

# Do you have a 'tsunami' leader at the head of your church?

Ten things to help keep your sanity when you have a dysfunctional pastor.



You have a problem — it's your senior leader. Not all of us face the problem, but many of us do. The reality of the problem may have taken you by surprise. Perhaps some wise friend forewarned you before you took the job. Either way, you know it now. You have a problem — it's your boss.

Every leader suffers from some degree of personal dysfunction. After all, every one of us struggles with sin. Yet an alarming reality strikes those of us in upper leadership: Many senior leaders bring some major dysfunction into the church's leadership culture.

Some pastors are just strong-headed. They demand attention like a spoiled child splashing in a wading pool. Yet other senior leaders are far unhealthier. Their personal dysfunctions redirect everyone's efforts like a dangerous undercurrent. They create cultural tsunamis of their own. If you're not careful, the riptide will pull you out.

## Number has risen

Based upon my personal experience and study of healthy and unhealthy leadership, the percentage of crippling dysfunctional leaders in local churches has risen in recent years. That percentage also rises precipitously as the pastor's popularity and church size rise.

Tsunami leaders come in all shapes and sizes. I worked with one senior leader whose members

were afraid to step into his office. Another senior leader consistently undercut his co-workers' efforts until no one trusted his involvement. During a consultation, staff members expressed frustration with their pastor's repeated emotional outbursts, saying that he got his way by pushing or deriding until someone melted under the barrage.

## Thrown under the bus

Some senior leaders are control freaks, while others are aggressive, narcissistic or some other dysfunction. Some are driven by shame, others by passivity. It would be impossible to collect all the horror stories or count the exact numbers of staff members who have been thrown under the bus by their senior leader. Unfortunately, tsunami leaders are everywhere, and are often unaware of the waves they create as they swim through the normal wake of the church's ministry.

The job of handling such dysfunction often falls to associates, such as the executive pastor. Your ability to deal with difficult senior leaders will have a significant impact on your ministry. So how do you relate to a tsunami leader in order to lessen the destructive impact on your staff and church? Let me offer a few suggestions:

**1.** Never lose hope that your senior leader can change. Keep praying for him. If anything can change your senior leader, it is God's power. At the least, hold

hope that you can make a good impact upon the culture.

**2.** Check your own responses if you discover that you are often sucked into the whirlwind of damaging behaviors. You may be adding something unhealthy to the mix. Perhaps you struggle with fear, denying, spiritualizing, avoidance or another personal response.

**3.** Act according to the principles of healthy behavior regardless of your surrounding climate. Healthy behavior must be your starting point. Work in ways that gain the trust and confidence of your senior leader. Relate in ways that open doors for interaction and support from your senior leader. Disagree in ways that merge truthfulness and graciousness, thereby creating new patterns of conversations.

**4.** Memorize the order of those three verbs: work, relate, disagree. If you pursue these things in respective order, you may be able to help him — along with your team — walk through the worst of situations. There is no guarantee that you can transform a dysfunctional climate, but by acting in a healthy way on a regular basis, you give yourself a greater chance to stabilize tsunami situations.

**5.** Never try to be your senior leader's counselor while working together. You can encourage him when the opportunity arises, but keep your boundaries firm. Watch for those rare opportunities when

your senior leader asks for advice in the midst of distress, yet be careful to discern whether it is a real request for help or a wistful thought on his part. The first builds partnership, while the latter creates division.

6. To the best of your ability, strive to clearly understand why your tsunami leader is so difficult. Look beyond his behavior to inward reasons. Understanding can soften your work relationship with him. Be cautious, however, with your evaluations. You are not a professional counselor (unless, of course, you are a trained psychologist). Do not make quick evaluations based upon little expertise.

7. Develop radar for potential fires. Know the potential hot spots and learn the best ways to put them out. Watch for flare-ups that may unexpectedly occur — and prepare.

8. When your senior leader reacts in an unhealthy way, listen and ask questions. Then gently and respectfully suggest other ways to think about the issue. You set the tone of the discussion, no matter how he reacts. Respond to him with healthy emotions.

9. Document all final decisions as quickly as possible after every decision or major discussion. This will affirm ownership and accountability for later flashbacks. Then communicate all final decisions to everyone who has a leadership part in the aftermath.

10. Find trustworthy allies with whom you can confide. They may provide sanity for you. Develop this network outside your organization so that you do not sow discord within your own team.

At some point in time you may have to decide whether to stay in your current position with your senior leader. You should consider leaving in the following situations:

- If your relationship with the senior leader places you into a compromising position ethically;
- If your relationship with the senior leader creates such frustration that you burn out professionally;
- If your relationship with the senior

leader creates such stress that you develop physical ailments.

If you decide that you must resign, then do so with grace and honor.

“Leading up requires great courage and determination,” said Michael Useem of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. His words ring true for every pastor who works in a dysfunc-

tional climate. Let’s lead up with courage for the sake of both the senior leader and organization. CE

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