



THREE WAYS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Every leader wants a strong, cohesive leadership team. They want to experience the special chemistry of being on the same page as they pursue a great mission with each person playing roles that use their unique gifts. And yet, it's always a bit of a surprise when a leader speaks in glowing terms a team that exhibits these high-performing characteristics.

One of the often repeated recommendations about leadership teams is to “get the right people on the bus.” This advice from Jim Collins is full of wisdom, but it is not the whole story. Even if you have the right people on the bus, the team may not have gelled. As I work with a variety of first chair and second chair leaders, the three recommendations that I offer most frequently are: be patient, be a student, and be honest. These recommendations apply to a variety of leadership teams - from 2 to 10 people, in churches and other non-profit settings, with new or long-tenured leaders.

Be Patient

How long did it take for the relationship with your best friend to become what it is today? Or if you're married, for you and your spouse to get to the point where you could anticipate how the other would react to a situation? It takes time, doesn't it? And there's no way to compress that time from months into minutes, no matter how hard you try.

We know this is true for a variety of relationships, but people often seem to think that a different set of rules is in effect for the relationship between first and second chair* leaders. They expect to reach that point of hand-in-glove partnership within a few weeks or months at most. Perhaps they think that this is a "working relationship" that is defined around job descriptions. Or perhaps they just feel an urgency that the relationship must develop quickly, even if they know that's not realistic. Unfortunately, having this kind of unrealistic expectation will increase the tension between first and second chairs, not smooth it out.

Notice that the need to be patient goes in both directions. A second chair needs to be patient when he/she feels that authority isn't being delegated quickly enough or trust isn't being given readily enough. A first chair needs to be patient when he/she feels that the second chair isn't getting up to speed soon enough. Leaders need to think in terms of calendars not stopwatches, gourmet meals not microwave dinners. The same is true for the relationships between peers, those second chairs that comprise the leadership team.

As you think about your own context, can you paint a picture of ideal relationships within your leadership team? As I talk to leaders in a variety of settings, I hear this ideal expressed as:

- The second chair anticipates what the first chair needs before he/she even says anything.
- The first chair truly understands the second chair's strengths, and uses them fully.

* *Leading from the Second Chair* defines a second chair leader as “a person in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization.” By this definition, there can be multiple “second chair leaders” in an organization. In this document, “second chair” is anyone on the leadership team other than the first chair. This terminology and the principles in this paper can also apply to departmental and other teams.



- The second chair would be trusted to lead an important meeting if the first chair was called away for a last minute emergency.
- Second chair leaders genuinely appreciate and support each other without rivalry.
- Leaders can each complete the other's sentences.

So how are you doing? Do you have a clear picture of your ideal? How close are you to meeting it? If there's a big gap, what will you do to shrink it?

Be a Student

I don't know how many times a second chair leader has confided in me about a less than ideal relationship with a first chair: "We're just not on the same page." They are not saying that the relationship is broken, nor are they saying that their boss is a tyrant. They're simply saying that the levels of trust and teamwork and shared decision-making are not what they'd like.

In these situations, it's tempting to put all the responsibility on the first chair. After all, he or she decides how much to delegate to others. But my advice puts the burden back on the second chair: *be a student*. A second chair leader should be a student of the first chair. The more that they understand him or her, the more that they will be able to get on the same page and thrive in the second chair.

I remember seeing the counter-example of this played out on one staff. The first chair led the weekly staff meetings. Some weeks the meetings took all morning, as the team joked and talked and argued, and the first chair joined right in. But other times, it was obvious that he had something else on his mind, and he wanted to finish the meeting quickly. I say it was "obvious," but apparently it wasn't to one team member, who wanted to talk and argue just as much on these days. Had he simply been a better student, he would have earned much more respect from the first chair.

Here are some questions that a good student asks (and answers) about his or her first chair:

- What kind of news most excites him/her?
- What kind of news puts the first chair on edge?
- What kind of rhythm does he/she prefer in meetings? For example, start with small talk or dive straight into the issue(s)? Send a list of topics in advance, have a written agenda, or keep it more free flowing?
- Does the first chair make decisions quickly or slowly? What factors are most important in these decisions?
- What qualifies as "important" information that needs to be communicated immediately?
- How does he/she prefer to receive bad news?
- How far can you run on your own with a major decision? When do you need to check in?
- What is the best way to earn trust?

Note that this relationship is not symmetrical – a second chair needs to be a student but can't demand that the first chair do likewise. The best first chairs, however, will take the same advice. The only way to build a dream team is if they care enough about their second chairs to invest time as a student. Where do you need to focus your studies?



Be Honest

When relationships within a team are strained, one of the most difficult things to do is to be honest. First and second chairs typically are well aware if there is some level of discord. They know, and others usually know as well, but no one wants to talk about it. And yet if the underlying problem is not discussed, it is unlikely to improve. That's why "be honest" is the third recommendation that I frequently offer to leadership teams.

I understand that there are reasons to hold back. There's the fear that the other person will react poorly – a first chair may get angry and fire a subordinate; a second chair may be hurt and decide to look for another job. Either may get defensive or resort to some sort of passive aggressive behavior. These are all legitimate fears, but they need to be overcome because there's no reason to think that the relationship will magically improve on its own.

If you are convinced that you need to be honest but aren't sure how, then consider these ideas:

- Step into the shallow end first. Start with something simple like "it seems like we're struggling to get on the same page." This allows you to see if the other person is also concerned and gauge their reaction. Don't immediately jump into the deep end, saying something like, "I don't think that you trust me."
- Own your part. Relationships are always two-way. Go into the conversation with the possibility that you may be part of the problem. Ask how you've contributed to the relational damage.
- Remember your shared goals. At the start of the conversation, affirm your desire to build a strong relationship and to see the organization excel. If you assume that the other person already knows that you believe this, you've missed a chance to reinforce your common foundation.
- It's not "one and done." In most cases, by the time a person decides to have this honest conversation, the relational strains have existed for a while. That means that you probably can't "fix" the problem in one conversation. In fact, you may not even be able to discuss all the problems in one sitting. Only cover as much in one conversation as the other person can reasonably handle. Be willing to talk as many times as necessary.

Finally, borrowing an axiom from Bill Hybels, be willing to say the last 10%. Too often leaders are partially honest – they will say some of what's on their minds, but will shrink back from saying the final thing that may be most important. If it's important, even if it's hard, find a way to be honest about 100% of what truly matters. So be honest with yourself – how honest are you in your conversations with the other members on your team?

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These three recommendations won't produce a dream team overnight. In fact, there are plenty of other steps that are needed for a team to function at its very best. But if you don't have the solid foundation of patience, understanding, and honesty, you'll never advance to the highest levels of teamwork.