



Panel Discussion

Building and Maintaining Healthy **Senior** Leadership Teams

This resource will guide you as you build your **Senior Leadership Team (SLT)**, and assess its health.

What is an SLT?

A **senior leadership team** is a group of people – most likely between four and six members – who share responsibility for the success of the parish with the pastor. Of course, they understand and honour the authority of the pastor, but they take responsibility for helping him do what is needed to make the parish amazing.

Who is on the leadership team? That is going to depend on the size, nature and makeup of the parish, of course. Generally, it will include key staff members or volunteers who oversee major areas of responsibility. In many cases, an associate priest may be included.

It must be noted that the members of the leadership team will not be chosen solely based on their areas of responsibility. They will also be mature, trustworthy, influential and capable of having strategic conversations. And they will see the parish as a whole, not merely in terms of their department or ministry. They will be willing to jump into critical topics or areas in the parish that need addressing, and often without much notice.

What we are advocating for here, is an entirely new team. This does not necessitate disbanding a current staff team, disbanding or repurposing a Pastoral Council or Finance Council. This new team, will support you as pastor, to make key decision and lead your parish towards vision. It will be made up of people specifically chosen for this task. As such, it is likely that people may be upset that they are not included on the team; try your best to explain the reasoning for the new team, and bless and release others to support the Church in other ways. What follows next is an explanation of 4 non-negotiables, that will help you choose the members of your Senior Leadership Team.



Who should be on my SLT?

Many factors go into building a successful leadership team. We stress **four non-negotiables**:

1. Unanimity of vision
2. Balance of strengths
3. Healthy conflict and trust*
4. Vulnerability and trust

*This resource is an excerpt from the DR Guidebook, published in 2016.

Since that time, we have reordered our 4 non-negotiables and you will now see them listed as 1) Unanimity of Vision 2) Balance of Strengths 3) Vulnerability and Trust 4) Healthy Conflict. Both vulnerability and trust are essential team traits if the group intends to engage in healthy conflict. While the list has been re-worked slightly over the past few years, the pages and exercises that follow are nonetheless informative and helpful.

Unanimity of Vision



Vision is essentially about where the parish is heading. Imagine four people in a canoe in the middle of a lake. Each person is paddling frantically towards a different shore. You know what is going to happen: nothing – or at best, they will go round and round in circles, getting exhausted and going nowhere.

Leadership teams are teams where members should openly disagree about the best way to move towards fulfilling the vision, but the very basis of this rich disagreement is a fundamental commitment to the one vision. If there are two visions, there will be di-vision. Division at the core of the parish leadership will produce division throughout the entire parish.

Take some time in the next few weeks to invest in your key staff and parishioners. Share your dream for your parish with them. Listen to theirs. Listen carefully to what they are passionate about. Don't presume that because you share a love and commitment to your parish that you have the same vision.

For your leadership team, you are looking for three to five people to join you. As you share your heart with your key influential staff and parishioners, identify those who are strong candidates for your leadership team. Remember, at this point you want to focus on common vision. A secondary goal is to identify the most influential members of your staff or parish with whom you share vision.



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Balance of Strengths



There is no such thing as a balanced person! There is, however, a balanced team. As a pastor, you have specific strengths, but also specific weaknesses. Lean into your strengths, and instead of trying to bolster your weaknesses, bring a team around you that balances you. This is what a leadership team is meant to do.

Another way to think about it is that we all have blind spots. Imagine a leadership team of five people, all with the exact same strengths and the exact same blind spots. Talk about the blind leading the blind!

Your team, however, is your team. They must be built around your specific strengths. This means that the members must be strong where you are weak. The first step, then, is for you to undertake an evaluation of your own particular talents or strengths before you identify those of others.

There are many helpful tools that help you do this. We recommend Clifton Strengths Finder from Gallup.

At this point we are evaluating natural talents. These are to be distinguished from spiritual gifts, which are indicated using tools such as APEST. Tools by which we identify spiritual gifts can be tremendously helpful for equipping parishioners to do ministry. They focus on what a person is called to do by God. Tools measuring natural ability will identify how a person will do what they are called to do.

As mentioned in Divine Renovation, the Clifton Strengths Finder categorizes its 34 themes of talent into four general categories: Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building and Strategic Thinking.

We highly recommend that you take the time to do the Clifton Strengths Finder online assessment. Pastors should unlock their full profile or results so that they can see their top, as well as bottom, strengths. After you have completed your online testing at the Gallup Strengths Center, use the chart on the next page to map out your top five and bottom 5 strengths. Write your name in each applicable box, indicating whether it is a top or bottom strength.

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Balance of Strengths



EXECUTING Catch an idea and make things happen. Work tirelessly to get it done.		INFLUENCING Help team reach a broader audience. Sell ideas in and out of organization. Speak up and take charge.		RELATIONSHIP BUILDING Glue that holds team together. Ability to create groups and organizations greater than the sum of their parts.		STRATEGIC THINKING Focused on what could be. They are constantly absorbing and analyzing info and helping the team make better decisions.	
ACHIEVER		ACTIVATOR		ADAPTABILITY		ANALYTICAL	
ARRANGER		COMMAND		CONNECTEDNESS		CONTEXT	
BELIEF		COMMUNICATION		DEVELOPER		FUTURISTIC	
CONSISTENCY		COMPETITION		EMPATHY		IDEATION	
DELIBERATIVE		MAXIMIZER		HARMONY		INPUT	
DISCIPLINE		SELF -ASSURANCE		INCLUDER		INTELLECTION	
FOCUS		SIGNIFICANCE		INDIVIDUALIZATION		LEARNER	
RESPONSIBILITY		WOO		POSITIVITY		STRATEGIC	
RESTORATIVE				RELATOR			

When you have completed this task, ask those whom you identified at the end of the last exercise to identify their top themes of talent using the same Gallup tools. Begin to map the names on the chart.

3

Healthy Conflict and Trust



As mentioned in the first section, on vision, the primary key to a successful leadership team is unanimity of vision. A shared passion for the desired future of your parish is the foundation for engaging in healthy conflict over strategy and tactics. Not only is this open disagreement tolerated, it is desired. This, however, is easier said than done. For healthy conflict to exist, there must be trust. Only trust allows team members to express different opinions, to disagree with the pastor, and do so safely. Many leaders lack self-awareness in this regard. They think they provide a safe place for constructive disagreement, but they can fool themselves. This can happen in several ways:

1. There is no balance in the team. Members share the same blind spots, which limits healthy conflict.
2. The pastor gathers around himself a group of “YES” people who would never dare to disagree with him, even though they see what he does not: “Yes, Father, no Father, three bags full, Father...”
3. The pastor has a balanced team of capable people, but members do not feel safe. Disagreement with the pastor can have serious consequences after the meeting. As a result, people do not say what they really think: they see the train wreck coming and are ready with an “I told you so” to one another when the wreck takes place.
4. The pastor has a balanced team of capable people, but he will silence any disagreement with a glance or his body language, even without realizing he is doing this. The results are the same.

Patrick Lencioni says that “conflict without trust is politics.” We all know that effective teamwork is too often limited by interpersonal politics within church circles.

What is the answer to this?

1. As the leader, be self-aware.
2. Gather team members who are free to challenge the pastor and speak their minds.
3. Work constantly at establishing a culture of trust and love within your leadership team.
4. Model the healthy conflict you wish to see, and encourage others to respectfully share their thoughts, even if they may disagree with others.

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Healthy Conflict and Trust

Think of the teams you work with the most. In all likelihood, these will be your staff team and your pastoral council. Take some time to reflect on your experience of these teams and assess the health of your teams by doing the exercise on the next page.

Write your scores down on the page beside the statement. When you are finished, go to the next page and collate your results.

When you are finished, ask the members of your various teams to complete the exercise. Obviously, many of these team members will be on the short list for your leadership team.

Compare results and take time to discuss and truly listen to those who support you in your ministry. You might be surprised by what you hear. Save this exercise, and return to it periodically with your Senior Leadership Team, to assess and maintain health.



ASSESS THE HEALTH OF YOUR TEAM

3=Usually

2=Sometimes

1=Rarely

1. Team members are passionate and unguarded in their discussion of issues.
2. Team members quickly and genuinely apologize to one another when they say or do something inappropriate or possibly damaging to the team.
3. Team members openly admit their weaknesses and mistakes.
4. Team meetings are compelling and not boring.
5. During team meetings, the most important and most difficult issues are put on the table to be resolved.
6. Team members know about one another's personal lives and are comfortable discussing them.



TEAM ASSESSMENT SCORING

Adapted from The Five Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick Lencioni.

**Behaviour 1:
Building Trust**

**Behaviour 2:
Mastering Conflict**

Statement 2 _____

Statement 1 _____

Statement 3 _____

Statement 4 _____

Statement 6 _____

Statement 5 _____

Total:

Total:

Questions for Reflection

- 1) Was there a significant difference between your assessment of team behaviors and that of the members of your various teams?
- 2) What did you hear from your team members about how you can grow in leading a team that can engage in healthy conflict?
- 3) What did you hear from your team members about how there can be greater trust?
- 4) Who were the team members most capable of speaking on these issues?
- 5) Who were the members who did not contribute to the discussion?

It should be noted that Patrick Lencioni names another three behaviors that contribute to a strong leadership team: achieving commitment, embracing accountability, and focusing on results. More details can be found in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.

A score of 8 or 9 is a probable indication that the Behaviour is not a problem for your team.

A score of 6 or 7 indicates that the Behaviour could be a problem.

A score of 3 to 5 is an indication that the Behaviour needs to be addressed.

Adapted from the The Five Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick Lencioni..

4

Vulnerability and Trust



Vulnerability is about being real. The truth is that if we set out on the journey from maintenance to mission, if it actually works, we will soon find ourselves in unfamiliar territory. Managing a parish in maintenance mode will not take us to a new place; therefore, there is a good chance that as leaders we will be fairly competent in our ministries. When a parish begins to move, however, the pastor will eventually find himself in a place where certainty about what exactly to do next will quickly disappear. The first and most necessary vulnerability, therefore, is that of the pastor who needs to say to his team, “I need you. I no longer know what to do.”

Going on this great adventure of leading your parish from maintenance to mission will involve great risk, great rewards and great fun. Along the way, there will be sparks. Why? Because you have gathered a group of passionate, capable people in an environment that seeks to engage in healthy conflict. How do we stop sparks from causing the wrong kind of fire? By creating a culture of trust and vulnerability. It is about being real and relying on one another, trusting that the teammates are honest with you, have your back, and have the very best intentions for the team.

Team members – no matter how committed to the vision and how capable of engaging in conversation they are – who hold their cards close to their chests and cannot be real with the other members will sink a leadership team.

So far you have identified your key people and discerned their alignment with your vision. You have mapped out the potential members who would be part of a balanced team and you have evaluated your own and your future team members’ ability to engage in healthy conflict. Vulnerability is the final piece of the puzzle.

I would like to propose two team exercises to help you be vulnerable with one another and help you discern who would best serve on your leadership team. Chances are that you already have a good sense of who really struggles with being vulnerable, but these exercises may be useful.

Sharing Exercise

This one is simple. At the beginning of your next staff or pastoral council meeting, take a moment to go around your team and have everyone share a high and a low from the last month. It can be from their ministry or personal life. Pay attention to see who plays it really safe and describes their high and low without being vulnerable in any way (it can be done).

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4 Vulnerability and Trust



Prayer Exercise

This is an exercise that calls people to step outside of the box and can be slightly uncomfortable. Ask your team to form groups of three or four. The groups can be seated or standing together.

1. First exercise: Thanksgiving

Each person takes a turn praying out loud in the hearing of the others. They pray a 30-second prayer of thanksgiving to God, such as, "Lord, I thank you for..." while others listen. After 30 seconds, the time keeper calls time and invites the second person to begin.

2. Second exercise: Petition

Each person takes a turn praying out loud in the hearing of the others so the others can hear. They pray a 1-minute prayer of petition to God, such as, "Lord, I ask you..." while others listen. After 1 minute, the time keeper calls time and invites the second person to begin.

3) Third exercise: Receiving Prayer

Each person expresses to the others something they would like to receive prayer for. After asking permission, the other members take turns praying out loud over that person as they place a hand on the shoulder or the head of the one receiving the prayer. A total of 3 minutes is set for each person to receive prayer from the other group members. After 3 minutes, the time keeper calls time and invites the second person to begin.

When the exercise has concluded, bring the group back together and take some time to discuss the following questions:

1. What was easy?
2. What was difficult?
3. What surprised you?

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, building a leadership team is one of the most crucial things you can do for the journey that lies ahead. These exercises around the four non-negotiables, plus what you already know, will give you all you need to discern the members of your team from among your key staff and parishioners. There is no algorithm for this. Who are the most aligned to your vision? Who are the most to engage in healthy conflict? Who are capable of vulnerability? From among these, choose those who will bring balance to your team.