

School's NOT Out! by Mike Bonem

It's the beginning of summer, and even if no one in your home is enrolled, you're thinking about vacations and barbeques and the swimming pool. After all, everyone knows that school's out! But for those in the second chair, this may be the time to study more diligently. Not in reading a stack of books, but by becoming a student of your first chair leader.

In *Leading from the Second Chair*, Roger Patterson and I devote a chapter to the subtle "line" that defines the authority and responsibilities of second chair leaders. This line describes the boundaries of your role – what you can do and what you should avoid. No matter how detailed your job description might be, there is no substitute for "reading" your lead leader to gain clarity on this question.

At the elementary level, second chairs see how their own strengths complement those of the first chairs that they serve. But at the advanced level, ace students know how to adjust their behavior based on subtle clues in their environment. They know that yesterday's decision can be rendered obsolete in the blink of an eye. They also know that the classroom is one-sided – they should be students of their first chair, but they cannot expect reciprocity in this aspect of the relationship. So what are some of the core "classes" that studious second chair leaders should take?

Communications 201

You should already know the basics of communication – things like organizing your thoughts and making your points clearly. But how much do you know about the ways in which your first chair prefers to receive communication? Does he prefer written or verbal communication, or a combination of the two? Does he want to hear an idea and then have time to think before discussing further? Perhaps he would like to see a written executive summary, followed by an in-person meeting. Does she like the give-and-take of a group discussion with lots of different ideas being considered? Or does she prefer a more focused, one-on-one meeting?

Sit back and watch your senior pastor during a meeting. What can you learn about the things that keep him engaged or that cause him to tune out? What happens when he is given an agenda with multiple items for discussion? Do he glaze over or jump around the page or stay on track? The answers to each of these questions offer important insights for how you communicate. You may not always be able to match the preferences of your first chair, but you should know what the target is. The more you study, the more you will learn and the better you will communicate.

Handling Disagreements

The relationship between senior pastor and second chair is like a marriage, which means that it will include its share of conflicts. What do you know about the "right" way to disagree with your first chair? We all know that it is wrong to "fight dirty," but we also know of times when a seemingly innocent and healthy disagreement has gone south in a hurry. Why does that happen?

The most likely explanation is a failure to read and understand the subtleties of how to disagree with your first chair. Time, place, and subject are each important factors to consider. Time, because you need to sense when your senior pastor is in a “don’t challenge me” mood. In the first five minutes of a meeting, can you read his body language or tone of voice enough to make this identification? Place, because you should know the audiences and forums in which you can voice disagreement. For some first chairs, a 1-on-1 setting is the only place for you to express a concern. Others desire to have this kind of give-and-take in their staff meetings, but not in a broader setting. Remember that anytime you express disagreement in front of others, you risk sowing the seeds of division and even insubordination. The final factor, subject, is a simple recognition that some topics may be “off limits” for disagreement, either because they are not your area of responsibility or because they are particularly sensitive.

Combine these three factors and you can see there are an endless variety of ways in which disagreements can be handled. And on top of that, one more factor adds to the confusion: your first chair may send misleading signals. More than one staff member has been tripped up by a first chair who says that he desires healthy, frank discussion, when in reality he will rarely tolerate a challenge. Be a student, and learn to understand the reality – not the theory – of healthy disagreement with your first chair.

Identifying Hot Buttons

The previous section focused on those times when you know that there are differing opinions, but you also need to understand your senior pastor’s “hot buttons.” These are the matters, big or small, that cause him or her to go through the roof. If you think these don’t exist, consider going back to school. Almost everyone has hot buttons, and you and your peers need to be aware of what these are for your first chair.

Some hot buttons – such as quality problems in a worship service or failing to follow-up on a family in crisis – are undeniably important to the effectiveness of your ministry. Others may seem to be minor or even irrational, but they still incur the same degree of attention (or wrath) from your first chair. The coffee area not being restocked or a typo in the newsletter or a late start for a Bible study class might be small matters that generate big responses from your first chair. When this happens, you can get frustrated at the apparent injustice, but your frustration is unlikely to change his behavior or the outcome. Instead, be aware of your first chair’s hot buttons. Then you can consciously avoid them, or when one is pushed, you can proactively address the situation.

Role Definition

Don’t be fooled by your job description, because it’s not the real source of authority. No matter what is written on a piece of paper, your lead leader is the person that defines your responsibilities. That does not mean that you must seek approval every time that you want to initiate something. But it does mean that you should know when to ask for permission.

This is one of the most neglected yet important lessons for second chair leaders. Their understanding of role is too often shaped by their job descriptions and input from others in the

church (elder board, fellow staff members). Or they had an in-depth discussion with the senior pastor during the job interview, and they view this as the final word on the subject. An executive pastor may be told that she will be in complete charge of the staff, only to find that her hands are tied when she begins to reorganize. Or a teaching pastor may expect to share equally in the brainstorming and planning for a future sermon series and find that he is marginally involved.

We wish that these were the exception and were simple cases of miscommunication, but the issue is much deeper. Often the conceptual design of a role does not match the way it is lived out day-to-day. Second chair leaders need to understand the nuances of their specific roles by studying their first chairs. In doing so, they will learn when they have complete freedom, when they need to keep their first chair informed, and when they need to ask permission.

Getting a Grade

The final course offering is not about “making the grade;” it’s about knowing how what grade you are being given. Many second chair leaders are unsure if they are meeting the expectations of their senior pastor, because many first chairs provide little meaningful feedback. As with each of the other topics, you can try to change your first chair. That could mean telling him or her, “I need to know how I am doing. Can you give me more frequent appraisals?” In reality, this is likely to be marginally successful. Remember: you’re the student, not the teacher.

An alternate is to learn to read the subtle signals that indicate your first chair’s satisfaction or displeasure. Can you tell from her tone of voice or level of engagement that she appreciates your work on a recent initiative? Or conversely, are there clues such as skeptical questions or permission being withheld that tell you that something is amiss? There are inherent risks in this approach – you may incorrectly interpret a signal or may completely miss a clue. And even if you correctly recognize one of the indicators, you may be unsure how you elicited this reaction. In the best of worlds, there is frequent, honest, unfiltered communication. But as you’re working toward that ideal, be willing to read between the lines as well.

Post-Graduate Study

This program of advanced study does not have a graduation ceremony, at least not as long as you serve in a second chair role. Just when you think you’ve mastered all the classes, one final reality breaks in: this is not a static picture. Factors outside of your control and even out of your sight can cause these shifts. Whether it is a personal situation or congregational dynamics, you may discover that you have to reassess the ways to communicate or disagree with your first chair, learn a new set of hot buttons, or renegotiate your responsibilities and authority. Always be on the lookout for indicators that something has changed and be prepared to adjust.

No one said that school was fun. It is hard work, and there are times when we all need to take a vacation. Just remember to come back and continue to learn, because the fruit that can grow out of your studies will be rich and long-lasting.