

FAQ's of Second Chair Leadership

by Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson

What are the questions that you have as you try to lead more effectively in the second chair? What are the issues and challenges that you struggle with? In preparation for our “Leading from the Second Chair” seminars, we have surveyed the participants to identify the questions that they most want to address. We present ten frequently asked questions in this article, and will respond to these questions in future editions.

1. How do I keep from being pulled in too many directions?
The most common cause of dissatisfaction for second chair leaders is being overwhelmed. Second chair leaders are often the glue that holds the organization together, being called upon to step into the gaps whenever there is a need and making sure that everything is working well. Some feel that they cannot do anything well because they're called upon to do so many different things. And many feel that their families, their spiritual lives, and their personal well-being suffer because of this.
2. Should I pursue additional training or formal education to better equip myself for this role?
How can anyone be fully prepared to perform the many different functions of a second chair leader? Those with seminary training can feel that they are inadequate for the administrative, management, and financial aspects of their job. Those who have business training and/or experience often feel unprepared to be spiritual leaders. In either case, they wonder if additional training is needed, and if so, how to best get this help.
3. What should I do if my first chair is a “micromanager”?
A number of second chair leaders feel that their boss is constantly looking over their shoulder, not allowing them the freedom (and responsibility) that should come with their position. This results in feelings of frustration and inadequacy, and even causes some to doubt their calling or their place in the organization.
4. How can I communicate more effectively with my first chair?
One of the functions frequently played by second chair leaders is that of “pulse taker,” a person who knows how to read and assess the mood of the congregation. Second chair leaders know not to withhold information from their first chair leaders, but they also know that it is possible to over-communicate. When they are the bearer of bad news, this challenge is magnified. Second chairs want to know how to find the right balance, the best timing, and the most effective approach in their communication.
5. How can I disagree with my first chair in healthy and appropriate ways?
Just like a marriage, even the healthiest relationship between first and second chair leaders will have times of conflict. Even though they could take a non-confrontational approach and never challenge their first chairs, second chair leaders know that healthy conflict can lead to better decisions. Most, however, have experienced a “harmless” comment suddenly turning into a destructive argument. The question is how to make sure that the discussion remains constructive.

6. How can I overcome my feelings of isolation and loneliness?
We have been surprised to discover the depth of loneliness that many second chair leaders feel. Their relationships with their boss or their subordinates are not conducive to authentic and open interaction. Many do not have true peers with whom they can share their deepest struggles and anxieties. As one second chair said, “I want someone to tell me that I’m not crazy!”
7. How can I better lead my subordinates?
An issue that we did not address directly in *Leading from the Second Chair* is the management of subordinates. This aspect of the role can present many challenges – knowing how to give adequate and appropriate direction, dealing with performance problems, overcoming lack of experience, and more. And when the second chair leader has a full plate of other direct responsibilities, it is difficult to even find the time for subordinates.
8. How can I better serve my first chair?
Many of those in subordinate roles truly want to support their lead leader. They know that this will lead to greater results for the entire organization and greater satisfaction in their roles. Personality, style, and communication issues can make it difficult for them to know how to do this most effectively. And at a deeper level, these second chairs may need to re-examine their attitudes and biblical understanding of their roles.
9. What should I do if my first chair is not an effective leader?
In some situations, a second chair’s leadership gifts exceed those of the first chair they serve. This can be a source of frustration as they see ways to lead better, and a cause of conflict as they sometimes overstep their bounds while seeking to use these gifts. Is this a hopeless, “no win” situation? Even though the easy answer may be to leave for a better chair, this may not be the right solution.
10. How can I increase my influence in the organization?
We have highlighted that a person can have influence that exceeds his or her official title. But what about those situations when the title exceeds the influence, when second chairs are positioned to have greater influence than they actually exert? Influence is not built in a day, and it is not conferred by title. Second chair leaders need to recognize and act upon each influence building opportunity that they encounter.

Which of these questions hit closest to home for you? In the coming months we will address each Frequently Asked Question in an article for the Second Chair Community. We hope that you’ll join with us as we explore these FAQ’s of second chair leadership.