

Churches and Organizational Excellence

Aligned Influence™

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A local church is struggling to determine just how it should organize its leadership team. The senior pastor and his staff were very capable, but the structure and roles of the elders, deacons and trustees has always been puzzling for everyone involved. I Timothy and Titus provide strong guidance regarding character qualities of elders and deacons, but provides little guidance on how to structure their roles or the relationship between the roles. The 15th and 20th chapters of Acts provide some insight into the roles of elders. James describes the elders as “channels” of mercy and healing. I Peter contains references to elders as models of holy behavior and shepherds to “the flock of God among you”.

All of these references are helpful, but still do not answer the question “what are the appropriate structure and roles for elders, deacons, and trustees?” This lack of clarity is apparent in the wide diversity in existing church structures. It seems apparent that God has left it up to each church to determine the details of how they organize. So then, where can churches turn for help determining structure and roles for leadership? Having been involved with churches all of my life including serving as an elder in my church and having spent the last ten years working in organizational governance, it is clear to me that applying aspects of board governance principles to secular boards is very instructive to church leadership. Governance principles define the roles of staff and board, force organizations to determine to whom the board is responsible and determine alignment of leadership committees. The same can be accomplished within churches.

While scripture does not specifically speak about the differences between staff and board roles, it is very clear that God has created order and expects our relationships to maintain a sense of order as well. First Corinthians 11 is a great example. Paul reprimanded the Church at Corinth for its disorder and urged the Church to establish order using the relationship between Christ and the Church as an example. Governance calls for this same sense of order and accounts for staff and board roles within church structure. In short, governance establishes the role of

the board as oversight and the role of the staff is reserved for operations. Each church identifies different leadership roles and because titles vary from church to church, this discussion will use the governance titles of “board” and “staff”.

Board oversight is summarized as directing, protecting, and enabling the organization. This allows the Board to oversee the organization without getting involved in the day-to-day operation of the organization which in turn allows the staff to operate the organization. The board directs the staff with a clear definition of the work to be accomplished and protects the organization with clear operational boundaries. The enabling role focuses on advocacy, resource development and role discipline, meaning that the board understands the challenges and opportunities of the organization and advocates for both through their personal, professional and community relationships. Boards document these roles, goals and boundaries in policies which become the guiding document for the work of the board just as operating policies are the guiding document for the work of the staff. On an ongoing basis, the role of the board is to maintain the currency of these policies and to monitor compliance with the policies.

As applied to the local church, the board should create a statement for the church that defines the strategic “what” it should accomplish, who is being served and what value is created for those people. The board creates a set of boundaries to keep the congregation safe, solvent and prepared to act on the opportunities that God provides. While this may at first seem odd, the board does not tell the staff how to be successful; rather it tells the staff what work it should accomplish and what methods for accomplishing the work would be inappropriate, thus creating the operational boundaries. It appears that this method of direction is one that should be familiar to churches because it is used scripture.

In Genesis, God gives man, created male and female, a clear work to accomplish, “Be fruitful and multiple, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of sea and the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (New American Standard Version). God does not tell Adam and Eve how to accomplish this but rather gives them a boundary; “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it surely you will die” (New

American Standard Version). In Deuteronomy chapters 5 and 6, God speaks to Israel through Moses. First in 5:1-21, restating for them the commandments that God gave him on Mt. Sinai and then in 6:4-5 giving them “the greatest” commandment in the form of a goal or a “do” statement; “Hear o Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your might” (New American Standard Version). The commandments are almost all given in the negative form; “You shall not”, and even the two that are given in the positive create the boundary conditions for a life well-lived. God did not tell Israel exactly how to accomplish the goal of loving God with “all your soul and all your might”, rather God gave Israel the goal and created boundaries, so that if complied with, would ensure that any choice would keep them safe and on-track.

Governance also forces the board to determine to whom they are responsible. My experience tells me this is both a difficult and clarifying decision for most boards. Without purposefully identifying to whom they are responsible, most boards act as if they are responsible only to themselves. However, this is never the case. Regardless of whether the board of a non-profit or the board of a church, the board is acting on behalf of some body or community who cares that the organization is successful. This is an extremely illuminating question for churches as they attempt to understand how best to organize their leadership.

Identifying who within the church is considered the “board” and who is the “staff” can be challenging. It is clear that the role of elder is established in the inspired word of God. In Titus 1:5, Paul directs the Church at Crete to “appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (New American Standard Version). In Titus, Paul equates the role of elder as an “overseer”. In I Timothy, Paul compares and contrasts the role of elder or overseer with that of the Deacon or servant leader also sometimes translated as minister. If indeed it is appropriate to interpret the selection of 7 Hellenistic Jews by the apostles in Acts 6 as an example of those serving as deacons, it solidifies our understanding that the role of the deacon is task-oriented and service-based. Trustees are not referenced in scripture; however, the role can be best understood by fiduciary responsibility assigned to someone who oversees a “trust fund”. A trustee is one who understands the business role of church and as such has responsibility

for monitoring compliance with boundaries associated with the business aspects of church life.

So then to whom is each of these roles responsible? It seems clear that elders are commissioned by God; providing the earthly oversight for Christ’s body. The governing boundaries created, maintained and monitored by the elders relate to the spiritual wholeness and integrity of the church. As described in I Corinthians, order is reflective of God’s nature and therefore the trustees must understand their role in relationship to the elders. In the United States, each church is also recognized as non-profit entity holding the tax status of a 501(c)3 organization. As such, the trustees are likely to be under the oversight of the elders and act as a committee of the elders providing oversight to the business-related boundaries of the church making them responsible to the elders to ensure compliance with fiduciary, administrative, and community boundaries. Finally, deacons are to understand their role in light of the order that reflects God’s nature.

Governance also drives organizations to ensure that committees are clearly identified as “board committees” - committees that assist the board in accomplishing its work of governing the organization or “staff committees”- committees that assist the staff in accomplishing the “work” of the organization. The question then to be answered is “Do deacons assist the board in governing the organization or do they assist the staff in accomplishing the work of the organization?” Traditionally, deacons have been seen as associated with the elders rather than the staff. However, one could also reach the conclusion that the deacons, servant leaders or ministers, are more associated with accomplishing the work of the church. It is a decision every church will need to make for itself.

Framing the trustees as a committee of the elders or the deacons as a committee of either the staff or the elders may be a new concept for some churches. However, it is critical that churches consider the biblical concept of order and how it reflects God’s nature within their leadership roles. It is clear that both the elders and the trustees have a role in governing and therefore have a role in providing oversight. The key is that the roles are to be aligned and not in conflict with one another. To a great extent this is the key to governance - aligning the work the organization with its leadership roles.

The professionals at Aligned Influence LLC are uniquely qualified to assist your church in exploring organizational excellence in your congregation's leadership. We are an organization that is led by Christians who are ready to work alongside you and your church as you take on the challenge of transforming and improving the leadership of your organization. If you would like to discuss our services further, please visit us at www.alignedinfluence.com or contact us at 303-257-1794.