

SEEDS OF CHANGE **BRAD POWELL**

Dealing With the Naysayers

Q

I'm relatively new as the senior pastor at a declining, inward-focused church. How would you suggest I work with staff, elders and other leaders who refuse to buy into my vision for the church?

A

This is a vital issue because you're building the foundation for your entire ministry in that church. More than likely, people don't know you all that well. Even if you've been promoted from within, they don't know you as a senior pastor. So understand this: The lens they see you through will be partially determined by how you handle the more "difficult" people and circumstances.

But first, start with some self-leadership and make sure you're in a good place spiritually, biblically and emotionally. If you're not there, you won't handle people properly, especially those who aren't "buying into" your leadership. Make sure your motivation for leading is right—to serve others, not yourself (Matt. 20:25-28). And be certain that the vision they're refusing to accept is God's vision—not yours (Acts 2:41-47). Sadly, sometimes pastors seek to lead a church to become what they want it to be rather than what God has designed it to be. To be honest, in that case I would side with those who are refusing to buy into the vision.

Once you've carefully evaluated yourself and your motives and know you're following God's vision, here's what I would recommend for dealing with leaders in your church who aren't responding well to your leadership.

Pray for them (James 4:1-3). Unfortunately, I wasted a lot of time, experienced a lot of unnecessary conflict and lost the opportunity to help a lot of people because I didn't pray for them. James hits the nail on the head in this area. We fight and struggle with one another to get what we want, but the simple explanation for why we don't have it stems from our failure to



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ask God. Nowhere is this more applicable than in matters of spiritual leadership and the church. Often, we want the right things, but we seek them on our own without God. Since the church is the people in it and only God can ultimately change people's hearts, we must pray for them, especially when they're not following our leadership.

Love them (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

In the early days of my ministry, I failed here—big time. Given that Jesus has made it clear love should be the primary identification of His followers (John 13:35), there's no excuse for a pastor to fail in this area. Yet, I did.

After a season of brokenness, this area of my life began changing. Rather than seeing these people as the enemy, I started seeing them as the point of my ministry. Not surprisingly, most people respond very differently to a person they know genuinely loves them. Of course, as the life and ministry of Jesus make clear, love doesn't win everyone. But whether or not it wins them, we need to genuinely love them if we're to positively represent Christ through our leadership.

Respect them (1 Peter 2:17). Jesus set the example here by how He responded to the religious leaders. While He clearly didn't respect what they did or why they did it, He did respect them as people of value. Though it ultimately proved hopeless for many, He reached out to them, answered their questions and attempted to teach them anyway. The apostle Paul did the same thing. So should we.

Invest in them (1 Tim. 1:15). As I mentioned, Jesus invested in those who didn't necessarily buy into Him. In fact, He left heaven and died on the cross as much for them as He did for anyone.

Sadly, many pastors take the easy route and simply blast



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these people from the pulpit. Don't do this. It doesn't work in winning those against you, and it causes those who would follow you to pull away. Though it was unbelievably difficult, I personally and privately confronted and corrected people that were skewering me in public. I actually won some of them to my leadership and ministry. Moreover, I won God's favor.

Reposition them (1 Tim. 3; 5:19-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-5). After doing everything else I could to help win these people to God's vision and my leadership, if they continued to refute me, it was time to reposition them out of leadership. I had to do this in an appropriate way organizationally and spiritually—but I had to do it.

Many leaders are afraid to do this, but it's an essential part of spiritual leadership. Remember, the church is people. If we allow leaders who aren't spiritual, what will the church ultimately become? Also, I've found that when you genuinely pray for, love, respect and invest in them, the need for repositioning becomes obvious to everyone. In fact, often these "difficult" people reposition themselves.

Final word: Remember that our failures don't have to be final. You will make mistakes. If you're like me, lots of them. When you do, acknowledge them and begin to lead differently. Those actions will earn you respect from those imperfect people you lead.

*The senior pastor of NorthRidge Church in Plymouth, Mich., **Brad Powell** consults with church leaders to help them lead their churches through transition. Brad has authored Change Your Church for Good (Nelson). NorthRidge Church is No. 15 on The Outreach 100 list of Largest Churches in America. Got an opinion on this column? E-mail: TellUs@OutreachMagazine.com.*

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