

LEAD ON

NAVIGATING THE LEADERSHIP SEAS: THRIVING IN MEETINGS WHEN YOU'RE NOT IN THE CAPTAIN'S CHAIR

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In my 14-year ministry journey spanning three very different churches, I've had the privilege of being guided by five distinct senior leaders. Whether you are ordained or a lay leader, we will all encounter moments when we find ourselves 'managing up' – engaging with those who lead us and at times navigating disagreements and clashes of expectation.

In Mark 10:44-45, where Jesus reveals his servanthood to his disciples, we are left with a powerful message: to be great, we must serve one another in love. This principle applies to all of Jesus' disciples, irrespective of their position or title in the Church. So whatever role you find yourself in, with this in mind, here are four simple ideas to guide your thinking when preparing for meetings where you are not the one calling the shots.

BE GRACIOUS: UNDERSTAND THE LEARNING CURVE

First and foremost, extend grace. It's essential to recognise that the majority of clergy and senior leaders don't automatically receive training in managing and leading teams. Certainly, it is becoming more common, but it can't be assumed that those who are called to be priests and leaders in Christ's Church have all of the managerial skill set. That certainly wasn't the pattern revealed in Biblical leaders anyway!

Just as we are continually learning and growing, so are our leaders, our bishops, our priests in charge and senior pastors. So, rather than expecting perfection, 'managing up' requires a spirit of understanding and support as we collectively navigate the complex landscape of church leadership together. This remains true when the manager has some years more experience than you – they are, and always will be, still learning.

There are brilliant programs out there like the Arrow

Leadership Programme and CPAS's online line-manager training to develop these skills in leaders, whether managing volunteers or paid staff. But a great starting place is acknowledging the learning curve that they will inevitably be on.

BE EXPECTANT: IDENTIFY NON-NEGOTIABLES

Before entering a meeting, identify what you genuinely need from it – your non-negotiables. While it's tempting to want to address all of your current gripes, covering multiple issues, choose one or two essentials that will be most effective in propelling you forward in your role. Whether it's a manager's detailed interest in your ministry area, honest feedback on a project, or simply space to process challenges, clarity on your expectations of the meeting sets a constructive tone and hopefully ensures you will leave it feeling that was time well spent.



Consider jotting down this non-negotiable at the top of your notes as a reminder during the discussion. Or even begin the meeting by saying something like 'I don't want to miss the opportunity to discuss ____ with you in our time now'. Expect that your line-manager will want to meet your needs to help you flourish in your role.

BE HONEST: OPEN COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Even the most exceptional leaders are not mind-readers. I once faced difficulties communicating with a line-manager and sought advice from a wise church warden who asked a simple question: 'Have you told them all of this?' The reality was, I had told them headlines and not all of the other interrelated complexities. Realising I needed to be much clearer (and braver!), I summoned the courage to express my concerns in detail. This resulted in a much deeper and newfound understanding between us, along with a wonderful new expansion of ministry opportunity. But importantly, I felt heard – and a big part of that was being bold enough to share my thoughts, even though I knew they would conflict with my manager's.

Honest communication is challenging, especially when it feels as if you're not holding the decision-making authority, but it lays the foundation for much more effective collaboration. Be courageous and honest – if you don't say it, they won't hear it.

BE OBSERVANT: DECODE YOUR MANAGER'S INTERPERSONAL STYLE

As mentioned above, I've encountered five distinct line-managers, each as different as chalk and cheese from the other. Only in recent years have I understood the importance of careful observation and attentive listening to understand your manager's interpersonal style.

If your line-manager is fast-paced and fact-driven, launching into a detailed account of your weekend may not be the best start to a meeting. Conversely, a more amiable, slower-paced leader might appreciate the details of your Christmas break and want to share their own highlights before diving into business matters.

Recognising your manager's interpersonal style becomes a key tool in approaching them effectively. For instance, a thoughtful, analytical manager may respond better to a new idea if you email it to them a few days before your meeting with relevant details enclosed. This isn't about moulding yourself to be like your manager for manipulation purposes but understanding how they operate so you can connect and communicate with them most effectively.

BE PREPARED: SET THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

All the aforementioned points hinge on good preparation and prayer. Just as you need 'mop-up' time after a meeting to act on discussed points, take time before the meeting to think and pray about how you can practically achieve your non-negotiables. Remember, you will have thought about this area of need more than your manager, so consider how you can help them support you. Come armed with a few suggestions; for example, if you would like to see increased interest in your ministry area, provide your manager with a rough calendar of key dates, highlighting events of particular concern or excitement. One innovative Children's Minister I'm connected with created a short feedback form for his manager to ensure that feedback is constructive and tailored to his needs. Know your non-negotiable need and plan accordingly.

In navigating the waters of church leadership, these principles will hopefully challenge or encourage you to grow in grace, greater courage, or the commitment to carve out that precious preparation and thinking time we all need. Be gracious, be expectant, be honest, be observant and be prepared. Remember, we're all in the 'second chair' in the kingdom of God, with Jesus firmly on the throne.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS



- What non-negotiables can you identify for your key work relationships, and how might you begin to express them effectively?
- In what ways might we need to extend grace to church leaders navigating the challenges of leadership without formal training? Perhaps it's time to extend some grace to yourself if you're the church leader facing these challenges.
- When have you next scheduled that all-important thinking and preparation time? Recognise its importance and commit to scheduling it in your diary now.

