



Setting Expectations

LEADERS & STAFF



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Practical Ministry Skills: Setting Expectations

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SETTING EXPECTATIONS**Leader's Guide**

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Leadership Media Group and Christianity Today, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This resource, *Setting Expectations*, offers insights into one of the biggest pressures of church leadership: expectations. Whether they're coming from an internal or external idea of what a church leader should be or do, or from competing claims on limited time and attention from those in the church, the weight of expectations can crush even the most prepared leaders. The following articles will help you set expectations of yourself and others that align with God's call on your life and ministry. It will equip you with tools to shed the unnecessary burdens that hamper your ministry and focus on the work God has called you to do.

For a meditation on the temptation to focus on expectations rather than grace, read "Failure or Fraud?" (pp. 3–4). "Unreasonable Expectations" (pp. 5–7) explains why it's so dangerous to "make people happy." For two takes on how to understand your call to ministry in light of conflicting expectations and your own limitations, read "Redefining Success" (pp. 8–9) and "A God-Centered Vision" (pp. 10–11). For insight into how you can slowly and successfully upset expectations and lead toward change, read "Leading by Failure" (pp. 12–14). "Beyond the Stereotypes" (pp. 15–16) will help you unlock the strengths behind the annoying stereotypes of pastors. And "Maximizing Ministry" (pp. 17–18) will help you set expectations for your ministry that align with your God-given strengths.

This resource recognizes that expectations are not a bad thing but they need to be carefully considered and revisited often to keep your ministry from losing focus. Leaders are highly visible in the church and are called to do their best but the pressure to be perfect, and to be everything to everyone, can quickly work even the most motivated leader out of ministry. We hope the insights we've included will help you think about how your leadership team sets and manages healthy expectations for yourselves and those you lead.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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Failure or Fraud?

God knows you're not perfect; he called you to lead anyway.

2 Corinthians 12:9

Pastors are most visible on Sundays, but performance expectations can arrive by special delivery any day of the week. On one such day, a congregant arrived in my office to tell me just what she made of my performance as a pastor: In summary, not much.

She was expansive in the adjectives she used to describe my deficiencies. As I listened, I recognized some truth in what she said. But she wanted more than my agreement, she wanted my resignation. Her logic was simple: "If you are not who you should be, you shouldn't be a pastor." By grace, I realized there was another logic worth considering. It says, "You are not who you should be, and God wants to use you anyway."

God's mysterious strategy is to use fallen people to witness to a gospel of hope and transformation. That means underperformance is built into the paradigm. It means those who do not live up to expectations are the very people God uses to call others who don't measure up either. This approach is completely counterintuitive, but then so is grace.

Grace is not an excuse to hide our deficiencies or deny our failures, and it's not a heat shield to protect us from getting burned. But grace does mean our failures don't have to paint us into a corner where the only way out is to abandon our call. Grace sets our lives in what the psalmist calls "the broad place," off the knife-edge of judgment, and nowhere near the winner-takes-all option some may offer us.

I tried to respond gently to the outspoken critic in my office. "You are more right than you know," I told her. "I don't have many of the qualities of a gifted pastor. But you have the wrong list of deficiencies. The real list is far worse. God knows the real list, and God, by his grace, has still called me to be a pastor."

I believe what I said, but living it is far more difficult. The temptation in ministry is always to focus on expectations rather than grace.

In a very difficult season when finances were tight, I was driving a dilapidated car that had been donated to the church. It had lots of problems, including a ceiling lining that drooped and grazed my head every time the broken shock absorbers launched me from the seat toward the roof. The car began to speak to me. It said, "Failure." Why couldn't I get my life together? I was getting older every year, I had a family, this car was humiliating, and I felt like a failure.

This continued for months until the day I took the car to the airport to pick up my nieces. It was a very hot day, and the air-conditioning in the car didn't work (surprise), so all four windows were down. Only later did I realize vinyl flakes from the sun-scorched dashboard were being blown into the backseat and covering my sweet nieces.

That day, still without the funds to buy a second car, we leased a new car. It was wonderful: No flakes, no droopy ceiling lining, no broken shocks. I was thrilled until the day this car also began to talk. Its message was also just one word: "Fraud." I was no more put together, no more successful with this new car than with the borrowed one. It just looked better. I was a fake.

My life swings between voices calling "failure" and "fraud." The key is not listening to either. I'm not as bad as my critics accuse me of being, but I'm not as good as I've led some to believe. And right there, in the truth somewhere in between, is where we hear the voice of God. He still says to me, and to everyone called to follow Jesus, "I want you and I will use you."

In ministry, performance matters—but grace matters more.

— MARK LABBERTON is president and Lloyd John Ogilvie Professor of Preaching at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 2008 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS**Discuss**

1. Do you tend more to hear the “failure” voices more often in your ministry experiences? Or “fraud?” When do you hear them? What are the common threads of these experiences?
2. What is the biggest barrier to accepting grace for yourself and your shortcomings or mistakes?
3. How might you better support other leaders in fighting back these voices while still calling them to their best? What do you need to hear from others to understand and embrace your call in light of your own failure to live up to expectations?

Unreasonable Expectations

Neither a church nor a pastor can satisfy every person's disappointment.

2 Corinthians 1:3

A friend of mine recently changed careers after being in pastoral ministry for nearly a decade. I asked him how his new job was going. “Really well,” he said. “These days, people get mad at me only once or twice a year. When I was in pastoral ministry, it seemed like someone was mad at me every other day.”

I understood. I can still see the parents of a teenager crying in my office because their son was walking down the wrong path. They were desperate for help, expecting and even demanding that I intervene in their son’s life. “Why doesn’t this church offer a better youth group?” they screamed.

I remember an angry keyboardist, frustrated that our church’s worship team was not using him “to his full potential.” He expected a prominent role in the worship service, and his expectations were not being met. “I really think the worship here should better utilize people,” he said.

I can picture a man offering to donate computer equipment to the church “but only if it was going to be well used.” Another man gave \$65,000 to the church but kept pulling on invisible strings, demanding that it be used as he directed. Three weeks later, after sleepless nights of wrestling with his demands and threats, I had our accountant write a check for \$65,000, and I gave it back to the demanding donor.

These frontline stories of pastoral work are endless. How do we handle people’s expectations, learn to get over them or live with them, or even learn from them? There are times when we even sense that these expectations come from God. What do we do then?

The key is to learn to listen to God and to let our vision flow from there. This often involves developing some thick skin, while still keeping our sensitivity to the real pain and needs of people. Every effective leader must learn to live with the very people who frustrate them until they no longer do. When you become a leader, you can never again get angry in public. The challenge is to stay balanced when criticized, to avoid taking the criticism personally yet to avoid becoming calloused or cynical. We are called to a paradox of personalities: sensitive but not easily offended, empathetic but not weak, flexible and yet filled with convictions.

You’re Not Making Me Happy

The common theme running through all of the stories I related can be summed up best in a single word—disappointment. That’s the root of all these unwarranted expectations, criticisms, and crises. Someone wants help and is not getting the help they want; someone needs a problem solved and the problem is not going away; someone is hurting and not getting any relief. It can all be summed up by the feeling of disappointment. We shouldn’t be surprised by any of this. We live in a fallen world, and it makes sense that if life is not working as it is supposed to work, people would turn to the church to relieve that sense of disappointment, to get help. Yet the reality is that neither a church nor a pastor can satisfy every person’s disappointment.

I have known pastors who fall into this trap all too often. They wrongly believe that it is their job to make people happy. So they run themselves ragged trying to cater to the needs of people, or they push their staff to do this. It may sound strange, but there is a sense in which I can truthfully say that the church does not exist to help people. Our job is not to solve their problems or alleviate their disappointments. The primary reason the church exists is to worship God and to point people to Christ, the ultimate solution to their problems. Our work should draw attention to the one who has saved us, the one who has given us hope in place of our disappointment.

We do ourselves a disservice any time we position ourselves as the ultimate answer to people’s problems.

In our well-meaning attempts to promote Christianity as the answer to everything, we sometimes overpromise when we present the gospel. We want churches to be happy places, so we end each service on a high note, giving the impression that happy feelings always come from church. Or we want to help everybody we meet, so we have churches filled with broad spectrums of ministries for every conceivable need, but we end up doing many things poorly rather than fewer things well. The answer to all of this is to strip down the gospel to its essence: mankind getting right with a holy God.

With that in mind, we may need to help people understand the following truths if we want to help them develop realistic, healthy expectations about the church and the role and abilities of those in leadership:

- Church will not always make you feel comfortable.

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- Church will not be the answer to your every need.
- You will sometimes not like what happens at church.
- You might leave a service unhappy once in a while, particularly if you are seeing yourself in light of God's righteousness.
- If you are a single person, going to church will not guarantee you a spouse.
- Going to church will not guarantee that your children will not rebel.
- Going to church is not the answer to all your financial problems.
- You might not get along with everybody you meet at church.

Disappointment with God

If the ultimate solution to the disappointments our people experience is pointing them to Christ, letting him be the Great Physician in their lives, disappointment takes on a different nuance. Now, if people are disappointed, they are ultimately disappointed with God.

For the teenager's parents crying in my office, so sad that their son is walking the wrong path, so desperate for help from the church, so expectant and even demanding that I intervene, the one who has really disappointed them is God. They prayed about the situation. They begged God to intervene. So where is God? He is the one they are upset with.

When people come to us with their frustration, sharing their pain and disappointment with us, we need to dig beneath the layer of the immediate concern. When those parents are crying in my office (and I am crying with them), what they are ultimately expressing is that they are frustrated that God allows people to make bad choices—in this case, their son.

The real work of a pastor is not to try to solve their problems, particularly when pathways to immediate solutions have already been suggested and are not being heeded. The answer is not to ratchet up the youth program, or to drop everything and help chase a rebellious teenage son, or to lock him in his room until he turns 30.

Rather, the real work of a pastor is to help give the parents a clearer sense of who God is, that God is good no matter what they are experiencing right now, that he desperately loves their son even to the point of allowing him to make poor choices. The real work of a pastor is to help people come to grips with God's goodness, even though we often do not understand his ways.

Picture the angry keyboardist, so frustrated that our church's worship team was not using him to his full potential, so hurt his expectations are not being met—his real disappointment is with God. Did the keyboardist not ask God to give him a greater ministry on the worship team? Why did God say no?

The wise church leader does not immediately cater to this man's demands and promise that he will be used more regularly on the worship team if that is not the best option. The wise leader will help this man see a righteous God contrasted with the prideful heart of man. Again, the ultimate work of a pastor is not to assuage this man's disappointment and solve his scheduling problem or his need to be in greater demand as a musician. It is to offer him a clearer sense of the character of God.

An Invitation to Lament

When you encounter people's unreasonable expectations of you as a leader, one very practical and biblical response is something we find modeled in the Psalms, in the ministry of Jeremiah, and throughout much of the major and minor prophets of the Old Testament.

This response to disappointment, to unanswered questions and unresolved tension, to the pain and suffering people bring to us is inviting them to lament.

This means that when a person comes to you, and the problem cannot be solved, you point them to Jesus and invite them to honestly pour out their heart to the Lord. We know that God is the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3). When we lament, we acknowledge that God is good and sovereign, yet life is not as we would like it to be.

We find validation for our grieving in our lamentation. We learn that our emotions are permitted, that it is right to express them, even when those emotions include anger at injustice. The biblical form of lamenting allows people to feel and express the discomfort and disappointment they experience living in an imperfect world.

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When you invite people to lament, you are acknowledging that you, as a church leader, are with them in their journey, and you empathize with what they are going through. You do not try to cheer them up. You do not try to fix all their problems. You allow them to feel the hard truth, the raw emotion of the problem or circumstance. And you point them to God.

David cried out to God. So did Jesus, who prayed with “loud cryings and tears to the one who was able to save him from distress.” God himself did this with Job. After Job had lost his family, his health, his housing, his reputation, and his livelihood, God did not wipe away every tear, at least not at first.

God did not try to make things all better. God did not offer Job any solutions to his problems. God did not crank up the ministries at the local church to help Job recover the things he had lost.

God simply pointed Job to the realities of the moment: that Job was a man, and that God was God. He allowed Job to lament, to call out in distress, and then God pointed him to facts that he could not fathom. It is perhaps the best example of pastoral ministry ever recorded.

Remember, seldom are your critics actually disappointed with you. They are usually disappointed with themselves, their lives, or God. You are simply a convenient target.

— WAYNE CORDEIRO is founding pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship in Honolulu, Hawaii; reprinted by permission from *Sifted*, by Wayne Cordeiro and Francis Chan (David C. Cook, 2012).

Discuss

1. How much of what you do could be described as working toward the goal of “making people happy?” When in your work do you most strongly feel this temptation? How would it look different to point people to Christ instead of trying to placate their desires?
2. What is your natural response when people communicate to you their frustrations about your church or your ministry? What does this communicate about your role, and the role of your church or ministry in their life?
3. Think back to a time someone brought to you a complaint. How might that interaction have looked different if you had viewed it as an opportunity to lament with them? Are there situations where this is not an appropriate response?

Redefining Success

The measure of success is to know God by obeying him.

Psalm 1:2–3

I grew up in a double-barrel ministry family, my grandpa and dad both serving as senior pastors. Combined, their legacy includes multiple congregations served and thousands of lives touched. But they are men from a different time. They would never use the word “success” to describe themselves—or even accept it being thrust upon them.

When I think of my grandpa, I picture his open Bible on the checkered tablecloth at the summer cottage. His long legs crossed comfortably while he poured God’s Word into his thirsty soul. At meals he would have all of us—grandparents, parents, cousins—recite Psalm 1 together, complete with hand actions.

He was a tall man. I can still see his lanky pointer and middle fingers walking like two legs up his outstretched forearm as he recited, “Blessed is the man who walketh not in the council of the ungodly …”

Withering Pastors

The point of Psalm 1 is that the “blessed” person is one who loves God’s Word, who “meditates on it day and night.” That person, God tells us, “will be like a tree planted by streams of water.” That person’s “leaf does not wither.”

And yet, in pastoral ministry I often feel like I am withering. I don’t know an honest pastor who does not sometimes feel like this. Under the heat, the constant pressure, the impossible expectations, we wither.

For more than 40 years of ministry, my grandpa never withered. I’m sure he felt like withering some days, but he never did. My dad, now in his 44th year of vocational ministry, remains a branch stocked with green leaves and heavy fruit. I do not have to ask my dad what the secret is because I grew up seeing it.

The definition of success for both my grandpa and my dad was never what another church was doing. It was never the size of their attendance. It was never the effectiveness of an outreach, a number on a page, or a comparison with another pastor. The measure of success always was, and to this day is, to know God by obeying him.

I’ve heard people say that “success is being obedient to God, regardless of the consequences.” The problem for most of us is with the latter part: “regardless of the consequences.” Our well-intentioned desire to shape the consequences for God, to produce the fruit we want for his kingdom, that’s what lures us to lesser definitions of success. We rarely realize we have lost God’s definition of success. Until we wither.

Default Definitions

I do not know what definition of success you default to. Mine is a high-bar that Billy Graham probably wouldn’t have cleared. These stifling expectations come from four sources. Can you relate to any of them?

1. *Self-imposed expectations.* I must have all the gifts of the body, can never make a mistake, should preach a “grand slam” every weekend, or look like some other gifted minister.
2. *People’s unrealistic expectations.* I should be at every church event, to always be available and yet always well-rested and well-prepared, to adopt their personal agenda, to heal their personal wounds, to boldly declare the truth without offending.
3. *Expectations of modern evangelical culture.* Your church doesn’t matter if it’s not a mega, that you don’t matter as a pastor unless you’re a celebrity with a massive blog readership or radio ministry, that “you’re either growing or dying,” that you have to be a podcast quality preacher, conference-speaking teacher, and a visionary organization-building leader.
4. *Expectations of your tribe*—whatever those expectations may be.

In my career as a professional writer, I benefited greatly from models. I would find successful writers and dissect their work. Imitating their structures and strategies made me a better writer. As a result, when the church I serve began growing, I naturally looked to more “successful” pastors who have also shepherded growing churches.

The problem came—for me—when I realized that my definition of success was no longer God’s. Somewhere along the way (and in the name of bearing fruit for Christ) these model ministers and ministries became my

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definition of success. This never happened officially or verbally. It happened in my heart. And nobody else knew. I had believed the lie that I needed to look like so-and-so, see growth like so-and-so, teach or write like so-and-so, in order to be successful.

But that is not heaven's measure of success. God did not create you or I to pastor like Rick Warren, Mark Dever, Matt Chandler, Max Lucado, John Piper, Craig Groeschel, Tony Evans, or whomever others around you happen to admire. God did not create you to be a clone of some other minister. He created you to serve him as only you can.

The Right Model

Knowing that we are all imitators, God did give us a model on whom we can fix our eyes. A servant who, like my dad and grandpa, would be out of place amid the bustle and bright lights of today's ministry scene—a quiet, praying servant named Jesus of Nazareth.

In Jesus' unhurried pace and unity with the Father, we find the true definition of success. I believe that God's calling for you will be fulfilled if you obey in these three matters:

1. Love God. (Luke 10:27)
2. Love God's People. (Luke 10:27)
3. Love God's Word. (2 Timothy 4:2)

I got to see this modeled growing up. My dad and grandpa accomplished a lot, but they managed to do so without severing their hearts from these wells of motivation and strength. The more I place myself with the disciples in the Gospels, the more I see these same simple priorities in Jesus' life, too.

The secret to success is not one more thing to do. (And that, I've found, is what most pastors want at a conference, another thing to heave onto the suffocating pile of To-Do's.) The secret to true and lasting success is actually to abandon anything you must in order to reclaim purity of heart in those "big three." To love God, who alone can infill you with love for his people. And to love his Word, which "prospers."

Do this and you will "be like a tree planted by streams of water." You will "bear fruit in season." When other expectations tug at your ego, remind yourself that the tree does not get to pick what fruit it produces. The tree does not even get to pick when it produces. That is all up to the Creator.

A tree's only job is to dig its roots deep into the soil, to drink up as much water as possible, and to stretch out its leaves to soak in the sunlight. That's it.

And so, as a mighty oak in God's kingdom, you need not plan or manipulate your fruit. Only keep yourself rooted in God's Word. Drive your roots deep in it. Gulp long swells of the living water that is found in Christ alone. Bask in the warmth of his grace, so that you can pass it on to others in need. Abandon any definition of "success" that tempts you away from doing this, and you'll grow. And others around you will grow, too.

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Discuss

1. Make a list of expectations you have for yourself that you use to define success. Identify the source of each item on the list. How does it point toward one of the three items listed under The Right Model? If it doesn't, how can you modify it so it does?
2. Who are the models you look to for examples of success? What about their ministry do you admire? How can this translate to your specific call and setting?
3. How does your ministry reflect that you "know God by obeying him?" How does this relate to your various tasks?

A God-Centered Vision

Let go of your own expectations and give your role the weight God gives it.

1 Corinthians 12

Nearly 10 years ago I sat in an Atlanta, Georgia, arena packed to the brim with college students. I was attending an annual conference hosted by Passion, and Beth Moore was about to take the stage.

In case you have never experienced Beth Moore's teaching outside the realm of women's events and teaching videos, it is an awesome thing to behold. I don't know if the co-ed environment brings out a different side of her, but she was especially on her game. She was fiery and she was powerful. She gripped each one of us with her prophetic message, and she straight-up preached it.

As a young 20-something, I had never seen a woman teach with such authority and conviction. I had never seen a woman command such a large audience with her anointed words. It was inspiring and it was empowering.

I left that day wanting to be like her.

Since that experience, I have realized that I will probably never be like Beth Moore. Aside from the fact that her combination of gifts is extremely rare—and I do not have those gifts—I am an introvert at heart. I enjoy teaching, but it is scary, draining, and hard for me. I prefer to sit behind the safety of my computer screen.

For a time I shifted my aspirations from "successful speaker" to "best-selling author." I wanted to make a difference, and I wanted it to be big.

As I have grown older, my expectations have continued to shift away from the goals of my college-age self. My writing ministry has not "exploded," but instead has been a gradual journey of open doors and new opportunities. I have watched as other writers' careers have taken off faster than mine, an experience that is humbling but important. Along this path God has refined my motives, skimming away the dross of my desires for self-glory. He has redirected my focus off my own image and onto his.

If my younger self could see me now, she might accuse me of selling out, of compromising my dreams by settling for something much too small. "What happened to the vision?" I might ask myself in disappointment. However, I think God has replaced the old me-centered vision with a new vision, a more God-centered one.

The older I get, the more I realize that it is not about the size of my voice, but how I steward it. Whether I have an audience of 10 or 10,000, the more pressing question is are my gifts and passions being used for the kingdom of God? How well am I overseeing the corner of influence that God has given me?

This new vision of mine is rooted in a more healthy understanding of the body of Christ. While the Beth Moores of the world are wonderful gifts to the church, 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us that we can't all be Beths. We can't all be Beths any more than the human body can be composed of all ears. Instead, God designed the church with beautiful diversity in which each part is unique and incredibly valuable. Without every single member of the body doing its part, the body is handicapped. It cannot function the way it should.

Now your story probably is different from mine. Perhaps there is another person you aspire to be like, or another area of ministry, workplace, or culture where you want to excel. But perhaps, like me, you have experienced disappointments when you were not as successful as you thought you might be. Perhaps your life hasn't turned out quite the way you envisioned.

If that is your story, then take heart in remembering your role in the body. Your story, your gifts, and even your failures have all worked to make you the unique human being you are, and Scripture tells us that your role matters. No matter how visible or how far behind the scenes, you play a vital role in serving the kingdom of God, and we would be a crippled body without you.

Whatever your gift and whatever your role, steward them with excellence. Give your role the kind of weight God gives it, not as one who is out for self-glory, but as one who knows that God created you for a purpose. Whatever your role, your voice, or your cause, it matters. We need you!

— SHARON HODDE MILLER is a writer and a doctoral student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois; adapted from our sister site GiftedforLeadership.com, © 2012 Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.GiftedforLeadership.com.

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Discuss

1. How have your goals and definition of success changed over time? What experiences contributed to this shift?
2. What have been the most difficult ideas of what your life and ministry would look like to let go? Why?
3. How can you measure how well you are stewarding your influence? How can you help keep those you lead accountable to this call?

Leading by Failure

Leading people in new directions means disappointing them in some ways.

Ephesians 5:21–33

About a dozen years ago I started reading books about fresh ways to understand the identity of the church. Reading thinkers such as Darrell Guder, Lesslie Newbigin, and Alan Hirsch convinced me of the church's need for a fresh expression of the gospel in Western culture. I had helped to start a few ministries in communities that had little exposure to Christianity and had seen God do some incredible things. But through my experiences and my reading, I became that annoying 20-something leader who believes the church is overdue for radical change, and that I'm just the guy to lead it.

Skeptical that "traditional" churches could make the kind of changes I longed to see, I gravitated toward church planting. The only way to see radical change, I believed, was to start fresh.

When we started Mill City Church in Northeast Minneapolis, we used all the language you might expect from young leaders out to change the church. We were about serving, not Sundays; we were about people, not programs; we were about being present rather than performing. I still believe many of these correctives are needed correctives, and I'm proud of the team that took the leap to help start a church based on some fresh thinking.

It wasn't long, though, before the realities of leadership started to sink in. As more people joined our community, more organization became a necessity. When we began to worship together regularly on Sundays, all sorts of decisions had to be made about how we would do things in a way that would honor our convictions about who we wanted to be. When people from our neighborhood started to join us, they brought their own expectations from a diversity of spiritual backgrounds.

Unavoidable Expectations

Though we were a new church, we all came with certain expectations about what a church should be and how it should be led. We were discovering what any seasoned pastor knows: regardless of what sort of church you lead, people have expectations for you as a leader. And the fact that we were overturning some traditional ways of doing church only compounded the problem. During that time a central question for me became, *How do I manage people's expectations while leading them in new ways of being the church?*

I was beginning to realize that it's not enough to have a compelling vision for your community. To help lead change in the church, I needed to be aware of the expectations people had of me as a leader. Some of these expectations weren't fair, but that doesn't mean I could ignore them. Leading change in the church demanded I learn to manage people's expectations.

Change is hard for everyone, and when we ask people to try new things and take risks they need to be able to depend on other parts of their life remaining stable and predictable. This means being intentional about how and when we challenge people's expectations. Or, to quote leadership writers Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, "Exercising leadership might be understood as disappointing people at a rate they can absorb." The same principle applies in ministry. Leading change in the church requires we learn how to fail people's expectations at a rate they can stand.

I've realized how important it is to meet some of the expectations of those you lead. Meeting common expectations people have doesn't mean you are selling out on the changes you believe need to happen. It turns out Sunday is not the enemy of serving, and programs/organization can help foster real relational community. Much of what people come to expect from a church is a necessary part of a healthy community. Providing environments where people can participate in worship, where their kids can gain an understanding of the love God has for them in Jesus, and where people develop meaningful friendships that help them pursue God in their life are all reasonable expectations for any church community. Investing in people personally by sharing your life with them and modeling a way of following Jesus helps people trust the leaders of their church community. Meeting some of these expectations as a leader is what affords you the opportunity to fail other expectations at a rate people can stand.

Change Comes Slowly

I remember sitting in a coffee shop with a close friend who had been integral in helping our church get started. He had given so much of his time and energy to serving, forming groups, and meeting needs in our community. As we sat together, he expressed disappointment with how absent I had been in his life over the

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past several years. He felt I had failed to care for him and his family as their pastor. It was heart-wrenching and frustrating. I felt defensive, thinking of all the reasons why I couldn't possibly live up to his expectations. But in the end, I knew there was a significant element of truth to what he was telling me; I hadn't served him well as a pastor. I had been so focused on the demands of starting a new church that I had lost sight of him as a person. This was hard to admit.

You probably have similar stories about how you have disappointed people you have led. I think it is inevitable that we will disappoint people as leaders, despite our best efforts. But there's a different kind of disappointment. Sometimes you have to make decisions not to meet known expectations people have because you know that meeting those expectations is not going to lead your people where God wants them to go. Leading people in new directions means disappointing them in some ways. But you have to disappoint people at a rate they can stand, so that they can accept the changes God wants to introduce into your life as a community.

Just a couple years into our life as a new church community, I started to realize that the structure of our church's life (Sunday worship, small group, service projects) did not fit our vision of helping people participate in God's mission in their local neighborhood. I realized someone could be coming to worship, going to small group, and serving at the food shelf or school without necessarily having to engage with anyone from Northeast Minneapolis that wasn't already a part of our church. It became clear we needed a different structure for the life of our church if we were really going to equip people to "love our community in the name of Jesus."

We began to explore the idea of creating "missional communities," groups of 20-40 people who would see themselves primarily as missionaries to a particular neighborhood or group of people. This model seemed to create an environment where engaging with people outside our church was not optional but a necessary part of participating in the life of the group.

There was just one problem. We had a lot of people participating in small groups. We decided that killing our small groups and asking everyone to form missional communities would have been too drastic of a change. Instead we piloted one missional community and discipled leaders who could help lead future missional communities, while still supporting small groups. People sensed the change and there was some resistance to it, but the disappointment came at a reasonable rate. We spent two years in this experimental phase before we were ready to offer more people the opportunity to participate in these missional communities. Those two years felt like an eternity, especially for a young church. But it was really a relatively short period of time to make such a significant change. And because we advanced at a slower pace, we were able to make the transition without minimal disappointment and resistance.

On the other hand, there have been times when we have intentionally failed to meet some expectations people have had of our church. We try not to create any ministry that already exists in our local area, encouraging people to join the work of non-profits and other churches who are already doing work our people want to be involved in. When you come to worship on a Sunday morning, you aren't sure who you will be preaching because we have about five speakers who share the preaching ministry. This is unsettling to many people, but reinforces our conviction that hearing from multiple and diverse voices is important for the maturity of the church. We meet on Sunday's in a public school, like many new churches. Despite the expectation of many that we will move into a worship space we own, we have decided to stay in the school for as long as we can because of the relationship it fosters between the church community and the school. This means forfeiting the comforts of our own space for the sake of relationship.

Jesus constantly failed the expectations of those he led. Almost everyone Jesus encountered had some set of expectations for him as a healer, a leader, a savior, a revolutionary, and as the Messiah. In fact, it was rare for Jesus to leave a group of people where he did not disappoint someone's expectations of him. Whether it was the rich young ruler who wanted Jesus to affirm that he was doing the right things with his life and his wealth, or religious leaders who wanted Jesus to affirm their authority, Jesus regularly failed their expectations. Occasionally, we get glimpses of times when Jesus wonders if he has pushed the envelope so far that even his closest followers might desert him. After one incredibly challenging teaching moment recorded in John 6, Jesus asks the twelve disciples, "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

Despite the clear challenge that Jesus presented to the established order of his day, he also attended to the needs of those he was leading and investing in. He regularly took time to explain to his closest disciples the meaning of some of his parables and teachings. He spent time away from the crowds with them, modeling and teaching a rhythm of rest and prayer. He gave them space to ask questions and just enjoy their friendship with

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him. In these ways, he met some of the expectations they had of him as their Rabbi and Lord. Because he met these expectations, he could fail other expectations at a rate the disciples could stand.

Looking back on the last 10 years of ministry, I see growth from my “blow it up and start over” phase. I feel very passionate about the need for the church in North America to embrace a missionary identity in an increasingly post-Christian context. But I’m realizing that the way God is leading us into that future is through a combination of meeting our needs for affirmation and presence while at the same time challenging us to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit into some unfamiliar places. This requires us as leaders to both meet and fail the expectations of those we lead.

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Discuss

1. What are the expectations people have of leaders in your church? List as many as you can. Why do they have these expectations? Which should you strive to meet?
2. Which expectations should you learn to fail at, at a rate people can accept? How could you upset these expectations in ways that push toward a new vision of the church?
3. What drastic changes would you like to make in your ministry? What are the expectations you need to fail in, in order to accomplish this? What are the expectations you could continue to meet to help ease people through the transition?

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Beyond the Stereotypes

How embracing those irritating pastor stereotypes can make you better.

Romans 12:1–2

Aside from the President of the United States, perhaps no one receives more unsolicited advice on how to do their jobs than pastors. Everyone, it seems, has an opinion about who pastors are and what they should be doing. Some of these opinions are completely off-base. There's no better recipe for ministry failure than to go about trying to fulfill everyone's expectations. On the other hand, I've come to see a silver lining in some of the most common stereotypes people have of what I do.

1. “Pastors don’t have to work hard.”

He is a hard-driving businessman, about my age. “Must be nice,” he tells me, “to work only one day a week.” Then he laughs. *Hardy har har.* I know—it’s just a joke. But he says this a lot.

Underneath the cloak of a joke lies the naked truth: he thinks he works harder than I do. Not only does he work more hours (so he thinks), but he does real work—like landing new accounts. Nothing so namby-pamby as dispensing devotional thoughts.

This irritates me. It pokes my pride, and immediately I know how I want to respond: prove him wrong. I will work my butt off. I will work harder than he does, longer than he does, and I will do so in a way that—subtly, spiritually, of course—he knows it. I will drop casual comments about being “crazy busy” or “my calendar being so full.”

There is one teensy-weensy problem, though, with proving him wrong, with showing the entire church just how hard I work: it ruins me as a pastor.

It turns out that to do pastoral ministry, I need a soul. And when I work all the time, I lose that. By doing so much ministry, I lose the one thing I need most in ministry.

In *Prayer* Richard Foster writes, “At first we thought solitude was a way to recharge our batteries in order to enter life’s many competitions with new vigor and strength. In time, however, we find that solitude gives us power not to win the rat race but to ignore the rat race altogether. Slowly, we find ourselves letting go of our inner compulsions to acquire more wealth than we need, look more youthful than we are, attain more status than is wise. In the stillness, our false, busy selves are unmasked and seen for the impostors they truly are.”

It turns out that the hard-driving businessman who puts me down for working only one day a week has a point: I should work fewer hours per week than he does. For I need time to pray, to reflect, to forgive the unfair criticism and the slight, to let go of the anxiety about our church’s finances. Otherwise, my soul becomes muddied, and I fail to bring a clear pastoral presence. The nature of pastoral work requires a different way of working.

Leadership Journal once asked pastors to log their work each week. Pastors reported high levels of work satisfaction up to 55 hours per week. But beyond that their satisfaction turned into resentment. Surely becoming resentful is not what Jesus had in mind when he called me to this work. Eugene Peterson’s words still shake me: “The adjective *busy* set as a modifier to pastor should sound to our ears like *adulterous* to characterize a wife or *embezzling* to describe a banker.”

The right way for me to respond to the business guy who “jokes” that “You pastors work only one day a week” is to do more than swallow. It’s to delight in the freeing realization that if we’re competing for most hours worked per week, he can win. *Go ahead. Because I’m in a different kind of work that requires a different kind of rhythm.*

2. “You should be accessible when I call.”

In any given week, someone wants me to come to a prayer breakfast. Another person would love it if I could attend her voice recital. A third needs me to write a pastoral reference for his mission trip. Not long ago a member called, distraught about her across-the-street neighbor, whose marriage was melting down. She didn’t know this neighbor well, and the neighbor does not attend our church, but “Could you go and help out? I’ll give you her number.”

Their unspoken expectation falls on my shoulders—*You should be accessible when I call.* That’s what pastors do.

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Intensifying this is the raw economic fact: each person pays part of my salary. When I worked in publishing, I had one boss, whose title appeared in the upper right corner of my job description. In the church, hundreds of names appear there; the paper quickly runs out of space.

It turns out that the stereotype of pastor as the humble parson who still makes house calls cannot be explained away, no matter how many church-growth books try. That is because it is in the essential nature of sheep to want a shepherd. They want someone who knows them well enough to call them by name, who will track them down when they get lost in a thicket. If you don't want that expectation, you don't want sheep.

And here the stereotype of accessible shepherd cuts across my grain. Do I merely want growth in attendance—that makes me feel good—or do I really want more people to pastor? Because that cannot wholly be delegated. If I have no time to meet with the distraught, to hear the confession of someone who starts out, “I’ve never told this to anyone before, but …” then I am not a shepherd.

3. “Pastors are out of touch.”

I’m in the barbershop, and someone curses. Then he looks over at me, “Oh, sorry, pastor. I know you’re not used to language like that.”

In one way, I appreciate his restraint, even if it came four seconds too late. But in another way, I chafe at being the professionally holy guy, the person who’s thought to be so sheltered, he’s never heard such language and couldn’t possibly handle it.

But this annoying stereotype can actually help me. It reminds me that to be wholly relevant is to lose my spiritual power. If the only things I pay attention to are what everyone else is paying attention to, I have nothing to say.

That’s why on the day of my ordination, the bishop charged me: “Will you be diligent in prayers, and in reading the Holy Scriptures, and in such studies as help to the knowledge of the same, laying aside the study of the world and the flesh?”

In the silence that followed, I made a public vow: “I will endeavor so to do, the Lord being my helper.”

That means I will sometimes be out of touch. But that’s not all bad.

G. K. Chesterton built a whole character on this stereotype. His detective, Father Brown, a short, unassuming priest, is constantly looked over and looked down upon. He’s sheltered, irrelevant, people know, so he couldn’t possibly understand the complexities and pain of the real world.

Yet Father Brown solves the murder.

How does he do it? Father Brown knows the human heart. His regular times in prayer have revealed to him his own sinful drives. Listening to people in the confessional, he’s learned what anger, lust, and greed sound like, how they darken a soul and lead some to the point of killing another human being.

In one way, Father Brown knows nothing. In another way, he knows everything.

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Discuss

1. How much time do you set aside for prayer and solitude? How could your church or ministry culture better value and support this?
2. How does my weekly schedule reflect my role as a shepherd?
3. How often do I try to prove I am “in touch?” When is this appropriate? When is it not?

Maximizing Ministry

Let your God-given gifts guide your ministry.

1 Corinthians 12:7–11

I looked at the results of the spiritual gift inventory and gulped. The areas in which I'd scored highest, preaching and discernment, came as little surprise; I enjoyed speaking and counseling. But way down the list were shepherding and mercy, two gifts associated with effective pastoring.

I had suspected for some time what the test confirmed. I was a good communicator, but I struggled with people skills. I lived for Sunday mornings but found visitation difficult to get motivated for.

But here I was, a pastor in a small church. The expectations leaned much more toward strong people skills and contact, and much less toward preaching and leadership. Why had God led me to such a position? What should I do? Should I stay in a job that seemed, by definition, to require a different person? Or was there room in the local church for pastors who weren't first and foremost shepherds?

Over time I discovered there is room for pastors who don't always fit the image of a personable parson. But reaching it requires accepting some truths.

Guilty No More

"Why don't you spend more time showing attention to your own people?" an older member of the church angrily said over the phone. "You're always interested in some new program or idea. Why don't you just be a pastor?"

He had a point. I didn't fit his idea of a pastor. I didn't enjoy long hours over coffee in someone's living room. I didn't look for the next church supper. I didn't attend every birthday or graduation party.

I carried guilt about that. I knew I fell short of the expectations of many people in the congregation. After all, my passions were for speaking, writing, innovation, and evangelism. But in a smaller church, those gifts were novelties, not necessities.

It took me several years to accept that there was nothing wrong with who I was. After all, it is God who chooses to give each of us gifts. Paul reminds us, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good ... and he gives them to each one, just as he determines" (1 Cor. 12:7-11). It is the Spirit of God who determines who gets what.

It slowly dawned on me that the expectations of others weren't nearly as important as God's expectations that I develop the gifts he had given me.

That self-acceptance didn't come easily. I remember setting up a campaign one fall to visit every family in the congregation. I started out on my new crusade to be the pastor everyone wanted. I lined up several calls and started out after supper.

I knew I was in trouble during the first visit. I sat down in the living room as the entire family nervously took a seat across from me. For five or ten minutes, we made small talk, then one of the children got up to leave. Soon the other child left. Then the dad announced he was going to check on his son. The mother thought she had better check on the dad. Finally, she popped her head back in the living room and said, "There's some cake in the kitchen if you want it. No one else liked it. I thought maybe you would."

I canceled the rest of my every-house campaign. This was not me. My congregational members were no more comfortable with my new "gift" of visitation than I was. (Of course, I still made some house calls, but usually to shut-ins or the elderly.) I had to accept that God made me who I was and learn to celebrate that fact rather than excoriate myself for it.

A Well-Executed Handoff

I don't think it's wise to stand up and say, "Folks, I don't think I have the gift of shepherding. So don't expect me to act like a shepherd. I'm a preacher. So I'm just going to give myself to preaching."

Chances are, if you say something like that, your Christmas bonus will include a gift certificate from Allied Van Lines.

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Instead, you need to find individuals who love doing the things you find difficult. One of the wisest things I did in a small church that expected pastoral visitation was to recruit a retired missionary. He lived for spending time with other people. I gave him the title “Minister of Visitation” and had a business card printed for him. I ran into him several years later, and he produced his business card with a proud smile.

Did I give up visitation entirely? Of course not. But I let the volunteer clue me in on who desperately needed to be seen. He felt fulfilled; I felt relieved.

We can never abdicate our responsibilities in areas we don’t particularly like or flourish in, but we can minimize the amount of time we spend in them.

Lead from Your Strengths

Part of my theology of spiritual gifts includes the idea of “A,” “B,” and “C” gifts. “A” gifts are things I do best. I receive affirmation from others when I exercise those gifts. I find energy and refreshment in performing tasks in those areas.

For example, I love preaching. No one has to put a gun to my head and say, “Okay, buddy, head for the pulpit or else.” It’s the one hour of the week I enjoy most.

The next category is “B” gifts. Those are talents we have aptitude for, but are not necessarily strengths. While I didn’t want to perform them on a daily basis, I did find performing funerals fulfilling. I even had one man remark, “Pastor, I hope I die while you’re still here. You do a good funeral.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. Somehow, it didn’t seem quite right to say, “Jim, I hope you die while I’m here too.” But I knew what he meant. He was affirming a “B” gift.

“C” gifts are gifts it’s a stretch to call a gift. Let me illustrate the difference.

My wife would often stand next to me in the receiving line following a Sunday morning service. I would shake hands with Elma, a dear woman from the church, and then she would move on to shake hands with my wife. On the way home, the conversation would often go like this:

“Bob, did you know Elma’s grandson is having surgery on Monday?”

“You’re kidding. She never said anything about it to me.”

“And did you know her landlord raised the rent on her for the third straight month?”

“No, she never mentioned it.”

“And she had to have her cat put to sleep because it had an anxiety disorder?”

“Come to think of it, I believe she did.”

Obviously, my wife had an ability to get people to share hurts that I didn’t have. When I would ask Elma how she was, she would simply say, “Fine, pastor.”

The lesson I learned: spend most of your time using your best gifts. Spend some of your time using your so-so gifts. Spend as little time as possible using your weakest gifts. There’s an argument for trying to improve weaknesses, but the simple truth is: you may teach a dog to ride a pony, but it’s never going to win a rodeo.

— BOB MOELLER is founder of For Better For Worse For Keeps Ministries and has pastored in local churches; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © 1996 Christianity Today, updated 2014. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. Which ministry tasks do you find most difficult?
2. What other leaders or potential leaders love doing the things you find difficult? How could you better incorporate them into your ministry?
3. What are your “B” gifts? How much time do you devote to them? How can you find a proper balance?

Further Exploration

Resources to help you manage healthy expectations.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “Learning from the Biggest Ministry Mistakes” Survival Guide
- “Fear of Failure” Training Theme
- “Redefining Success” Training Theme
- Goals Pack, The Church with New Leadership Training Track
- Spiritual Health Pack, The Church with New Leadership Training Track

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Alter Ego: Becoming Who God Says You Are by *Craig Groeschel*. We only discover our true identity when we lay down our perceptions of ourselves, and allow God to tell us who we are. We have a new identity in Christ and once we uncover what that is, our lives will never be the same. (Zondervan, 2013; ISBN 978-0310333715)

Leading from the Second Chair: Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your Role, and Realizing Your Dreams by *Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson*. This acclaimed book will help secondary leaders understand their callings and find success outside of the spotlight. (Jossey-Bass, 2005; ISBN 978-0787977399)

Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome by *Kent and Barbara Hughes*. Pastor Hughes and his wife, Barbara, share examples—and biblical support—to suggest that success should be measured by service and faithfulness. (Crossway, 2008; ISBN 978-1581349740)

Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples by *Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger*. This book focuses on practical strategies for discipleship. (B&H Publishing Group, 2006; ISBN 978-0805443905)