

Building a staff team: Seven guides for transitioning off the team

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In previous articles in this series, we addressed how to [find staff](#) members, how to assist new staff members in making a [strong start](#) in their new ministry, and how to train and [develop](#) staff members into a [cohesive team](#). Now, the hard part.

What if you have taken all the appropriate steps in the hiring and training process, but despite the best efforts of both you and your staff member, the task of ministry is not being executed with excellence, because the staff member is, quite frankly, not a good fit for the church, the staff team or the ministry assignment?

Or what if you arrive on the scene as the new pastor, minister of education or staff coordinator and notice an existing staff member is no longer “getting the job done?”

How do you transition a staff member off the ministry team in such a way as to minimize damage to and preserve the dignity of the staff member, the church, and the pastor or staff supervisor?

Keeping an ineffective staff member on a ministry team is not fair to the staff member, the church or the staff team. Unfortunately, churches usually fall into one of two ditches: (1) The church leadership sticks its head in the sand, ignoring an obvious incompatibility between a staff member’s strengths and his or her place of service, or (2) a church leader—pastor, personnel committee chairman or deacon chair—carelessly fires a staff member without due process, not counting the cost to the staff member,

the church or the leader who made the rash decision.

Are there any guidelines to follow that might assist church leaders in helping staff members write a new chapter, finding a better fit for their strengths in ministry? Is there a good way to approach this, the hardest of tasks?

Guidelines for transitioning off

Consider the following suggested guidelines for helping a staff member transition to a different place of service, a place better suited to the staff member's skill set.

1. Try every trick in the trade.

Make sure you have attempted to do everything possible to assist the staff member achieve ministry excellence (See "[10 keys for a great start.](#)").

Effective leaders always should ask themselves, "Am I part of the problem?"

Has the ineffective staff member been given clear expectations, freedom to succeed, and the resources necessary for his or her assigned area of responsibility?

Put plainly, you must be sure the staff member is, in fact, the issue at hand. There are some tasks and some circumstances too daunting for anyone to find success.

2. Count the cost.

Every staff member, no matter how new or ineffective, has fans and followers. In the process of transitioning the ineffective team member off the ministry team, how many church members will resist the change and

come to the staff member's defense, because they personally have perceived the staff member as a "helpful hand" in ministry?

If the staff member is golfing partners with the chairman of deacons or socializes on the weekend with the chairman of the personnel committee, you need to be aware of the allegiances and alliances that exist before you move forward.

Such transitions are the equivalent of tiptoeing through a mine field; one false step and the church may be subject to irreparable damage. Always ask: "Who will care about this transition?" and "How do I minimize the negative impact on the church?"

Once, while transitioning an ineffective staff member hired by a previous pastor, I approached the staff member's close confidant, a church member with whom I had a cordial pastoral relationship.

Asking for the member's trusted confidence, I said: "Jane Doe may be facing some challenges in the next few weeks and might be coming to you for support. Please know I am doing everything I can to assist her and expect you to be both a support and comfort to her, if needed. She is certainly going to need a confidential sounding board."

With this explanatory forewarning, the transitioning staff member's closest comrade was not blindsided by what might be considered bad news. Building this trust relationship ahead of time allowed a potential conflict to be averted and my staff member's friend to serve as an insider on the issue of transition.

I was very careful not to divulge personnel information in the way I worded my conversation. Fortunately, in this situation, everyone was served better by my giving another church member my blessing to be an ally and friend to the staff member, if needed.

3. Avoid surprises.

Unless moral failure is part of the equation, the staff member should see the transition coming because of repeated and candid conversations during his or her tenure of service. Leaders of integrity do not make knee-jerk decisions based on the latest hallway gossip in the church. It is best to bear in mind, transition decisions impact staff careers, families and often have an incalculable ripple effect.

4. Keep it professional.

Never belittle a staff member.

The unfortunate need for a transition off the ministry team should be a completely professional decision, seeking only what is best for the church. A leader should never allow his or her own ego or personal agenda to impact such an important decision.

On the rare occasion when a staff member cannot be retrained or reassigned for a more appropriate ministry fit, make sure you've done everything necessary to assist the staff member discover a new place of service that might be suited better for his or her gift set.

During the entire time of transition, keep the staff member's situation completely confidential, and seek every opportunity to assist the staff member in his or her relocation effort.

I know I have transitioned a staff member well when the former staff member and I are still friends at the end of the process.

5. Be generous.

Church leaders should be more than gracious with support and resources, helping the staff member successfully relocate. Follow the Golden Rule for such situations: Treat the staff member as you would want another

pastor/leader to treat your family member if the circumstances were similar.

The difficult time of transition calls for the church to go above and beyond, avoiding any appearance of stinginess or mean-spiritedness.

A successful transition may require months of searching by the staff member. During a particularly long transition, our staff coordinator met every other week with the transitioning staff member to review the “ministry search” steps the staff member was taking to ensure an active process.

6. Put the church first.

Make sure the decision to transition the staff member is in the best interest of the church body as a whole.

Confidentiality, cooperation and problem solving are the best approach to staff transitions.

Always ask the obvious question, “Putting personalities and power struggles aside, how can we solve this staffing issue in a way that serves the body of Christ best?”

7. Cover your back.

Make sure vested partners are informed when appropriate.

For example, when transition is necessary, I make sure the chairman of the personnel committee knows, in confidence, we are seeking to assist a staff member find a place where he or she can be most effective.

The last thing a pastor/leader wants is a disgruntled staff member calling a committee chairman, asking, “Did you have any idea Pastor Jones is trying to take my job away?” On the contrary, covering your back means no

surprises for those who “need to know.”

Finally, when in doubt, consult with a human resources attorney to make sure both you and the church are protected in the process.

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