ways to describe how a leader goes about leading!

For today's purposes we are going to look at a leadership process

- A sequence of steps your Session can take that walks you through the tasks of leadership as you deal with an issue
- For each step we will explore WHY this is important in congregational leadership
- To help us, we will follow the story of one Session dealing with an important issue common to many congregations

Scanning

Scanning is the first practice of leadership

- It is being mindful of congregational life and mindful of the congregation's wider context, which is its surrounding community / society
- Scanning seeks to observe what is changing & emerging
- Those changes may be:
 - Positive things that the congregation should be capitalizing on
 - Negative things that can bring harm to the congregation
- The first role of Session is to watch, and notice (take note of what we see)

Scanning is important

- We can only address issues that we are aware of
- Sometimes the sooner we become aware the easier it is to address the issue (before it becomes a big problem!)

I believe scanning is a pastoral practice

- It is an expression of faith-filled care
- In congregations (more often than not) scanning
 - discovers needs (within the congregation or the neighbourhood)
 - people in need that we feel an empathy for
 - needs that call us to be servants in helping

Example:

- in one congregation I served, the Session in its scanning *noticed* that the elder district system wasn't working.
 - Now, most Sessions see that their district system isn't working! And most Sessions look at this issue as a nuisance problem that needs to be managed, so
 - We move congregants from one district to another
 - We cajole elders to take more congregants in their districts
 - We try to get new elders to share the load
 - We categorize congregants as needing visits or not needing visits, perhaps even create a district of congregants that we no longer care for.

Does that sound familiar?

Our Session *noticed* that the elder district system wasn't working, and these management solutions were really not solutions at all.

Scanning is a pastoral practice:

- Our fixes were failing
- Elders were feeling guilty that they weren't fulfilling their responsibilities
- We were losing touch with many congregants

The elders saw what they always saw about the district system, but this time they took note of it, and wanted to know WHY it was failing

Sensemaking

This is the next practice once you've noticed an issue

This practice asks

- What is really happening here with this issue?
- Why is the issue the way it is? What is at its root? The causes?

It is my sense that many Sessions don't work hard and long enough at sensemaking

- The human animal seems to be satisfied with superficial analysis and we crave simple answers for our problems
- But the problems that dog our congregations are not simple, and the solutions often aren't either

A simple practice for avoiding superficiality is to ask

"why...why...why?"

- When you notice an issue, ask "why is the issue the way it is?"
- For each answer you get, ask "and why is this the way it is?"
- By asking "why...why...why" you drill down to see the roots of the issue

Our Session decided to try to make sense of our challenges making the district system work

- When we asked "why can't we make it work?" we got the usual answers
 - Elders are busy, the people we visit are busy, it's hard to make appointments, I feel like I'm imposing, time just passes and I never seem to get around to it
- We took those answers, asked "why?" again and drilled down to root issues
 - For some elders district visitation was simply not a priority
 - Visiting for some elders was an anxious experience, and they wanted to avoid the feeling of anxiousness
 - Being trained to conduct visits did not help some elders feel capable

- Visiting made some elders feel guilty, but the guilt they felt in not visiting was not as strong as the guilt they felt when they visited someone they hadn't seen for a long time. It simply felt less guilty not to do it.
- Those who liked it and did it well had a pastoral heart for people

We conducted a poll. We asked elders which option would they prefer:

- Conducting church business only
- Pastoral visitation only
- Church business and pastoral visitation

The finding

- 40% preferred church business only
- 40% preferred pastoral visitation only
- 20% were content doing both (as directed by the Book of Forms)

Assessment: “Is this a “Management Moment” or a “Leadership Moment”?

“Management Moments” occur when you have a clearly understood issue and accepted, functional solutions for the issue

- Eg. You arrive at worship and there are not sufficient ushers to collect the offering. Solution: you tap a couple of people on the shoulder and you ask them to help.

“Leadership Moments” occur when the issue is not clearly understood and a solution is not readily apparent.

- Eg. the young adult members of our congregation who grew up here are no longer interested in attending church. It may not be clear at all why this is so, and the Session can be lost for solutions.

When you have done sufficient sensemaking you have what you need to make this assessment. If it appears to be a leadership moment you go on in this process.

For our Session looking at the challenges of making the district system work we realized that addressing the issue would take a more fundamental change than we'd been doing.

Faith Reflection (9 minutes to here)

Faith reflection should be a habit for the leadership of a faith community like a church, but I find that it isn't

I think a management mindset is so ingrained in congregational leadership that many sessions skip this step.

God desires congregations to pursue some great, overarching purposes, but I think we assume that just by being a congregation we are fulfilling those purposes.

But as we've seen, "leadership moments" occur when the issue is not clearly understood and a solution is not readily apparent.

So part of the leaders' work is to go back to first principles. Ask:

- At its core, what does God call the church to be?
- How do we see in the New Testament the followers of Jesus pursuing these callings?

In our example, the elders explored several New Testament passages about the work of elders / bishops, the centrality of care as Christian ministry. We also noted the story found in Acts 6. The apostles were so busy teaching and leading that pastoral care was being overlooked. So they called seven people to be specialists in care.

So what did the early church do?

- It recognized that leadership and pastoral care could be understood as separate tasks, with people with specific giftedness fulfilling those tasks.
- The decision they made was practical

We also noted that the Book of Forms permits the office of Deacon to (in part) meet the need for care in a congregation

Bring the Congregation Into the Conversation

If a congregation needs to be solidly supportive of a new innovation or a new direction, then it is important to open up discussion in the congregation sooner rather than later.

Here we tend to focus discussion the wrong thing.

Specifically, too often the first conversation sessions have with the congregation as a whole is when they have a proposal for change.

Conversations need to start earlier focusing on the concern / the issue.

The congregation needs to understand and appreciate the issue IS a concern.

The goal in early conversation is to build consensus that “how things are now” is no longer acceptable.

If a congregation comes to be uniformly dissatisfied with the status quo that dissatisfaction:

- Builds motivation / resolve to find solutions / new directions
- increases the probability that the congregation will accept the future proposed direction / solution.

In our example congregation, we highlighted for the congregation our desire to improve upon the traditional district system. The congregation simply viewed this initiative as a good thing in our case. No debate.

Enter a Learning Phase

So far,

- the session has recognized there is an issue
- they've drilled down asking "why" to figure out the origins of the issue
- the congregation is on board desiring the issue to be addressed
- you've done some faith reflection on the topic

The next question is, "What do we do?"

If the leadership process is going to break down, this is typically where it happens.

Recall that I said that "Leadership Moments" occur when the issue is not clearly understood and a solution is not readily apparent.

Figuring out solutions / directions is where the rubber hits the road in a leadership moment. Why? Because the solutions are:

- not a part of our history
- not something we've experienced before
- these things create natural limitations for our imagination and point-of-view. It is hard to think outside the box.

At this point a session will feel a natural pressure. Imagine two opposing forces representing two realities:

- the first force is the recognition that "we have to make changes"
- the opposing force is the realization that "we don't know what to do."

These two forces working in opposition can quickly impede progress. It can become an impassable impasse.

So how do you break that impasse?

- Leaders often try to break through by creating more urgency to change
- You set some learning goals.

There are three ways you can go about learning how to address your issue:

- 1] Read books on the topic.
- 2] Look for congregations that have addressed the issue. How did they do it? What can we learn from them? See if you can find several different ways to address your issue.
- 3] Design and try some prototype solutions. Remember that “Leadership Moments” occur when the issue is not clearly understood and a solution is not readily apparent. Prototyping is trying on a possible solution on a small scale for a brief period of time. The goal of prototyping is to learn from the experience of doing. Trying the prototype will help you become clearer about the issue and will help you move towards a workable solution for the issue.

In our example, the session did two of these things:

1] The prototyped. They thought a possible solution might be having double sized elder districts with two elders looking after it. So the session created one district like that and tried it for a year. The experience was reviewed and we learned that it addressed some of the issues but not all. On that basis they decided not to go any further down that road.

2] They looked for congregations that had developed their own solutions for the challenges of elder districts. The session was quite surprised to discover that there were a number of churches out there that had quite a variety of practices.

Decide Direction, Implement with Determination, and Learn from the Experience

Because of our limited time together, here I want to focus on implementation of a new direction. This is the #2 hump in leading change in a congregation. 2 facts about implementation:

- the third largest survey ever conducted of American congregations found that half of congregations have an officially adopted direction but insufficient motivation to pursue implementation
- Second, across all organizations (regardless of what kind of organization they are) 70% of planned change initiatives fail during the implementation phase.

For any church turning the vision into reality is hard.

There is several ways to address this challenge, but we will focus here on one: develop an excellent plan for implementation.

An excellent plan is motivational because it strengthens the congregation's belief that "we can do this!"

There are many resources to help you learn how to develop an excellent plan, but here are some highlights:

1] Describe the goal clearly and concretely. Vague goals fail to shape implementation and fail to motivate. The goal should paint a picture of what of the outcome you desire in a detailed way.

2] Name the steps and stages that you will have to pass through to get from now to goal attainment. These are often called objectives. Make them easily understandable, realistically achievable, assignable (so people doing the work of implementation know exactly what they have to do), measurable (so you can see if you are making progress) and controllable (so people can make progress and have success)

When you are into the implementation phase, remember that you are still learning. As I said, “Leadership Moments” occur when the issue is not clearly understood and a solution is not readily apparent.

Even when you have...

- A congregational consensus to pursue a specific direction
- A plan you are convinced will work

...there will still be some uncertainty whether you’ve really understood the issue and whether this really is the perfect solution

So as you proceed through implementation, learn from our experience. Be willing to adjust the plan as you go.

In our example session, thinking about elder districts, they decided on a few things:

- They questioned the Book of Forms assumption that every elder can be an excellent generalist: capable for leadership, congregational management, and pastoral care.
- They decided to let elders focus their involvement in the area(s) where their interests and giftedness lay
- They looked at the Book of Forms option to have deacons, but dismissed it as an option for their congregation
- It was agreed to keep the structure of the district system, but no longer require the district visitor to be an active, serving elder
- Rather, following the Acts 6 example, decided that some of the districts could be cared for by non-elders with a giftedness and interest in pastoral care

So here is a practical step-by-step process to help you address an issue in congregational life that is a “Leadership Moment”: when the issue is not clearly understood and a solution is not readily apparent.

1. Scan your context and note issues
2. Sensemaking: “what is really happening here?”

3. Assess whether this is a management moment or a leadership moment
4. Engage in faith reflection on the issue
5. Bring the congregation into the conversation to help them feel dissatisfaction with the status quo
6. Enter a learning phase seeking possible solutions for the issue
7. Decide direction, implement with determination and learn from the experience of implementation

An excellent exercise is to look at those 7 steps and ask yourself, “for our session...

- Which of these steps are our strengths?
- Which of these steps are our weaknesses?

And then ask, “how might we go about strengthening those areas of weakness, and build them into our habits of practice?”

If a session wants to step up its game as congregational leaders it will need to be very intentional in addressing its weaknesses. But here is an idea. You can use this process to scan the session’s leadership capacity, and to do some sensemaking around the strengths and weaknesses of your leadership practice. Then, carry on applying this process to yourself!

Parting Thoughts

In our society today there is an astonishing amount of leadership training going on in organizations of every kind. Every organization faces rapidly changing contexts, so leadership is critical for the future well-being of organizations.

Consequently, a lot of time and effort has gone into figuring out the most effective ways to do leadership training. What works, what doesn’t?

What have these studies discovered?

The critical discovery is that educational programs such as this tend to fail in the aspiration to help participants become better leaders. Put another way, on average, this workshop today will only help a minority of participants. According to studies, most of you will not benefit from this webinar.

Why? It comes down to how you see yourself and what you do about that.

Ask yourself: “am I a leader?” Is your answer a confident “yes”, a self-conscious “no” or an uncertain “I’m not sure”?

In The Presbyterian Church our formal leaders are called “ruling elders” and in that name is the implication that you are a leader. If you are an elder, the congregation has seen in you the giftedness for leadership and so they have called you to a leadership office.

To benefit from a webinar like this you first have to believe that you are a leader.

Now we have all seen leaders. Some are poor, many are good, and some are exceptional. Leadership studies have shown that some people by their nature are oriented to be great leaders.

However! Studies show that most people, regardless of their nature, can learn to be leaders. Leadership capacity is learnable. That’s because most of what leaders do is rooted in skills. And what makes the difference in learning leadership? “Do you make leadership your craft?” Leadership is a craft like woodworking, preaching, gardening, writing, playing guitar. If you make leadership your craft then you will become proactive in your self-development as a leader.

As I said, benefiting from a workshop like this will come down to two things: how you see yourself (“I am a leader”) and what you do about that (make leadership your craft).

If you make leadership your craft you will benefit every organization you are in: your family, the hobby club, your workplace, your curling team, your church.

If you make leadership your craft you will want to build on the inspiration you find in this webinar, take the notes from it and strengthen your skills.

One last thought. If you make leadership your craft you will become more conscious of the moments and opportunities you have to express leadership. Those moments are also learning moments. If you take that opportunity, express leadership in some way, then reflect on the experience learning from it, you will accelerate your development as a leader. Studies show this is the most effective way to grow as a leader.

Know this:

Most everyone can learn the skills of leadership

Believe you are a leader

Make leadership your craft

You will grow as a leader, becoming a greater asset for every organization you belong to.

Recommended Books to Read:

Ron Heifetz, ***Leadership Without Easy Answers***. 1987.

In my view still the best leadership book written. Even though it is not written specifically for congregational application, its terminology, concepts and illustrations are all very helpful. If you can read only one book on leadership this is it.

Jackson Carroll, ***As One With Authority*** (2nd edition). 2013.

Dr. Carroll approaches this congregation-based presentation on leadership from the perspectives of sociology, theological reflection and a lifetime of research. I found the first edition immensely helpful as I was beginning my ministry. Now 30 years later the second edition is supremely helpful. While the target reader for this book is clergy it is approachable and applicable for anyone in congregational leadership.

Peter Coutts, ***Choosing Change***. 2013

I know....it can seem more than a tad self-serving, but I am of the humble (and I think objective) opinion that this is pretty helpful book. My book looks at leadership as a task in motivating people helping them to choose a new direction for congregational life and strengthening their confidence for pursuing that goal. The book introduces the basics of motivation psychology then applies it in a step-by-step way to help congregational leaders move from recognizing issues through goal implementation. You can learn more about the book at www.choosingchange.ca

All books available through amazon.ca

