

Leadership Discipline White Paper No. One: Collaborating Leadership - Developing a Strong Team

Definition: Leadership involves discerning and casting a Godly vision, and then with God's help, leading others toward it. I believe that the most effective leaders do not operate alone but rather collaborate as part of a close knit team of passionate and committed people whose gifts complement each other.

One great example of collaborative leadership that has captured the imagination of the American public in recent weeks with his attitude, heart, determination and performance is none other than New York Knicks' basketball player Jeremy Lin. Though I am impressed with all of the above attributes, the one I most appreciate is his emphasis on teamwork. While Lin can make much happen on the basketball court with his individual skills, that is not his default mode. His favorite tactic is to work within the context of his team. This type of collaborative team effort is not only important in athletics, but also in life and ministry.

This type of teamwork that Lin displays on the court is at the heart of Collaborative Leadership. There is an added dimension, though, that exponentially increases the power of this type of leadership in the church. Those in leadership are seeking a Godly vision and God is helping them to lead others toward it. The most effective leaders I know value and practice collaborative leadership. This requires the humility to recognize that discerning with a group of trusted leaders will likely result in a better outcome than isolated discernment. It necessitates the self-confidence to admit that no one leader has all of the answers. It means trusting others enough to let go of controlling every detail of the outcome.

Key principles essential for leading collaboratively include: 1) Inviting the right persons to the table. 2) Investing the necessary time together to become a true team. 3) Listening with respect to each voice on the team. 4) Making adaptive issues a priority.

I have had the opportunity to grow my understanding and practice of collaborative leadership, especially in the past 8 years as lead pastor at St. Luke UMC, and I have learned much from some of the extraordinary leaders who are a part of this congregation. Together we have developed a leadership model in which a group of between 8 and 12 trusted leaders nominated by the church at large and interviewed and selected by a selection team serves the function of a church council or administrative board. We study together, laugh (lots), cry (occasionally) and

hold each other accountable for personal discipleship growth goals. Our team covenant frames how we operate as a team. We focus on macro-level leadership priorities by recognizing that other teams in our church are charged and equipped to do technical work. We recognize that our primary task is to discern and cast a Godly vision and then under God's leadership, lead others toward it.

Over the past seven years this team has met an average of 4-6 hours per month. In addition to growing into a collaborative team, some of the tangible outcomes of our work together include:

- 1) Discerning our church's vision, values and goals;
- 2) Developing a vision driven organizational structure, staff and process;
- 3) Leading our congregation in building a life center that has doubled our discipleship and outreach space;
- 4) Establishing church-wide priorities and initiatives;
- 5) Creating a healthy decision-making process that permeates the entire organization;
- 6) Launching a multicultural worship service designed to reach immigrants and refugees.

This model has changed the practice of ministry at St. Luke UMC in the following ways.

- 1) Thanks to our commitment to investing upfront time in team formation, we are able to make hard decisions effectively and efficiently.
- 2) The turnaround time for team decisions is often 2 weeks or less.
- 3) This team of big picture thinkers is freed from the technical work that often prevents leadership teams from staying focused on the vision.
- 4) The Lead Pastor teams with a group of capable and trusted leaders in leading the church.
- 5) The team members look forward to attending leadership meetings . . . are fully engaged in the meetings . . . treat each other with respect, care and candor . . . and make most decisions by consensus.

I have found aspects of this leadership model to be applicable to Conference, Jurisdictional and General Church teams. For instance the Kentucky Conference delegation which I chair has developed a mission statement and covenant, will have spent 3 full days and an overnight retreat together by the time of Jurisdictional Conference, has several team members providing leadership at various levels and is forming into a collaborative team. As a result team members:

- 1) are empowered to share their expertise and gifts with the full delegation;
- 2) are preparing for General Conference
- 3) are hearing a variety of perspectives about critical issues in the denomination and
- 4) are developing into a supportive, encouraging and focused unit.

In short, we are fulfilling the mission statement we adopted at our initial delegation retreat. "As delegates of the Kentucky Annual Conference and Red Bird Missionary Conference we are committed to gathering in community to prepare ourselves physically, spiritually, emotionally,

and intellectually to fully and faithfully serve Christ and the Church.” (Many thanks to the Virginia Annual Conference for circulating a sample delegation handbook that included a similar mission statement).

Developing a strong team is important for leaders who want optimum results. Basketball player Jeremy Lin has recently reminded fans that this is true in basketball. It is even truer in the church context.