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Sticky Teams

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Chapter 1



The Unity Factor

The One Thing That Can't Be Left to Chance

I GREW UP IN a Christian home. My dad was a deacon. I have no idea how I ever got saved.

It's not that dad and mom were hypocritical. They were anything but. It's just that, well, Dad was a deacon. And that was enough to show me the dark side of church. It taught me early on that serving as a lay leader can be a tough assignment filled with late-night meetings, petty squabbles, acrimonious debates, and worse.

In addition, one of my best friends was the pastor's son. When the church went through a split, my family was on the other side. It was ugly, really ugly.

So I found it rather bizarre when God called me to become a pastor. I'm still not sure why I didn't pull a Jonah.

When I became the pastor of North Coast Church, the church was just three years old. I was twenty-eight. The founding pastor had recently moved on to further his schooling. But since he was a good friend of mine (he'd been an usher in my wedding) and the congregation was small, I figured it would be a rather seamless transition.

I must have been smoking something.

Six months in, I was embroiled in controversy. Attendance was steadily shrinking. Worse, the board and I were having a hard time

seeing eye-to-eye on anything. I literally lay awake at night wondering what I'd do when they finally asked me to leave, or when the church split, or when a congregational meeting turned raucous.

Fortunately, none of those things happened.

Instead, with God's help, a once divided board and splintered congregation (I didn't have a staff to mess up, or that too would have been a disaster) became a tightly knit leadership team in a church now widely known for its health and unity. Along the way, I learned a ton of lessons. But none was more important than this simple truth: *A unified and healthy leadership team doesn't just happen. It has to be a priority.*

Why Worry about Unity?

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. You'd think I would have known that based on my early church experiences. But I didn't.

That's because I chalked up conflict to sin, and of course when I quarreled with somebody, most of the sin was on "their" part. I had no idea that organizational disunity was more the norm than the exception. I had no clue that personality differences, differing perspectives, and even organizational structures could cause good people to do bad things.

I should have.

From Aaron and Miriam's harsh criticism of Moses, to Paul and Barnabas's heated argument and eventual split over John Mark, to Euodia and Syntyche's sharp clash at Philippi, to last week's big mess at First Church, God's people and God's leaders have had a hard time getting along. It's nothing new.

But I thought we would be different. I assumed that as long as we put good people on the team and stayed focused on the Lord and the Great Commission, harmony would naturally follow. If you would have told me to slow down and focus on camaraderie and unity, I would have chided you for your self-centered, holy-

huddle approach to ministry. We had a world to conquer and disciples to make.

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

As things steadily got worse, it finally dawned on me that we were never going to change the world *out there* if we couldn't solve the conflicts *in here*. So I did something I never thought I'd do. I set aside all of my ministry and church-growth goals and, for the next two and a half years, focused on molding a cohesive leadership team. I made it my number one priority.

It was a move made out of desperation, but it was one of the best moves I ever made. It changed everything. So much so that to this day I consider maintaining the unity of our board and our staff as one of my most important leadership priorities, far ahead of other worthy goals — including even evangelism, church growth, and community outreach — because without unity, everything else falls apart.

But unity doesn't just happen. You have to work at it day after day, because if you don't, it quickly slips away. And once it does, it won't matter how clear your vision is or how gifted your team is. When the foundation rots, it's not long until the whole house collapses.

It All Starts with the Board

When it comes to building a healthy and unified ministry team, it all starts with the board. As the board goes, so goes the rest of the church.

Mark my words. If the board room is a war zone, it doesn't matter what kind of revival you're having in the sanctuary. If the infighting continues, it won't be long until there's a coup d'état or a resignation. I guarantee it.

That's what happened to my friend Brian. When he took over a struggling church, he assumed that the unanimous call of the board meant that everyone was ready to move on to the next level. He came armed with vision, ideas, and a game plan to get there.

What he didn't take into account was the close friendship that two of his board members maintained with the previous pastor. When

Brian began to make changes, they took each one as a personal affront to his predecessor. They began to resist nearly everything he proposed.

From the congregation's viewpoint, things were great. After years of decline, attendance and giving were way up. Young families poured in. Evangelism and community impact were at an all-time high.

But that's not the way the board saw it. Poisoned by the continual complaints of the two ringleaders, they catastrophized every complaint and criticism they heard from an unhappy parishioner. The difference between their perspective and the congregation's was amazing. The board thought the church was on the edge of disaster. The congregation thought it was on the edge of revival.

But no matter how much affirmation Brian received from the congregation, no matter how many people came to Christ, no matter how fast the church grew, it was still the board to whom he reported. They set his salary, approved or vetoed his ideas, and controlled much of what he could and could not do.

After five years of frustration and constant battling, Brian finally quit. He and his wife decided life was too short to spend it skirmishing with the very people who were supposed to have his back. The congregation never saw it coming. They were in total shock. Before it was over, the church was decimated, a mere shell of what it had been under his ministry.

Sadly, Brian's story is not unique. It's all too common. I've heard it time after time. My guess is that you have too. But I've seldom, if ever, heard the opposite: a riled up congregation driving out a pastor who has a supportive and unified board.

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.

The Unseen Realm

There's another reason why unity, not only within the board but also among the staff and congregation, needs to be a priority.