

Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team & Staff on the Same Page

Title: *Sticky Teams: Keeping Your Leadership Team and Staff on the Same Page*

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Book Description:

Serving as a church leader can be a tough assignment. Whatever your role, odds are you've known your share of the frustration, conflict, and disillusionment that comes with silly turf battles, conflicting vision, and marathon meetings. No doubt, you've asked yourself, 'How did it get this way?' With practical and accessible wisdom, Larry Osborne explains how it got this way. He exposes the hidden roadblocks, structures, and goofy thinking that sabotage even the best-intentioned teams. Then with time-tested and proven strategies he shows what it takes to get (and keep) a board, staff, and congregation on the same page. Whatever your situation; from start-up phase, to mid-sized, to megachurch, Osborne has been there. As the pastor of North Coast Church he's walked his board, staff, and congregation through the process. Now with warm encouragement and penetrating insights he shares his secrets to building and maintaining a healthy and unified ministry team that sticks together for the long haul.

Book Quotes:

Sticky teams stick together. That's their defining trait. When faced with the differing agendas and clashing perspectives that every team must work through, sticky teams know how to deal with the issues at hand and still come out united in purpose and vision, with a genuine camaraderie undamaged by strong differences. In other words, sticky teams are not only productive; they're healthy.

Location 170

A unified and healthy leadership team doesn't just happen. It has to be a priority.

Location 239

I don't think it's an accident that Jesus predicted church growth but prayed for unity. If left unattended or taken for granted, unity quickly disappears. Unity is the one thing that can't be left to chance.

Location 241

I didn't realize the power organizational problems have to create and exasperate spiritual problems.

Location 252

That's because as the board goes, so goes the rest of the church. And that's why I always recommend focusing on unifying your board, even before the staff and the congregation. Your board needs to be healthy, unified, and working together, because otherwise, everything else soon goes south.

Location 282

1. Doctrinal Unity — I've found that the first component of a unified and healthy leadership team is doctrinal unity.
2. Respect and Friendship — The second component of a unified and healthy ministry team is respect and friendship.
3. Philosophical Unity — The third component of a healthy and unified team is philosophical unity. Simply put, this means having a basic agreement about our priorities and methods of ministry.

Location 358

The dysfunction and disunity in our churches often is not so much a matter of sinful people with evil motives as it is a pattern of failed traditions, policies, and structures that unintentionally tear us apart.

Location 385

I started this monthly meeting to take advantage of an important principle of group dynamics: "Whenever a group of people increase the amount of time they spend together, there is a corresponding increase in their regard and appreciation for one another."

Location 479

The fact is, many of the fiercest conflicts and battles in a church board are triggered by differing experiences and paradigms that we aren't even aware of. We can be using the same words but completely different dictionaries. Without adequate time spent together, it's hard to accurately understand and appreciate these differences, and it's much more likely that conflict will break out.

Location 485

Another significant roadblock to our unity and health as a leadership team was the constant turnover legislated by our church's constitution.

Location 493

To solve the problem of constant turnover, we changed to a system in which board members are elected to one-year terms that can be renewed indefinitely. That removed the lack of accountability that comes with a lifetime appointment, while ensuring that we could keep our best board members for as long as needed.

Location 517

Size is another structural roadblock to unity. When a board, ministry staff, or executive team gets too big, it's hard to get anything done. Last week I talked to a pastor who has twenty-five members on his board. It's no wonder they move at the speed of an arthritic snail.

Location 530

The larger the size of a board, the greater the temptation for board members to think of themselves as representing a particular constituency. If there are seven of us, I feel compelled to care for the whole organization. If there are twenty of us, I'm much more likely to watch out for my own.

Location 532

It's hard to have a winning team with losing players, which is why guarding the gate is one of the most important tasks of leadership.

Location 564

But worst of all, once a toxic board member or a troublesome staff member has a seat on the bus, it can take an act of God to get them off. Removal can be an incredibly difficult process. That's because even the most disruptive board member and unproductive staff members have friends and supporters. Getting them off the bus usually results in their friends and supporters leaving the church as well, and they seldom go quietly.

Location 571

Selecting leaders is too important to be treated this casually. It demands the best people we've got. In fact, your nominating committee (whether it's an official committee or ad hoc group) may be the most important committee in your church. It serves like the headwaters of a river. When there's pollution upstream, it eventually defiles everything downstream.

Location 595

I've also learned that it's important that our board and staff members think of themselves as leaders, not representatives.

Location 628

Our "no theys" rule applies not only to the board; it also applies to every staff meeting and to all of my dealings with the congregation. Now whenever someone says that they've been talking to some people who have a concern, I always ask, "Who are they?" If I'm told that they wouldn't be comfortable having their names mentioned, I respond, "That's too bad, because I'm not comfortable listening to anonymous sources. Let me know when they're willing to be identified. I'll be happy to listen."

Location 660

Another mark of a leadership-oriented team is that it has a completely different agenda than a representative-oriented team. Rather than trying to figure out what everybody wants them to do, leadership teams have only one question: what does God want us to do?

Location 665

I like to remind our board members and staff leaders that we're lobbyists for God. Our primary job is to listen to, discern, and carry out God's will, not the congregation's.

Location 667

Still another important thing to look for when choosing leaders is philosophical alignment. By that I mean agreement with your basic philosophy of ministry and the direction that God has called your church to take.

Location 705

A final grid to use when guarding the gate is team fit. This has two aspects. How will this person fit with the team relationally? How will this person fit with the needs of the team organizationally?

Location 722

I've since learned that if the best person available is not the right person for the job, it's far better to have a long-term vacancy than a long-term cancer on the team—even if everyone else is hounding me to fill the position right now.

Location 747

Never forget, growth changes everything. A storefront church, a midsized church, a large church, and a megachurch aren't simply bigger versions of the same thing. They are completely different animals. They have little in common, especially relationally, organizationally, and structurally.

Location 783

The first sign that the game may have changed is a significant increase in the time spent massaging relationships. Whenever conflict significantly or suddenly increases, absent a major crisis or controversial decision, it usually means that the game has changed and some of the key players never got the memo.

Location 892

A second sign that the game may have changed is a marked increase in miscommunication. When important messages are chronically missed or misunderstood, it's time to change the way we play the game.

Location 910

It's the same with a leadership team; the larger the team gets and the more hectic the game becomes, the greater the need for special meetings, chalk talks, and film sessions to get and then keep everyone on the same page.

Location 923

Because of this, and because some folks will always like the old game better than the new game no matter what, every leader of a growing organization faces enormous pressure to keep or revert to the old ways of leading and communicating, even when they no longer work. Lots of people prefer the familiarity and comfort of the past, even at the expense of the future and the success of the mission. It's human nature.

Location 930

The need to change the game, as well as the rules of the game, tends to sneak up on leaders and leadership teams because growth exponentially increases complexity. We might think that we've only added a couple of new programs or staff members, but in reality, we've multiplied organizational complexity and the lines of communication that need to be maintained.

Location 937

My list of the six things I want every one of my leaders to know: Ignore your weaknesses. Surveys are a waste of time. Seek permission, not buy-in. Let squeaky wheels squeak. Let dying programs die. Plan in pencil.

Location 973

Another way that leadership teams get sidetracked is when they depend on surveys to plan their ministry. Surveys are to leadership teams what butterflies are to Little League right fielders. They quickly take our eye off the ball, and they have nothing to do with the game at hand. The problem is that surveys (especially anonymous surveys) seldom give us the accurate information we think we're getting.

Location 1004

Certainly, leaders and leadership teams need broad buy-in for their current mission and methods of ministry. But when it comes to setting a new direction or starting new initiatives, it's seldom needed. Buy-in is overrated. Most of the time, we don't need buy-in as much as we need permission.

Location 1038

Permission, on the other hand, is relatively easy to acquire, even from those who think your idea is loony and bound to fail. That's because permission simply means, "I'll let you try it," as opposed to buy-in, which means, "I'll back your play."

Location 1042

Wise pastors and leadership teams know an important paradox of leadership: church harmony is inversely related to the amount of time spent oiling squeaky wheels.

Location 1075

Another counterintuitive principle that leadership teams often ignore is the importance of letting dying programs die. Programs that are terminally ill need to be put out of their misery ASAP.

Location 1103

Without a commitment and willingness to cease funding and staffing the programs that no longer work, we'll never have enough money and energy to create the future.

Location 1106

But the truth is that the best-run churches and organizations are masters of the midcourse correction. They plan in pencil. They know the power of “fuzzy and flexible plans.”

Location 1128

A similar thing happens when it comes to church constitutions and bylaws. Most are far too detailed and restrictive. They often include rigid and detailed clauses that are nothing more than a pendulum-swing response to some unpleasant event in the past.

Location 1164

Overly restrictive constitutions and bylaws reveal a profound lack of trust. It’s as if those who write them trust God’s ability to lead in their own life but not his ability to lead in the life of the next group of leaders. So to keep future leaders from going astray, they put in all kinds of detailed regulations and procedures that make sense today but that will make no sense tomorrow.

Location 1170

Obviously, it’s best if these issues are worked through at the beginning of a pastor’s calling. But I’ve discovered that even then most boards, staffs, and congregations are far slower to let go of the reins than they claim. And few will really let go until three key questions have been answered to their satisfaction. Is the pastor as committed to the church as I am? Who is best qualified to lead, and why? How can we prevent a strong leader from becoming a dictator?

Location 1223

The answer is simple. In most cases, the pastor is best qualified to lead not because of superior spirituality, intelligence, or even leadership skills but because of two key factors: time and training.

Location 1280

This is a particularly big fear in churches like mine that have a heritage of congregational government. To some of these folks, strong leadership and dictatorship are synonymous. Before they’ll let a pastor lead, they have to be thoroughly convinced that appropriate checks and balances are firmly in place. Personally, I’m good with that. I know my sin nature too well. That’s why I’ve committed myself to follow three key guidelines. Present first drafts, not final proposals. Keep no secrets from the board. Follow the board’s advice.

Location 1332

A strong, initiating leader who presents everything in final form puts the rest of the team in an awkward position. Those that hate conflict become rubber stamps. Those that fear domination dig in and become adversarial, either aggressively or passive-aggressively.

Location 1343

I've committed myself to listen to and follow the board's advice for two reasons. It's the best way to undercut fears of domination. And more important, it's the best way to become a wiser leader.

Location 1392

One of the best ways to cut off disharmony and dysfunction at the pass is to clarify board roles and staff roles before someone joins the team—and to make sure that everyone knows that changes in these roles will be unavoidable and necessary as the church grows.

Location 1433

The primary role of the board will always be the same: to determine God's will and then see that it's carried out. But the process of how this is best done and what role the board should take will change as the church changes.

Location 1440

At this point, the increasing complexity of our ministry called for something much closer to a board governance model. The board needed to shift from reviewing almost everything to setting direction and boundaries. At North Coast, this involves setting North Star goals and operational boundaries. The board then steps back and lets the paid staff figure out how to accomplish these goals.

Location 1480

The strongest indicators that it's time to consider changing the primary role of the board are (1) a marked increase in conflict and frustration while making decisions and (2) meetings that drag on forever.

Location 1501

At North Coast Church, our worship pastor has long been paid to raise up other worship leaders. I don't want an all-star band. I want a stable of quality musicians and worship leaders. I don't want an incredible musician who caps our ministry. I want an empowering musician who leverages our ministry.

Location 1572

But that's not the real reason that most churches and leadership teams push young eagles out of the nest. The real reason is that leadership is a zero-sum game. One person's emerging influence is always another person's waning influence. That's why making room for the young eagles is a hard sell, especially to those who already have a place at the table.

Location 1637

I find that most ministries pride themselves on empowering people. But I seldom hear anyone talk about platforming people. Yet empowerment without a platform is like responsibility without authority. It's frustrating for everyone involved. Platforming is granting someone the symbols of power and prestige. It tells everyone that this person has significant juice, influence, and power.

Location 1660

Leaders who willingly share the symbols of organizational power experience a completely different reality. Since their young eagles (and any other eagles they have on the team) don't have to go elsewhere to fly, they tend to stay. When a congregation has other gifted, powerful, and appropriately platformed leaders to choose from, people will start turning to them for spiritual counsel and the keys to the kitchen, significantly lightening the pastoral load.

Location 1675

Getting everyone on the same page is one of the most difficult and important roles of leadership.

Location 1806

And almost everyone responds to a lobbyist with the same reaction: a healthy dose of skepticism and resistance. This goes a long way toward explaining why so many pastors feel that their best ideas are their most-resisted ideas.

Location 1815

When information is presented too close to a decision-making process, most people will view it as a lobbying effort, not as a training exercise.

Location 1826

That's why anything you can do to keep your training for ministry from looking or feeling like lobbying goes a long way toward helping people to buy into or reject the ideas on their own merits.

Location 1918

We confuse familiarity with understanding. To keep from doing that, I try to keep in mind the three stages of learning: exposure, familiarity, and understanding.

Location 1945

That's why, given the choice, I'll always choose on-the-job training over front-loaded classes or curriculum. Leadership is not an academic subject. It's an art and skill that's best learned in a hands-on environment.

Location 2070

In many ways, that's the role of a lead pastor with multiple staff members. It's not enough to pull together a team that shares a common theological and philosophical perspective. It's not enough to get everyone dialed in on the same goal. You also have to make sure that everyone understands the route they're supposed to take, the pace, and any special rules of the road.

Location 2140

The most powerful tool I've found for overcoming these differences and for making sure that my staff is aligned in terms of their day-to-day values and decisions is something I call "ministry plumb lines."

Location 2146

I have a list of twenty-one ministry plumb lines that I've used over the years to make sure that my decisions reflect my values. I've distilled that list down to ten plumb lines that I share with our pastoral staff to clarify expectations and priorities. And many of our individual programs and ministries have their own set of plumb lines as well.

Location 2154

That's not to say that values like "reaching the lost" or "glorifying God" are unimportant. Obviously, they are. But the purpose of plumb lines is to clarify how we plan to go about reaching the lost or glorifying God in this church at this time.

Location 2189

One of the great advantages of plumb lines is that they identify and objectify misalignment long before it becomes acute and messy.

Location 2195

I find it relatively easy to get our entire staff headed in the same direction and aiming at the same goal. I find it much more difficult to ensure that everyone is taking the same route to get there.

Location 2260

That day I learned an important lesson about congregational alignment. Church members are just like board members. They need to hear what I think about dicey issues ahead of time. Otherwise, whatever I say in the midst of a confrontation will come off as lobbying, and there will be little chance of anyone changing their mind.

Location 2297

In particular, I've come to rely on five powerful tools to keep us aligned. A clear and simple mission statement. A front-loaded pastor's class. The drip method of preaching. Sermon-based small groups. Short and sweet congregational meetings. Location 2304

To counteract that, and to do any necessary thinning of the herd on the front end rather than after people had settled in, I started teaching a pastor's class subtitled "Why we do, what we do, the way we do it."

Location 2327

When deciding how to conduct our annual business meetings, the first thing we did was get rid of anything that resembled a so-called town meeting. I find that the churches that structure their meetings like an open forum have far more disunity than those that don't. Though intended to be a vehicle for building consensus, in reality, this type of meeting has a strong polarizing effect. It's usually attended by a small percentage of the congregation, most often by those who already have a dog in the fight. It doesn't tend to moderate positions; it tends to harden them.

Location 2398

Getting on the same page is one thing. Staying there is quite another, because mission tends to creep and vision tends to leak.

Location 2422

Our fiercest battles are seldom fought over theology. They're fought over change, especially any change that comes as a surprise, alters a comfortable tradition, or represents a symbolic changing of the guard.

Location 2442

Step 1: Test the Waters.

The first thing I want to do with a new idea, potential change, or innovation is to find some way to gauge how people will respond. I call it “testing the waters.” I do something political leaders are masters at.

Location 2461

Step 2: Listen and Respond to Resisters.

Rather than view those who initially resist my ideas as enemies to be overcome, I prefer to see them as advisers helping me to transform a good idea into a great idea. Resisters have an uncanny ability to point out all the potential flaws within a proposal.

Location 2489

To identify these psychological barriers, I ask myself two questions.

1. Are resisters objecting to the proposal or to the presenter? Pious-sounding objections can cover up the real source of resistance: a lack of trust in the person presenting the idea.
2. Are resisters objecting to the proposal or to the way it's presented? This is a common problem. Lots of good ideas and changes are resisted because they are presented with offensive language—not swearwords but loaded terms and phrases that carry a negative connotation to the listeners.

Location 2513

Step 3: Sell Your Idea to Individuals before Groups

The third step in effective change diplomacy is to sell your idea to individuals first. Before bringing a new idea or proposed change to the congregation, staff, or board, I always want to have some strong supporters lined up first.

Location 2527

Step 4: Lead Boldly Once

I've tested the waters, listened and responded to the legitimate concerns of resisters, and sold the idea to a few individuals, it's time to lead boldly. Location 2553

But even when I'm absolutely convinced that something is God's will, I check one more thing: is this God's timing? I've learned that God's will has a what and a when. The question of timing is often answered during the testing-the-waters stage.

Location 2564

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle "location" is provided after each entry.