



## FROM BUSINESS EXEC TO EXECUTIVE PASTOR

A variety of paths can lead to the role of executive pastor (or executive director) in a church. One of the most common is the businessperson who is already a volunteer leader in the church and makes a mid-career switch. It's a change that looks great on the surface but can be filled with challenges.

The start of the story often looks like this. A businessperson is wrestling with questions about "what's next?" or perhaps reads *Halftime* and wonders about making a shift from "success to significance." So they schedule a time to meet with the senior pastor. Sometimes quickly and sometimes gradually, the two begin to see the enormous potential benefit that the businessperson can bring to the church. And so, the businessperson eventually makes the jump from marketplace to vocational ministry.

In my coaching and consulting work, I've met many of these second chair leaders. Unfortunately, a number of them have shared stories of frustration, conflict, and unrealized potential. In more than a few cases, they have left their ministry roles and gone back into business.

Why? What causes the wheels to fall off of a relationship that seems to be so full of potential? It starts with a serious gap in expectations. Senior pastors often don't know what they're asking for or what they're getting in this new, high-capacity second chair leader. The businessperson often interprets the pastor's comment that "we need someone with your skills" as *carte blanche* to fix anything and everything that isn't working well.

So if you're that businessperson, how can you avoid a short and unhappy ministry experience? Getting clear about expectations before you make the move is an essential first step. Beyond that, here are seven "healthy transition" ideas that you can put into practice starting on Day One: (1) simplify any systems you implement, (2) narrow your focus to increase your impact, (3) expand your understanding of stewardship, (4) lead relationally, (5) stay tethered to the senior pastor, (6) redefine key boundaries, and (7) keep God at the center. The first three shape your understanding of the role, while the last four focus on the vital relationships. Taken together, they can give you a new perspective on this transition.

*Simplify any systems you implement.* A common challenge in the business-to-ministry transition occurs when "improvements" are made to the church's systems and processes. Even "organic" churches have processes for planning worship planning, assimilating new members, hiring, calendaring, and much more. As a new second chair leader, you may have found these systems to be woefully inadequate. But the good news is that you have created and/or used great systems in the marketplace. It's just a matter of recreating them in your church, right?

The problem is that corporate systems and processes are typically designed for much larger organizations with an inflexibility that doesn't fit most church cultures. For example, performance evaluation in corporations can be quite complicated and time-consuming. If you try to implement the same system in a church, you can expect confusion or resistance.

The point is not to abandon your efforts to create or improve your church's systems. Rather, you need to keep them simple. It's better to have a basic evaluation system that can be used across the board than a sophisticated one that alienates the staff or never gets implemented.

*Narrow your focus to increase your impact.* It's not enough to keep systems simple. Your senior pastor may have said that "everything" needs to be improved, and you may agree, but that

doesn't mean to fix everything *now*. If you attempt to do so, you and the staff will end up deeply frustrated.

Within a few weeks of joining the staff, you may discover that the church database, hiring practices, chart of accounts, and planning processes are all inadequate. In addition, two staff members may be performing poorly and the volunteers in the worship ministry may be in turmoil. If you try to address all of these concerns at the same time, you'll find yourself running in circles.

Those who successfully transition from business to ministry recognize that they've signed up for a marathon, not a sprint. They take one step at a time, focusing first on the issues that are most urgent or those that will have the greatest positive impact. They realize that the church has functioned with its deficiencies up to this point and that some improvements will simply have to wait.

Even if you think that you have the capacity to tackle a wide range of improvements, don't lose sight of the impact on the staff. Almost any change will have a ripple effect, and the small "pond" of a church can only handle so many waves.

*Expand your understanding of stewardship.* Even if you don't have a financial background, you probably have more experience in the financial arena than most ministry staff members. So it's only natural for you look at the church finances through a lens of stewardship. If you find waste – whether funds not being used wisely or an unproductive staff member – you want to address the problem. That's just good stewardship, right?

Eliminating waste is good, but you may need to expand your understanding of stewardship in two ways. The first is to understand why the resources are being used as they are. No one intentionally wastes the church's resources, so there must be a bigger reason. In many cases, it involves a tradition or history, or perhaps a powerful group. That doesn't mean you can't address the concern, but that awareness should inform how you do so.

This leads to the second consideration for seeing stewardship more broadly. You are responsible for payroll costs, but you also may have an opportunity to help a struggling staff succeed. Both are good stewardship, but they may seem to pull in opposite directions. Or you may want to redirect funds away from an ineffective program, but you recognize that the long-time members that support the program are also key leaders in other vital areas of the ministry. The "wasted" funds pale in comparison to these leaders' greater impact. Taking this broader and longer-term view of stewardship can help you avoid a variety of headaches.

*Lead relationally.* Relationships are important in business, but the business exec can often succeed through the power of great ideas, strategies, and expertise. In a ministry setting, relationships are essential. That's why business-to-ministry transitions start on the right foot when the new leader establishes strong relationships with the staff (and other key leaders).

The reality is that ministry staff are often skeptical about business executives who step into senior level positions. They're concerned that the newcomer won't really understand the ministry context. They fear the imposition of business practices that won't fit their culture.

You may think that you already have good relationships with these staff members because you've worked with some as a volunteer, but everything changes once you start drawing a paycheck. Those first few weeks are a great opportunity to re-establish relationships. They're also a chance for you to listen and learn about some of the unique dynamics of ministry leadership. Taking the time to listen and build relationships on the front end will increase the acceptance of the ideas and expertise that you bring to the table later on.

*Stay tethered to the senior pastor.* I'm sure that you understand the importance of having a good relationship with your senior pastor, but what does that look like? It's different in each

situation, and it's a major focus of both of my books on second chair leadership. But for this article, let me introduce the idea of staying "tethered."

When an object is tethered, it can't get too far away from its anchor, but it isn't tightly controlled. Some business execs want to "save" the church and feel that they've been given complete freedom in the arenas where they have experience (such as staff management, process and system design, budgeting, and even strategic planning). They don't need to "bother" the senior pastor with what they're doing. This is an "untethered" attitude that is sure to lead to problems.

Being tethered means keeping the senior pastor informed. It means allowing the first chair to direct your energies toward certain areas and away from others. It means that you may be told that you've stepped out of bounds. It doesn't mean being micromanaged and it certainly doesn't negate your contributions. It simply paves the way for a longer and more enjoyable tenure in ministry.

*Redefine your key boundaries.* Most business execs that transition into ministry roles do so in their home churches. That means that they already have relationships with a variety of members. They have often served on the governance board or in some other key volunteer roles.

If you make the vocational change, you need to be prepared to make some relational changes as well. I'm not saying that you will need to turn your back on friends. But some of your conversations may need to change.

It won't be appropriate for you to share frustrations that you have with your senior pastor or with other staff members. Nor will it be appropriate for you to lobby the governing board for a change, unless you do so with the senior pastor's support. And it certainly won't be appropriate for your friends to use their relationships with you to bypass other ministry leaders. Get clear about your boundaries, and learn to say, "That's not something I can talk about."

*Keep God at the center.* Presumably you didn't leave the business world and enter ministry on a whim. The same humble, prayerful attitude that brought you into this role will be essential for sustaining you. Vocational ministry has a way of squeezing spiritual vibrancy out of people. Bill Hybels once described the danger this way: "The pace at which I'm doing the work of God is destroying God's work in me."

Keeping God at the center is important for many reasons, and I want to highlight two of them. The first goes back to the skepticism of the staff as mentioned earlier. When God is doing a deep work in your life, it will be obvious to others. Not because you talk about it all the time, but simply because it will influence everything you do. The staff member that questions "whether this business exec has any business being in a staff leadership role" will begin to change perspective when he or she sees how God is working in and through you.

Second, even if you put the other six ideas into practice, have a great relationship with your senior pastor, and are experiencing many victories in the church, you will still have difficult seasons. For those who have transitioned out of business, those tough times are when you wonder if you made the right decision. You may think, "My business job was a lot easier, and I got paid a lot more. Maybe it's time to go back to the corporate world." In those moments, you need a vibrant spiritual life. Perhaps this was just a temporary season in vocational ministry and God is releasing you to resume your business career. But it may be that God wants you to stay in place and depend even more on Him. You won't know if your spiritual life isn't grounded.

I am certain that God wants to use you and your talents for Kingdom purposes, whether that's in the marketplace or in ministry. If you find yourself transitioning from the former to the latter, these seven practices can help your transition be a rich and meaningful one.