

Sticky Teams

Chapter 8

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Making Room at the Top

Why Young Eagles Don't Stay

IN HIGH SCHOOL, I noticed a strange phenomenon. The freshmen got smaller every year. It was really weird.

When my friends and I walked onto campus for the first day of our freshman year, we were legit high schoolers, admittedly a little intimidated by the seniors but plenty cool in our own right.

Not so with the punks that came in the next year. Something must have happened at the middle school to stunt their growth. None of the new ninth graders were anywhere near as big, smart, or mature as we had been the year before. And by the time I was a senior, the middle school was pumping out mental, physical, and emotional midgets.

As I said, it was really strange.

Of course, that's not what was happening. The freshmen weren't getting smaller, stupider, and less mature; we were getting older, more mature, and arrogant.

Fortunately for each incoming crop of freshmen, the seniors keep graduating, giving last year's freshmen, sophomores, and juniors an opportunity to spread their wings and fly. And sure enough, they always ended up flying a lot higher than the seniors would have guessed.

In the church, it's a different story. The seniors never graduate (at least not until they've become literal seniors and start dying off). They hog the leadership table, shutting out the next generation. It's one of the main reasons that most churches stop growing and lose their evangelistic touch (and cultural relevance) around the twenty-year mark.

Letting Young Eagles Fly

Ironically, most churches are started by young eagles. But soon after getting their nest built, nicely appointed, and fully furnished, they start to marginalize the next batch of young eagles, asking them to sit at the kids' table and wait for

their turn at middle-aged leadership.

To counteract that natural tendency, I've made it a personal priority to make sure that our young eagles have a place at our leadership table. I see it as my role to enhance their influence within our church, making sure that they are supported, protected, and listened to.

But I have to admit, it's not always appreciated, especially by middle-aged eagles who think that tenure should be the primary determiner of influence.

I understand their reluctance. Young eagles can make a mess in the cage. They're impatient. They lack the wisdom that comes with experience. In short, they make the same dumb mistakes that the old eagles made when they first started out.

But that's not the real reason that most churches and leadership teams push young eagles out of the nest. The real reason is that leadership is a zero-sum game. One person's emerging influence is always another person's waning influence. That's why making room for the young eagles is a hard sell, especially to those who already have a place at the table.

Again, I understand. Like most leaders, I love the *idea* of servant leadership and putting others first, as long as no one actually cuts in front of me or starts treating me like I'm a servant.

But it has to be done or we'll fall victim to the predictable twenty-year death cycle that causes most churches to stop growing, evangelizing, and making a mark.

When a church grows old, gray, and culturally out of touch—far more interested in protecting the past than in creating the future—it starts to wonder, "What happened to all the young people that used to hang around here?" That's a sure sign that the young eagles have been shut out for a long time.

I'd be a liar if I said that protecting and promoting young eagles is a pain-free venture. It's far easier in theory than in practice. I don't like giving up my personal power, prestige, or preferences any more than the next guy does. It's kind of a drag.

But young eagles are born to fly. It's their nature. It's how God made them. If they can't fly high in our church, they'll bolt and fly elsewhere. And sadly, if and when they do, they'll take most of the life, vitality, and the future of the church with them.

So, honestly now, how are you and your church responding to young eagles? Are they written off, tolerated, or celebrated? Are they encouraged to fly or asked to clip their wings?

I guarantee you, your answer will determine your church's future.

When working with leadership teams to determine their ability and openness to fully utilize and keep young eagles, I ask three questions.

1. Are young eagles empowered *and* platformed?
2. Are young eagles in the loop or in the meeting?
3. Who gets to ride shotgun?

Once I know the answers to these three questions, it's relatively easy to predict with great accuracy whether young eagles are flying high or flying away.

I must warn you, however. If you are over fifty, already have a seat at the leadership table, and perhaps think most of the new eagles you know are a lot like the shrinking freshmen I encountered in high school, you might not like what you read next.

1. Are Young Eagles Empowered and Platformed?

I find that most ministries pride themselves on *empowering* people. But I seldom hear anyone talk about *platforming* people. Yet empowerment without a platform is like responsibility without authority. It's frustrating for everyone involved.

Platforming is granting someone the symbols of power and prestige. It tells everyone that this person has significant juice, influence, and power.

These symbols of power and prestige vary from one organization and industry to another. But everyone within knows exactly what they mean. In the business world, it's the corner office, a private parking space, or an impressive title on your business card. In an academic setting, it's the letters after your name or the title "professor" rather than "instructor" (even if you're teaching exactly the same material). In a church, it's the title you're given, the role you're allowed to play, and a host of other subtle symbols.

I grew up in a church where it was pretty clear to all of us that the senior pastor was the only real pastor. Though there were two others on staff, he always carried out the symbolic duties of spiritual authority: communion, baptisms, weddings, and burials.

That sent a strong message to every other eagle (young and old) that if you wanted to fly in the pastoral world, you'd better go elsewhere. His was a platform not to be shared.

The senior pastor's hogging of the symbols and platforms of spiritual leadership also sent a strong message to the congregation. If someone was in the hospital, he had to be the one to visit. His were the only prayers that counted. If

someone needed spiritual counsel, or even the keys to the church kitchen, he was always the one you called.

The result was an overwhelmed pastor and two devalued associates.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Leaders who willingly share the symbols of organizational power experience a completely different reality. Since their young eagles (and any other eagles they have on the team) don't have to go elsewhere to fly, they tend to stay. When a congregation has other gifted, powerful, and appropriately platformed leaders to choose from, people will start turning to them for spiritual counsel and the keys to the kitchen, significantly lightening the pastoral load.

We can platform people in many ways. Most involve simply stepping back and sharing some of the platforms and perks you already have. The following are some of the most effective strategies I've used over the years. They have helped our young eagles (and other eagles on our team) fly higher and stay longer. I don't offer them as a prescription. They're examples. I realize that each ministry is unique. What works in one setting can easily bomb in another. So you'll have to figure out what will work in your unique ministry environment.

Titles

Years ago, I had a great associate pastor that I didn't want to lose. He shared the pulpit with me and was an integral part of what God was doing in our church. Yet people were constantly asking him when he was going to get his own church. They weren't hoping he would go; they were worried he would leave. But the question itself was a devaluing question. It sent a message that staying here was somehow a sign of failure, while going elsewhere was a promotion.

Now, there is nothing wrong with the title "associate pastor." But in my faith tradition, it has come to mean that you either are too young to be a senior pastor or lack the gifts to be a senior pastor. So people assume that anyone who has strong preaching and leadership gifts (and the title "associate pastor") will be leaving soon for an upgrade.

Ironically, achieving the title "senior pastor" is always seen as a promotion even if the new church and circle of influence is much smaller than in the "associate" days. Apparently, there is a lot of power in the word *senior*. So I decided to change our nomenclature.

We changed my associate's title to match mine. We now had two "senior pastors." Though nothing changed in terms of what he did, the congregation's perception and response to him changed remarkably and almost immediately. So did his self-perception.

The questions and the pressure to get his "own church" stopped. People began to turn to him for things they previously seemed to think that only I could answer or do. Twenty years later, he finally left to "get his own church." During the twenty years he was with us, he helped our church grow numerically and spiritually in ways it never could have

if he'd been forced to fly elsewhere.

Today, we have four "senior pastors." It drives outsiders nuts. (They can't figure out who's in charge.) But our people love it, and so do the senior pastors. As for role confusion, it doesn't create any more role confusion than having multiple partners in a law firm or business venture. We all know our roles. But we also all share a platform that says loud and clear, "I'm not the only important person around here."

What titles you can and can't share within your polity will vary. But titles are powerful platforms that cost nothing to give away except a willingness to share some of your own organizational prestige and power with others.

Roles

Another powerful way to platform others is to allow them to do things that send a signal of spiritual authority within the context of your church traditions and organizational culture.

Weddings, funerals, baptisms, preaching, and up-front leadership at special events provide significant platforming opportunities. Letting others take the lead in these situations sends a strong message, as long as two conditions are met: (1) *They do a good job at it.* A stumbling or embarrassing performance in the spotlight helps no one. It doesn't platform someone; it devalues them. (2) *They aren't seen as a substitute.* If the only opportunity to take the lead happens when I'm out of town, it doesn't platform someone; it positions them as an understudy.

Our church is so large now that no one knows if I'm at another venue or campus, out of town, or in the audience—or even sleeping in, for that matter. But up until we reached a few thousand in attendance, I made sure I was highly visible whenever I wanted to platform someone.

For instance, when I first started sharing the pulpit, I would come back from vacation a day early, make announcements, and sit in the congregation taking notes. Since no one knew I'd been on vacation (I didn't broadcast it to the congregation), my presence told people that this was our "other teaching pastor," not my substitute.

Another platforming example would be my decision years ago to have our worship pastor start presiding over communion. Previously, I would step in and take over after he had led us in worship and prepared our hearts. But by doing so, I unintentionally conveyed that I alone was spiritually qualified to lead the congregation in the Lord's Supper. So one week I asked him to transition us directly from worship into communion while I sat in the congregation and partook along with everyone else.

Once again, it immediately elevated his stock, since up to that point, our church tradition had always been to have the top dog step in and take over.

Now, years later, the culture of our church has changed radically. The Lord's Supper takes place in all of our small

groups at the end of each quarter. It's led by lay leaders, so presiding over communion no longer carries the same symbolic status.

And that illustrates an important point about platforming: Each church and faith tradition has its own symbols of spiritual prestige and power. They can change over time. You have to figure out your own. But once you begin to see your ministry and staff through the "platforming lens," you'll be surprised at how many places a subtle change in title, role, or actions can send a powerful message to young eagles and others that they don't have to go elsewhere to become a "real pastor" and fly.

2. Are Young Eagles in the Loop or in the Meeting?

Another key to keeping young eagles and releasing them to have significant impact is to make sure that they aren't just kept in the loop. They also need to be in the meeting. The distinction between the two (and the importance of it) is something I learned while serving in my first full-time ministry position.

I was the young eagle.

The church was a large Baptist church, one of the two or three largest in the denomination. Though I was only twenty-four years old, I had somehow landed the job as the youth pastor. I was treated unbelievably well. I had an excellent salary and strong support. I was even given the opportunity to preach. Before long, I became the second-string preacher, which meant preaching when the senior pastor was out of town or not too many people were expected to show up (Labor Day, Memorial Day, and all the other "where is everybody?" Sundays, for example). Even so, it was a great honor because I was nowhere near that high on our organizational food chain.

Best of all, the senior pastor consistently brought me into the loop on churchwide programming and ministry decisions. He not only told me what was happening; he asked me what I thought, he listened, and when appropriate, he incorporated my advice.

I couldn't believe my good fortune. I knew I was being honored and empowered far beyond anything I had a right to expect. My wife and I loved the area, the church, and the people. We even bought a house.

Only one thing was lacking. Despite my access to the senior pastor and the decision-making process, I was never in the room when a final decision was made. I waited outside the door like a good little eagle while the pastor, the deacons, and a few key staff members made the final call.

In one sense, there was nothing wrong with that. I had no right to be in the room. But nothing said "cage" like sitting outside the door wondering what was going on in there.

So within a couple of years, I did what all young eagles do when they feel locked out (or locked in). I flew the coop.

To everyone's surprise, I took a cut in pay to become the pastor of a tiny church a fraction of the size of my youth group. It wasn't that I wanted to leave. It was that I needed to fly. So I traded the comfort of a nicely feathered cage for a small shoebox without a lid.

That's what young eagles do when we confuse *keeping them in the loop* with *inviting them into the meeting*.

3. Who Gets to Ride Shotgun?

One of the surest ways to put a ceiling on your ministry is to fill leadership roles on a first-come, first-served basis. Yet that's exactly what many of us do. Whether it's a seat on the board or an influential role on the staff, the first person to get there gets to stay there. New folks and young eagles are expected to take their place in queue and wait until something opens up.

It reminds me of a game I used to play with my friends. Whenever a group of us jumped into a car or van to go somewhere, the first person to cry out "Shotgun!" got to ride in the front seat.

That works fine for a road trip. But the problem with churches playing shotgun, is that the ride goes on forever.

Shotgun churches are easy to recognize. Just look for a church where all the good and influential seats on the leadership bus are filled by old-timers. And the telltale sign is a once thriving church that has grown old, nostalgic, and culturally irrelevant. Still another indicator is a strong youth ministry but few young singles or young families in the worship service. (I call these "feeder churches" because they feed the fast-growing churches in town with a steady stream of young eagles, singles, and families.)

When tenure is the primary determiner of who sits where on the leadership bus, a church is headed for trouble. There's no way it can effectively utilize or keep its young eagles. Nothing crushes the spirit of a young eagle like the realization that there won't be any room at the top until someone who's already there dies off.

Just this week I talked to a frustrated young leader in a once great church that is now slowly dying. As I listened, he lamented an environment that marginalizes young leaders without even knowing it. At thirty-five, he's trusted with an important task, well paid, and given lots of affirmation. But a place at the leadership table? No way. He's far too young and inexperienced for that (though last I looked, he is old enough to be president of the United States).

Ironically, this church's present leaders (both board and staff) were all in their late thirties to early forties when they took the reins and led the church into its heyday of growth and relevance. But much like my high school buddies, they're convinced that the new crop of freshmen will never measure up to their own wisdom and prowess.

They'd love to keep this young staff member around. They love his gifts. They love him. They can't imagine why he'd leave such a "great church." But there is no way he'll stay. They've already crushed his spirit. They've already lost his heart. He just hasn't packed his bags yet.

Biting the Bullet

All this stuff about making room for young eagles and others makes for nice theory. But it's very difficult to pull off. Those who already have a good seat on the leadership bus are seldom cooperative when asked to sit somewhere else, especially when it's for a younger person who ought to wait their turn.

As a leader, my choice is clear. Either I can slowly kill off the future of our ministry by allowing tenure to determine who sits where, or I can bite the bullet and start moving people around.

There is no easy or pain-free way to do it. Asking someone to move to another seat almost always leads to frustration, hurt feelings, and ruffled feathers. Sometimes the hurt is so great that the lay leader or staff member will decide to get off the bus or find another church. But it has to be done. There is no other way to make room at the top. No one ever decides to change seats on their own.

I remember a few years ago when we added a highly gifted teaching pastor to our team. A few of our key staff members weren't too thrilled about it. One even told him during the interview process that if *he* were in charge, we wouldn't be adding him to our staff.

One of our elders also wasn't too keen about putting this pastor on the elder board. He told me, "He's too young; he's only in his midthirties. He needs to prove himself and get some seasoning before we add him to the board."

I quickly pointed out to the concerned elder that *he* was in his early thirties when he became an elder, and I was twenty-eight when I became his senior pastor. It was a classic case of the freshmen getting smaller.

Fortunately, our staff members and elders alike acquiesced and welcomed our new teaching pastor with open arms. Almost immediately, he began to infuse our ministry with a fresh wind of insight, enthusiasm, and new ideas—none of which would have been heard or heeded if he'd been forced to sit at the kids' table.

Before he came, we were already successfully reaching a younger demographic. After he came, our ability to do so was accelerated.

That's what happens when young eagles are allowed to sit in some of the best and most influential seats on your leadership bus. Though it is never easy, it seems like every time I've asked someone to move over to squeeze someone new in, the pain and pushback on the front end has been well worth the rewards on the back end.

Toward a Cure: Zero-Based Retreats

Besides giving our young eagles a good seat on the leadership bus, one of the best ways I've found to make sure that they have significant influence is to periodically host what we call a *zero-based retreat*.

This is simply a small leadership retreat, during which we ask the following types of questions:

- What would we do differently if we were starting all over again?
- What are we doing now that we wouldn't do?
- What are we not doing now that we would do?
- On a scale of 1 – 10, how effective is each ministry and program?
- On a scale of 1 – 10, how effective is each staff member?

If done right, a zero-based retreat is a great way to make sure that your young eagles have major input. I like to keep it small (six to eight is the ideal number). And I don't invite people to participate based on where they are on our organizational chart; I invite them based on their ability to help us dream creatively and wisely about the future. And ideally, half of the room is forty or younger.

It's amazing how differently a group with a significant number of thirty- and forty-year-olds sees life and ministry. If only one or two young eagles are in the room, it's easy to blow them off. Put critical mass in the room and it's hard to hold them back.

One way or another, young eagles will fly. It's our choice as to where. If your leadership team chooses to shut them out, please don't complain when they fly down the street and plant a church that sucks away all the kids, young families, and energetic folks who used to join you for Sunday services.