Critical Leadership Behaviors.

We've now talked about the well-defined leader, the one who is secure within his or her own skin, who maintains good personal boundaries, who makes decisions according to rational thought more than emotional promptings.

Now let's look at leadership behaviors. These behaviors actually exist above the thirteen or so daily responsibilities that consume the pastor's time. These actually can be considered as processes that the pastor must embrace and develop in order to lead effectively.

The Leadership Triangle

My organization, The Armstrong Group (TAG), has discussed thoroughly what we call the Leadership Triangle. [1] The concepts denote that there are actually three leadership challenges which present the pastor with three options to confront these challenges.

Glance at the chart. [2] This summarizes some of these differences based on whether the challenge at hand is technical (tactical), strategic, or adaptive (transformational).

	Tactical	Strategic	Adaptive (Transformational)
Role	Expert	Synthesizer	Facilitator
Tone	Confident	Vision-casting	Creative
Key Question	What's wrong?	What's the focus?	What's the question?
Problems are to be…	Solved	Planned	Reframed
Interaction	Training	Inspiring	Free-flowing and robust
Tense	Present	Future	Past, present, future

In our work with hundreds of organizations, we've observed that successful leaders use all three of these primary modes of leadership: tactical, strategic, and transformational. Note that your role as leader changes dramatically as the nature of the problem at hand changes. Unfortunately, all too often the pastor leader never changes his or her stance.

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[1] See Kevin Ford & Ken Tucker. *The Leadership Triangle* (New York: Morgan James, 2013).

[2] Adapted from *Governance as Leadership* by Richard Chait, et.al.

And usually what is occurring is the leader attempting to remain in the expert position even through the situation calls for another leadership posture. And in many ways, the congregation, ruling boards and staff conspire (unconsciously) to keep the senior pastor in this technical expert role, even though the situation may have shifted. We'll go into a bit more detail about how each of these three options works in Chapter 6. I do encourage you to pick up *Leadership Triangle* for a full discussion.

Let's turn to the specific behaviors that each leader must employ in order to maintain alignment.

The Overarching Responsibilities

1. **Keeper of the culture**

   As the leader of your church, one primary leadership responsibility you have is to protect the culture of your church. Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K) or the Duke Blue Devils basketball team once was asked what he thought was his most important function in his role as basketball coach. His answer was to protect the culture. Coach K has molded over the years arguably the most successful college basketball program in the history of the sport. He would argue that in addition to his basketball wisdom, he has been especially assiduous in his creation and maintenance of the culture of his program at Duke.

   Here's what Coach K had to say about culture:

   > I know "culture" is a big thing in companies, and it's been a big part of my success throughout my coaching career at West Point, Duke University and for our U.S. National Team. Developing a winning culture is as important to achieving your mission as recruiting the right talent for your team. But what does developing a culture really mean? And what does it look like?

   > To me, developing a culture means having a tradition that maintains the standards you want to define your program. It's not something that can be accomplished overnight, nor is it something that can be done once and forgotten about. Instead, culture is a continuum. This means it is not merely about creating it, but perpetuating it.[3]

   As I will demonstrate in my chapter on culture, culture eats strategy for breakfast. You can make all the plans and schemes you wish. But if you have not given adequate attention to the culture, you'll find those strategies going awry quickly.

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[3] Mike Krzyzewski. "What does developing a culture really mean?" August 29, 2017.

2. **Technical knowledge**

   These are the skills necessary for a successful ministry that we discussed in the chapter on pastor responsibilities. These include adequate sermon preparation and delivery, caring for those who struggle within the congregation, and so forth. And remember, you will only do about a third of these really well. Another third you'll do somewhat okay. And a third you will be really poor at performing. Knowing this, and how to get those things that you're not good at (and drain you emotionally in the process), will go a long way in determining the success of your ministry.

3. **Business acumen[4]**

   That's right, if you're going to be successful in ministry, you need to have some business sense. And the larger your church and staff grow, the more important this becomes. Of course, if you have the luxury of an executive pastor, or staff administrator – someone who functions more or less as a COO – you'll be able to off load much of this function. But still, having a rudimentary sense of best business practices will serve you well in hiring and aligning the people who work for you.

   Let's take a quick look at some of those best business practices that should prove helpful as you wear the business hat in your ministry. Look at the footnote below for a couple of authors that can greatly expand this discussion.

   Standing far and away as the most important practice is the selection and development of your staff team. Unfortunately, so many leaders (not just church leaders, but leaders of all stripes) neglect to due diligence here, and suffer the consequences along with their congregations.

   Take a look at this progression:

   - First, Select Your People. This may be the most important business function you will ever perform in your pastor role. It is probably the most poorly done. Who should I slot into the various positions that I have available (assistant pastor, admin assistant, youth director, etc.)? What skills do they bring to the table?

     Two initial questions are critical to begin with: What does this job actually involve (What will I expect the new hire actually being doing each day)? And,

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[4] Books that I have found helpful in increasing business acumen are those by Marcus Buckingham and Patrick Lencioni.

What particular skills and ability will be essential to accomplish those particular functions I just listed?

When it comes to gathering information on various candidates, resumes and reference interviews are very important, but so is the face-to-face interview with the short list of candidates. Here are some questions I like:

- Relate an experience where you asked for help in your previous workplace.
- What kinds of people give you the most difficulty. Why them?
- Describe the kind of work that gives you the most satisfaction and energizes you.
- Describe the kind of work you like the least, that you find draining.
- Describe, as specifically as possible, the characteristics of an ideal supervisor that would optimally motivate you.
- Describe the most important feature of a very satisfying workday for you.
- What personality traits or behaviors in others do you find difficult to accept or like?
- Describe a situation in a work setting where you were in conflict with a colleague. Tell me the particulars of the situation. How did it get started? How did it develop? How was it resolved?

The answers to these questions hopefully will go a long way in helping you understand who this person is that you are interviewing, and how she will fit into your staff team.

- Set Expectations for Your People. The Gallup organization asks a set of questions to organizations to determine the overall health of an organization. The first question is this: Do you understand what is expected of you at work? The majority of people asked this question across the organization spectrum answer negatively. The reason people don't know what is expected is that they, up front, are not told adequately, or as the job evolves, they are not kept up to date on expectatons.

  And this leads to adequate understanding of performance criteria (that should be included in every job description) that is behaviorally specific to each job. A question I like is this, If I turned on a video camera, and it captured everything you're supposed to do in a week, list for me all of those specific functions. If these are currently not in place for you and everyone on your staff, I'd first have each person list specific responsibilities that they perform each week. I'd look at each list and have each person come in and modify the list until it accurately reflects expectations. Avoid generalities and subjective comments.

Once the criteria is in place, then periodic performance reviews need to be conducted that are all about those specific functions.

- Motivate Your People. People are motivated in all sorts of ways. Take a look at Paul White and Gary Chapman's book, *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace.* This details ways we motivate others (although it should be noted that some people are completely self-motivated and find external motivation an annoyance).

  Once you have your people on board and busy at their tasks, one responsibility you have is to keep them motivated doing what they're doing.

- Develop Your People. Hopefully you now have the right people (their talents align with their functions) doing the various functions in the church. And these people know what is expected of them (and are evaluated accordingly). And you have been motivating them. A critical ongoing function that you the leader is to continually monitor their ongoing development.

  A good annual conversation to have with each of your direct reports (and they with theirs if the staff is that large) is the Individual Development Plan (IDP) discussion. This asks each person where they see themselves in five years, how they plan to get there, and how you and the church might assist them in reaching this goal.

  Probably no other discussion is more important to each person's (including you) overall morale. When people know that their organization cares about them and where they are going, and is willing to assist in that journey, they tend to stick around with higher morale and productivity.

  Once people's talents are identified (and the Strengthsfinder ® assessment from the Gallup organization is an excellent tool to identify talents), these talents need to be developed. An example of this is the preaching ability of a new seminarian hired as an assistant.

  And certainly, all of the volunteers that fill the ranks of the church's unfolding ministry need to be developed. Of course, this takes time, but the value add to the ongoing work of the church is certainly worth it.

Now it's time to align your organization. To function optimally (or even adequately), your organization must be aligned. And how is the organization aligned? Around the following elements:

- This is why we're here (the mission)

- This is what matters most to us in this church (the values)
- This is where we're going (the vision), and
- This is how we're going to get there (the strategy, and how your ministry that you're doing now fits in to the mission, vision, and values).

This four stanza song must be sung over and over again to your staff and to your church board. In lieu of this, people will default to self-interest. I personally believe that every church board meeting and every performance evaluation should begin with this song, so that whatever is occurring can be evaluated and aligned around these four key points.

4. **Strategic approach**

Strategic challenges relate to external changes. They are future-oriented. They are about major transitions. Such challenges require more than a tactical fix. Strategic challenges require strategic leadership, the art of leveraging strengths in order to minimize weaknesses and capitalize on opportunities. But strategic leadership often involves dealing with opposition, as internal stakeholders may resist the needed change.

Just as a missionary tries to understand a new culture, strategic leaders are on a quest to understand their external environment. They must ask big-picture questions.

How do people think?
What motivates people?
What do they value?
How do they form relationships?
How do they make decisions?

5. **Board and governance**

Every protestant denomination, within their polity, has a governing board. The actual authority of this board varies from denomination to denomination. It is important for the minister to understand clearly how his/her denomination spells out the authority of the board, especially as it relates to the minister and his/her functioning. It is also critical (because boards are usually constantly turning over in membership each year) that board members know clear what their responsibilities are and the limits of their authority. Almost invariably there is confusion on this point.

In most denominational structures, the ruling board has only one employee: the senior pastor. The board along with the pastor(s) sets the overall direction of the church, then turns the operation of things over to the senior pastor and staff

to carry out the mission of the church. The senior pastor is then held accountable to the board to carry out the mission s/he has been given to do. The senior pastor must be strong and trustworthy to carry out the day-to-day operations, so that the board doesn't have to worry about this, or get involved in these tasks.

The main functions of boards are as follows:

- Cradling the mission and vision of the organization. (Why are we here and Where are we going?)
- Guarding the organization's values. (What is truly important to us?)
- Forcing an external focus. (What is our role in the community?)
- Separating large issues from small ones. (What is the most important thing?)
- Enabling an outcome-driven organizing system. (Does what we're doing square with our purpose?)

Boards usually experience difficulties in the following areas:

- They spend their time on trivial issues. Boards must keep their focus on the broad issues that confront the organization.
- They focus on the short-term. Boards must be constantly peering into the future, taking the long view of things. The present is not their primary focus. And certainly very little time should be spent on what happened in the past.
- They become reactive, monitoring the day-to-day operations and reacting to what they are seeing. In contrast, the high-functioning board actively sets policy according to the overall needs and direction of the organization.
- They become caught in rehashing, reviewing, and redoing things. Again we're back to the details of the organization, where the board should not stray.
- Their accountability becomes leaky. Boards need to hold CEOs accountable. But if the board steps into the domain of the CEO and assumes his/her functions, it becomes impossible to effectively hold the CEO accountable.

6. **Leadership**. Much has been written about best leadership practices. What I have found to less well understood is how leadership activities are done well when the issue is adaptive or transformational.

- ***Observing: Getting on the balcony.*** This may be the most important function of leadership. Everyone knows that the 'fog of war,' whether real combat, or the warfare that swirls around each of us from time to time in our organizational lives, can blur our ability to reflect on what is occurring and what is truly important at any given moment. Great athletes have the ability to play the game while maintaining a detached ability to observe the

unfolding drama as a whole. Wayne Getzky's (former NHL hockey great) quote, "I skate to where the puck is going to be" is an example of this.

It's far easier, especially when intensity rises, to adopt established beliefs, or the group think (i.e. 'consensus building') of the moment, then to critically evaluate the merits of a situation. The herd instinct makes it hard to see another direction when there is so much dust obscuring the scene.

Getting on the balcony, and making observations from there, is arguably the critical first step in exercising leadership. This is not a disengaged position. Absenting oneself from the fray, even for a moment, can be very difficult, but yields important perspectives. I remove myself from the immediate conundrum to take a position that allows me to get a better handle on how all the processes are unfolding and conspiring to create the challenge.

However getting on the balcony does require:

➢ You to be well-defined and non-anxious (blue zone = "None of what I'm seeing is personal to me"). Members of the organization are often consumed with anxiety, and demand immediate action from the leader. This sense of urgency can tap directly into the leader's own personal issues ("I must be competent. Therefore I must rescue these people with a technical solution").
➢ This allows you to remain resolute when the temptation and seduction is to be drawn into the action and lose the critical perspective. Getting people to address those deeply felt issues is dangerous and risky. It is always easier to jump into the fray, follow the 'party line,' and attempt to rescue those who are most anxious.

Once on the balcony:

➢ You can hear individual stories, while listening for the 'music' under those stories that will give you critical information as to where a person is actually coming from, how they defend their actions, habits, and ways of thinking, and how they go about resisting the difficult value choices and changes that are critical. Listening to the music, often defined as empathy, is a talent that certain people assume intuitively. Others of us have to struggle to grasp what this 'music' actually is. If someone close to you is much better than you a 'listening to the music,' I'd suggest relying on that person to help you out with the overall tone of a relationship – are people generally content? Are they 'buying in' to what is going on? Who might be dissatisfied? Discouraged? Angry? Resentful?

> ➤ You can see the vital interactions and relationships that make up the interlocking systems within your organization.
>   - ✓ Find out where people are. Who relates to whom? How? Who takes center stage? Who is marginalized, and therefore their voice is never heard? Etc.
>   - ✓ Where have coalitions formed that may or may not be useful to the overall goals of the organization.
>   - ✓ Note the ebb and flow of the energy in the room, both with individuals and with subgroups. As energy levels rise, anxiety invariably is also rising. So ask yourself, What's underneath this rise in anxiety?
>
> ➤ Possibly the most important single element to be noted while on the balcony is the energy in the room. Energy rises and falls with individuals and groups as anxiety is triggered or recedes. When you note the energy rising, you should conclude that for that individual, or the group together, something important is transpiring, and needs to be explored.

To actually effect change, the leader must come off the balcony and once again 'enter the dance.' As the leader is able to see emerging patterns of relationship, she is able to adjust her behavior accordingly.

But a word of caution, the leader must also avoid making snap judgments, and voicing those 'balcony' observations immediately. Reality is many-faceted and can prove elusive to even the most careful observation. This is especially important when judging another person's intentions. When I make a snap decision about another person's intentions, almost invariably I have projected my own issues onto the person I'm evaluating.

- ***Interpreting.*** Once you come down from the balcony, you must interpret to your people what you observe to be happening. "I'm noticing that when we brought up the issue of hiring a part time youth director, the energy went up in the room.   And the main ones to be energized seemed to be the older members of our leadership team. Tell me what that's all about."

  Organizations want you to accept their interpretation of reality. "I just don't see why we need a youth director at this point. When I was young, I never had a youth director." Your job is to reframe toward an alternate view of reality (which is also to move your people toward the mission). "I'm wondering if there's some upset among older members here that limited resources will be directed toward the young rather than toward senior citizen programs."

People caught up in the moment of crisis rarely are able to see clearly the processes around them. As a result, they become a participant in those processes in ways that are less effective.

- *Intervening*. Interventions are based on hypotheses of what is understood to be happening. Interventions are experiments. Strategic planning is the best current guess to go forward. But as initiatives are set in motion to move organizations forward, one must always continue to collect data.

- *Direct Intentional Conversations..* The leader needs to generate heat in the system (but not too much) to get the system to deal with adaptive challenges. Therefore, in order to call attention to realities that may have been completely overlooked and ignored, the leader must encourage intentional conversations that permit the salient issues to emerge. Every organization with a great culture has safe places where people can speak their minds, express their dissent, and call their leaders to account. Are there places within your organization where people can speak their minds without fear of retribution?

- *Identifying the adaptive (transformational) issues*. Hopefully, once on the balcony, the adaptive leader can more easily spot the adaptive issues at play – the gap between espoused values and those values used to make key decision, and the competing commitments that snarl the organization in incongruence. Once seen, the leader than presents to the stakeholders what she understands to be those adaptive issues.

- *Framing the issue*. How an issue is framed is critical – 80% of the answer is in the question. Our minds insist on framing all issues and experiences in one way or another. And often those frames we manufacture are not useful to achieving the success we desire (raising healthy kids, bringing a new product into the marketplace, building a structure that is on time and below cost). How can I frame this issue so that the stakeholders can grasp the issue, and move forward?

- *Giving back the work*. The work (when it is adaptive) is not yours (as the leader). The work belongs to the stakeholders. They would like for you to embrace the work, while they sit back and wait. But they must do the work. And so often leaders, when handed the work of others, are more than happy to dive in applying technical solutions to a problem that is not theirs to solve in the first place.

- *Managing Levels of Anxiety*. Remember, if the stress is too low, people will feel no anxiety that moves them toward action. Therefore the leaders must

find ways to raise the anxiety. But if the stress is too high, people will become paralyzed and will be also unable to act, a situation demanding that the leader lower the anxiety to productive thinking can occur. To meet adaptive challenges, people have to go through a period of painful adjustment, absorb various forms of loss, refashion loyalties to people to whom they feel beholden.

- **Tolerating ambiguity.** Adaptive issues are fraught with ambiguity (as you hopefully have seen in the previous chapters). And that is exactly what no one wants to hear. We want to hear the leader frame a clear problem along with a clear way forward. But a complex world with competing values does not lend it self to easy answers, and ambiguity will always abound.

- **Providing a safe environment.** If a safe environment is not provided, people will not have enough trust to enter into the adaptive work they must perform. Safe environments are created by leaders who are internally aligned and therefore can be trusted. They allow the elephant in the room to emerge. They protect the voice of dissent. They are not afraid to empower those around them.

  And once that safe environment has been provided, the people can have the conflict (Blue Zone) that is necessary to wrestle through the competing values and cobble together a way forward.

Note these additional points:

- Today's problems often come from yesterday's 'solutions'. What worked in the past does not work anymore because of a change in the competitive landscape.
- The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back (The system is perfectly designed to give you the results you're getting"). The system is an unforgiving thing. It can't be defeated, only understood and, over time, transformed.
- Faster often results in slower. It's difficult to overestimate the importance of critical reflection and building ownership of stakeholders on the front end of a change initiative.
- Small changes can produce big results – but the areas of greatest leverage are often the least obvious.
- There is no one to blame. We tend to want to make people scapegoats and culprits. But in fact people generally behave exactly how the system rewards them for behaving.
- Crisis and sabotage can be signs of success. You may have successful accomplished your initiative, but that may result in a paradigm shift and the attending resistance ("I don't want to change").

Notice each of these issues is counterintuitive. And that's what makes organizational life challenging. Marcus Buckingham wrote a book, ˆ*First Break all the Rules,*" that details all of the management issues that are likewise counterintuitive.

Often our worse enemy is our past success. We get trapped into doing things that have always worked in the past, even if those once-valid approaches are not the most effective anymore. This was especially true of Robert E. Lee at the battle of Gettysburg during the American Civil War. He had two things working against him in his past successes: first, he thought his men invincible. Second, following the successful battle plan at Chancellorsville, he thought the same plan would work at Gettysburg (hit them on the flank first, then follow up with a blow through the middle.).

We all have default ways of behaving, thinking, and leading. Our 'defaults' are comfortable for us largely because they have worked in the past. But the downside of defaults is that they blind us to a more robust and wider array of solutions that could actually create more value.

Further Reading

- Tod Bolsinger. *Canoeing the Mountains*
- Ron Heifetz & Marty Linsky. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World.*