

The Biggest Mistake Leaders Make When Choosing Team Members

By Rev. John A. Chevalier

Over the last several months I have been in a discussion with a local church in our area. I have been leading worship for them and we have been talking about a deeper ministry commitment. The discussion has moved to evaluating my gifts and abilities and how best to serve. During this time I have regularly challenged the leadership with the question of "IF" I fit. The answer I get back is always an absolute and definite; "Yes, of course you fit here."

As I watch how the organization handles different situations I can clearly see a much different philosophy of ministry than what I hold to. I am not saying that what they are doing is wrong, by any means, but it is so different from the way I think that I can see potential conflicts as we move forward. We are in a place, as followers of Jesus, where it is vitally important to examine every angle of working together. We live in an age where church leaders still believe that if you like each other, your theology matches, and your gifts fit the need, then of course you should be on the team. My answer to this is; "Maybe!"

You see, there is much more to working together than simply filling a need and getting along. The "How" is just as important, if not more so, as the "Why". It's real easy to see a need and a gift that fits that need, but that's not where most church conflicts begin. It isn't in the belief that the task needs to be completed or the belief of why it needs to be completed that is the problem, but in the practical walking out of the task is where the differences surface. The problem is that we rarely look at how an individual processes the task. Things such as time management, leadership development, and even calling his/her department to a higher commitment, are rarely considered. Instead, in the church, we focus on theology and people's gifts as our main source of evaluation. This falls far short when it comes to evaluating if a person "fits" into your ministry.

I've been on both sides of this. I have hired people who fit the gifting needed for the position and not considered their worldview or philosophy of ministry. I cannot tell you the level of hardship and heartbreak that this caused. In the end, I needed to remove the person from ministry for the good of the entire congregation and was forced to deal with some of the fallout. In the end, removing the person was the right decision, but the whole thing could have been avoided if I had worked through the "right things" in the beginning. I've also been the person who was hired into a culture that I couldn't relate to, much less work in. In this case I relocated my entire family over 900 miles away from home. I was only in my new state for less than 24 hours when I found out that many things that I had been told were not entirely true. When I attempted to discuss this with leadership, I was basically told that I needed to submit to the leadership and just do my job. I lasted in that position for a year, but in the end we mutually agreed to part ways. This too could have been avoided if I had known the right questions to ask and what to look for going in to the position in the first place.

It's these types of situations that put a scar on the reputation of the church. When it comes to the Lord's work, it is vitally important that we communicate clearly and handle every situation with integrity. This sounds like a no brainer, however, I have found that most church leaders have not had the experience of a healthy leadership model, or any training at all. As a matter of fact, in general, I have seen healthier leadership models and hiring practices in the secular workforce, than in vocational ministry. When I entered full time ministry I was 34 years old and already had a successful career as an Automotive Technician, Repair Shop Manager, Customer Service Manager and in Professional Sales. In all of these situations I experienced a far superior model of team in the secular workforce, than in ministry. I saw this as a problem. A real problem. As a matter of fact the one church that I was on staff the longest had a leadership base of people who also entered ministry later in life and had experienced leadership outside of the local church as their training ground.

You see for some reason in local church ministry, and also in many parachurch organizations, the focus of our evaluation is on character, doctrine, and qualifications. Most of the time the things that really matter are ignored. Let's take a look at this.

CHARACTER:

If you look at the qualifications for an elder in I Timothy chapter 3, you'll see that these are all a reflection of a person's character. My guess is that you will find out early in the interview process if the person's character meets the criteria. In most cases the majority of people seeking a position to serve the Lord have what it takes character wise. This should not be an assumption and it's always best to take a real close look. All I am saying here, is that this is normally an easy thing to determine. This is not an area where you will experience conflict in daily ministry. If a person's character becomes a problem, you deal with it. It's pretty black and white.

DOCTRINE:

This is an area that you do need to consider, however, I think a lot of times we major on minors here. You obviously want a person to have a genuine, growing, relationship with the Lord, but for the most part agreeing to a specific list of doctrinal statements really doesn't tell you a lot about the person. I have heard many pastors say; "If your theology lines up, then God will take care of the rest." This is a myth as it makes the horrendous assumption that your theology is "correct", which at best is pretty arrogant. Take a quick look at the great commission and the great commandment. These verses say nothing about what you believe. They are really clear about what we should be doing. These passage communicate "Actions"! The importance of doctrine will vary from denomination to denomination, however, a commitment to unity will help you overcome minor doctrinal differences. Again, if problems arise it's normally in the day to day work of the ministry and not in what you do or do not believe.

QUALIFICATIONS:

Once again, if the person was not qualified to do the job, you probably wouldn't be interviewing them in the first place. Qualifications matter. Asking the question; "Can they fill the position?" is important. But again you could be making a huge hiring mistake if you stop here, focus on the gift, and look no further. The main time that this becomes a problem is when the candidate is overqualified for a specific position and/or has stronger gifts than the senior leadership. The problem normally is never related to the persons gifts as much as it is to the insecurity of the senior leader. I was on the leadership team for a large international ministry. When I took a job leading worship at a new church I was very excited to have my pastor attend a large annual event with me. I was not only on the ministry's leadership team, but was also one of the music directors and taught several workshops over the course of the week-long convention. Following the conference my pastor and I had a strained relationship and within two months I was unemployed. I would think that a pastor would feel great that his worship leader had such a high level of influence, but instead his insecurity couldn't allow me to have a greater influence than he did. This was not so much a hiring mistake, but one of personal self worth within the leader.

Although the things mentioned above are important to look at, they pale in comparison to things like vision, passion and personal ministry philosophy. These are far more important. Understanding these similarities or differences will go a long way in making or breaking relationships when you are filling ministry positions in your church or organization. You want to to be working with people whose hearts beat as yours does, while at the same time hiring to your weaknesses. The last thing anyone needs is a super qualified person, who doesn't see the world as you do. So let's look at these.

VISION:

When we talk about mission and vision, some pastors simply say that we have our mission and vision, it's Jesus's mission and vision. It's the great commission so there's no need to discuss this

any further. This is an extremely narrow view of mission and vision. Our mission is clear, but our vision is normally a reflection of our personal passions and drive. Ask questions such as;

- What do you believe that a local church ministry should look like?
- What do you believe the church should look like?
- How do you see your role in meeting the overall mission and vision of our ministry?
- What people groups are you the most comfortable working with?
- If you could design your own position in local church ministry, what would that look like?

And other questions that tell you what a person's personal vision for ministry is. I think it's very important to notice if they even have a personal vision. Most people who have a passion for serving, also have an idea of what their ideal ministry position looks like. You need to take the time and catch the vision of the person you are wanting to add to your team.

PASSION:

For the majority of my ministry my main focus has been in worship and music ministries. When I lead worship one can normally sense how natural this comes to me and could easily determine that this is my main passion. However, that is more of a reflection of my gifts, and although I do have a passion for worship, my dominant passion is for unity in leadership and the overall ministry development and leadership in the church and Christian community by-and-large. In short, without taking the time to have conversations, ask good questions, and really dig into what drives a person to serve, it's extremely easy to confuse gifts and talent for passion. Here are a few questions that I like to ask.

- What is your passion in serving the Lord, and don't limit your answer to (INSERT POSITION) ministry? (Yeah, just ask the direct question!)
- What really bothers you about serving in the local church?
- If you could change the way things are done, what would it be and how would you do it?
- What has been your biggest frustration in working in local church ministry? Normally what frustrates a person is a reflection of what drive them.

These questions, if asked in a positive way, will normally give you a really good picture of what really makes a potential new staff members heart beat. You never know, you may find out early that you are getting much more than you thought you would. And that's a good thing.

MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY:

How do you view the church? I didn't ask how you were were taught to view the church, or what the bible says the church is, but seriously, HOW DO YOU VIEW THE CHURCH? You can't really evaluate a potential teammate without knowing what you really believe. Things to ask yourself and potential team members are:

- How are ministries created?
- What is the role of the pastor?
- What are the expectations of the associate staff?
- What is your leadership style and what style of leader are you looking for?
- Is there a chain of command?
- Who will the new staff person answer to?

These are all vitally important questions to answer. Before you can bring on a new team member you must know yourself and what you are really looking for and what you are really expecting.

One thing that I counsel new potential staff members on is to NEVER accept a responsibility without the authority. I am not talking about power, I am talking about the ability to get the job done. The worst thing you can do is give a person the responsibility to complete a task, but then give them no authority to carry it out. You not only have to give them the authority, but you have to have to make sure that you respect that authority by referring all decisions related to their ministry, to them. Some churches operate by giving a person the responsibility, but the senior leader always holds the authority over that ministry. This kills teamwork. Any person worth hiring is worth respecting.

In conclusion, I think you can see that the question of a person fitting in any ministry position goes far beyond character and gifts. Teams only work when vision, passion, and ministry philosophies line up. Take a serious look at the areas of consideration mentioned above paying special attention to the last three. Do everything you can to get as much information about the potential new staffers vision, passion, and ministry philosophy. Knowing this will go a long way in making sure that your next hire is a long term relationship and not a disaster waiting to happen.