

ARE YOU
a
CONTROL
FREAK?

**DON'T THINK SO?
YOU MAY JUST
BE IN DENIAL....**

BY ALAN NELSON

In his book *The Control Freak* (Tyndale), Les Parrott III defines control freaks as “people who care more than you do about something and won’t stop at being pushy to get their way.”

If you talk to staff members and lay leaders behind the scenes, you’ll find that many pastors, although loved and appreciated, are considered to be too controlling. Control issues seem to be an equal-opportunity affliction for churches of all sizes, styles, and theologies. Control issues keep most churches from transcending the 200-member barrier. However, once you get inside many megachurches, you’ll find other forms of control issues. As I reflect on the two church plants I’ve led, I’m convinced that I was too controlling at times, and at other times I failed to establish healthy accountability systems. >>>>



Control issues entangle us far more than we'd like to think and adversely impact the congregations we're called to serve. This is nothing new. In Exodus 18, we read how Moses was losing control. He clung so tightly to his role of pastor, judge, and leader that he was on

the brink of collapsing. The "customer service" side of his ministry was on the verge of implosion. Just weeks before, Moses had confronted Pharaoh with God's words, "Let my people go." Now he was enslaving God's people to his limited time and talent. Fortunately, God sent a "coach" in the form of Jethro, who told Moses in essence: "Let go. Quit trying to control everything. Expand your leadership."

Jesus resisted his mother's attempt to control him at the Cana wedding (John 2:3-4) and the disciples who pressured him to meet some people (Mark 1:38). He predicted that those with faith would do greater things than he did (John 14:12) and unleashed 72 others to expand the ministry (Luke 10:1). The disciples, unwilling to exchange their call to preach for waiting tables, decentralized the ministry by recruiting seven who would do the latter (Acts 6:2-3).

Every pastor should honestly ask this question in quiet reflection: "How controlling am I?" Notice the question infers not "Am I?" but "How *much* am I?" To think of yourself as not controlling is likely a sign of denial. Of course

we're controlling to a degree and for noble motives. We've been entrusted with God's work in our local congregations. We've prepared ourselves for effective ministry through years of study and practice. We're charged with the protection of God's sheep in our specific fold. We protect them from wolves. We want to be good shepherds. But for many pastors, the temptation to transcend the line of good care toward unhealthy control is one we subtly cross more than we're aware. Like the foolish steward, the desire to hold on to ministry limits its productivity (Matthew 25). Accountable release, while counterintuitive, is the best means of expanding God's work in our midst.

CONTROL OR ACCOUNTABILITY?

Are you controlling or merely trying to implement accountability with others around you? Left to our own devices, most humans let down on their responsibility and potential when there are insufficient accountability practices and systems in place.

The problem is that there's a lot of confusion among ministry managers and pastoral leaders as to the difference between control and accountability. For the most part, control tends to be negative in terms of closing down the human spirit and demotivating people in an organiza-

CONTROLLING

Doesn't trust the person

"I question your productivity."

"Where are you going?"

"You need to ask your superior for funds."

"Here's how to do your job."

"You need to be at work from x to x."

Tends to train poorly

Tools: forms, email, policy manuals, logs, meetings, permission requests

Tendency of managers

Control works at times for non-leaders but is disastrous for leaders

"I'm in charge" mind-set prevails

Fear-based

ACCOUNTABILITY

Trusts the person, recognizes human tendency to loose focus

"We need your commitment."

"Let us know how to communicate with you."

"Here's your budget. Keep receipts. Use it wisely."

"Get it done. You figure out how to do it."

"Here's what we need to see from you by x."

Tends to train well, so that staff knows what's expected from them

Tools: far fewer of same

Tendency of good leaders

Accountability works well for both leaders and non-leaders

"Let's produce" mind-set prevails

Outcome-based

tion, whether at work, in the community, church, or home. Controlling environments should be limited to extreme situations because of their inability to foster healthy commitment, creativity, and teamwork.

Accountability, while not always enjoyable or “fun,” tends to increase productivity, personal and organizational growth, as well as fostering teamwork. For example, forcing someone to do physical activity or harassing him for not doing it is quite different from hiring a personal trainer or asking a buddy to work out together. Controlling attitudes can prevail, even with accountability systems, so that team members feel restricted.

There’s a tendency for those in leadership roles to use the word accountability when they’re actually trying to control because accountability sells better and sounds less autocratic. In the box on page 46, you’ll find a comparison of the two concepts to help you ascertain whether you’re a controller or merely trying to apply responsible accountability systems while working with others.

Obviously, certain jobs and roles need more or less control. The same is true of individuals. The rule of thumb should be to begin with a few accountability practices in terms of communication, budget, and work, and only increase them after you’ve exhausted reasonable training and feedback. Generally, the higher the position and the more competent the staff or team member, the less control you need.

Control will be deemed as demeaning and constraining, so that you’re apt to lose good people when you convey control instead of healthy accountability. Signs of control include conflict, challenge of team members to policies and practices, management feeling consumed with monitoring staff, and reduced long-term productivity. Control is a short-term fix, appropriate during crisis or when risks to safety and life exist.

While there are strategic reasons to incorporate numbers 1 through 3 on the control continuum (see the box on page 48), such as the initial phases of a church plant and crisis, they become detrimental to a congregation if they’re cultural norms. Few pastors would view themselves as overly controlling, but sometimes their level of concern and desire for excellence deters strong leaders from using their gifts for the benefit of the congregation. The role of the leadership gift is to engage other gifts, so when that leadership is ineffective, other services suffer.

The far right end of the continuum, points 6 and 7, do not enhance congregational health either. Here pastoral leadership has been abdicated and there’s a lack of control or influence. This is often sold as democracy but is really pseudo in nature. Unfettered democracy has often been spiritualized as godly in American Christianity, but we find

little precedence in the Bible. When it does emerge, it does not result in benefiting the people (Numbers 14). The answer is not for pastors to abdicate control, but rather to wisely and faithfully unleash it.

The optimum points on the continuum are 4 and 5. In this area there’s suitable accountability in the areas of quality, stewardship, and empowered leaders, but the goal of pastoral ministry is primarily to unleash the body of Christ to serve one another using their gifts, which results in spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4).

EVERY PASTOR SHOULD HONESTLY ASK THIS QUESTION IN QUIET REFLECTION: “HOW CONTROLLING AM I?”

FEAR-BASED MINISTRY

When you cut to the core of most control you’ll find fear. Recently I asked a group of pastors why it’s so difficult for us to let go and surround ourselves with strong staff and lay leaders who possess leadership gifts that we might not possess. One of them responded, “The reason we don’t surround ourselves with lions is that somewhere along the way, we invited a lion into our life who turned out to be a jackal.” Distinguishing the jackal is not always easy. Even Jesus had one in his small “staff.” Whether it’s a staff member who betrays you or a strong lay leader who mobilizes a coalition to your demise, anyone with a few years of ministry experience knows what it’s like to feel this pain. So the natural tendency is to put up our defenses and withhold power from others.

Church boards do this when they overcompensate with policies after a pastor violates boundaries. Policies are put in place that restrict the freedom of the next pastor. Their controlling nature confines the ability of the staff to get things done because of a predecessor’s indiscretions. The root of this controlling nature is fear that typically can only be reversed with progressive trust.

This is the curse and blessing of bureaucracy. While there are numerous checks and balances (control measures) that make progress difficult, the benefit is that no despot or wayward leader can ever obtain sufficient power to overthrow the government or send it into chaos. Churches with numerous control issues have often developed them out of self-preservation, which in turn can strangle them

to death. Organizations tend to be social, corporate expressions of organisms. Hurt me once, shame on you.

Hurt me twice, shame on me. Churches develop policies to reduce future pain.

The spiritual answer to pastoral control is realizing that your church isn't yours—it's God's. It's not your job to keep everything in your grasp, but to constantly surrender it to the Owner. Your ego and identity are not up for congregational vote. They're firmly established in the Creator's image and enduring grace. Jesus' washing of the disciples'

IT'S NOT YOUR JOB TO KEEP EVERYTHING IN YOUR GRASP, BUT TO CONSTANTLY SURRENDER IT TO THE OWNER.

feet reveals a rather keen insight that connects psychology with theology:

"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet" (John 13:3-5) (*emphasis added*).

Jesus acknowledged the source of his power, not from ecclesiastical structure, title, or role. *Then* he got up and began washing feet. As pastors, we have to go through the perpetual process of remembering the true source of our power so that we can give up control. When we're insecure about *whose* we are, we'll be tempted to hold on to control, no matter the size of our congregation.

The real challenge of giving up control is establishing suitable accountability systems and discipleship so that we can delegate power to others. When we've not done our homework of providing sufficient feedback loops and check-in protocol, giving up control becomes a matter of dumping, of avoiding responsibility. Just as some confuse control with accountability, others confuse delegation with dumping, freedom with irresponsibility.

Moses, Jesus, and the apostles decentralized control in order to multiply their ministry. The results included improved care of others, the raising of more leaders, and the expansion of God's work. 🙏

ALAN NELSON is the executive editor of *Rev! Magazine*.



ESTIMATE YOUR MINISTRY CONTROL CULTURE

High Pastoral Control

Low Pastoral Control

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

CONTROL CENTRAL

DECENTRALIZING POWER

ABDICATING RESPONSIBILITY

- 1 The senior pastor pretty much calls all the shots of the church; no one moves without permission of the pastor as "God's appointed;" autocratic, dictatorial, even if benevolent.
- 2 The senior pastor empowers others for minor decisions but primarily micromanages staff and lay leaders, reprimanding those who buck the process.
- 3 The senior pastor and pastoral staff run the church, allowing lay people to fill subordinate ministry roles and be perceived as holding staff accountability, although this rarely happens.
- 4 The senior pastor, staff, and church board work together to oversee ministries; lead pastor empowers key people to be responsible for their areas; mutual accountability systems are in place.
- 5 The senior pastor and staff are primarily equippers (Ephesians 4) who disciple and train ministry leaders to do what is necessary to unleash ministry team members; effective accountability systems are in place; freedom and trust prevail.
- 6 The senior pastor is seen as an employee of the church board, which makes major decisions and oversees the running of the various church ministries; pastoral leadership abdicates most authority and responsibility.
- 7 The senior pastor provides neither control nor accountability, allowing people to manage on their own; tendency toward chaos and irresponsibility. Others attempt to fill vacuum of power abdicated by senior pastor.

CONTROL AND ACCOUNTABILITY MINI-ASSESSMENTS

Place a number beside each statement in terms of how it describes your behavior in ministry. For better results, ask a few people who interact with you in church to fill it out *about* you.

RESPONSES: 1=nope, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often

CONTROL MINI-ASSESSMENT

- 1 When I've scheduled a meeting with staff or ministry leaders and they cancel or want to change it, I resist and let them know my frustration. _____
- 2 My family members and coworkers tell me I'm sometimes hard to please and can be critical. _____
- 3 I pretty much call the shots and get my way in staff and board meetings. _____
- 4 There are things on my to-do list that could be delegated, but I don't because I figure they won't get done or won't get the quality they deserve. _____
- 5 When I'm in a meeting and others are coming up with suggestions I don't like or that are different from my own, I shut them down and shorten the discussion. _____
- 6 My staff and ministry leaders have little to no budget and must come to me for approval to spend. _____
- 7 I expect my staff to keep strict hours and let me know where they are at any given time. _____
- 8 I plan most of the worship service by myself. _____
- 9 The pastoral staff has the responsibility and authority to know God's will for our congregation, so we plan the church calendar almost entirely ourselves. _____
- 10 I personally attend to the care of my congregants, so that they know that their pastor and church loves them. _____



ADD THE CONTROL RESPONSE NUMBERS. SCORE ANALYSES:

- 10-20**=No problem; may want to see how you do on the Accountability Mini-Assessment.
- 21-28**=Not a problem or you're in denial.
- 29-34**=Your control is likely hindering your ministry in some areas.
- 35-40**=You're a control freak; find out why and what to do about it.

ACCOUNTABILITY MINI-ASSESSMENT

- 1 I pretty much make and keep my own work schedule without others knowing it. _____
- 2 Our church board meets haphazardly and rarely uses a planned agenda. _____
- 3 Our staff members are free to set their own ministry goals, and I don't see their goals more than once a year. _____
- 4 We don't do strategic planning that results in written, measurable objectives. _____
- 5 We assume our staff are getting their jobs done on their own and require little feedback. _____
- 6 I respond to emails, calls, and mail as they come during the day so as to be available whenever my congregants need me. _____
- 7 I try to be a generalist, taking care of the many needs of the church as best I'm able. _____
- 8 I resent colleagues or board members who want to know what I'm doing with my time or how church money is being spent. _____
- 9 We don't perform assessment measures on church productivity other than attendance and finances each year. _____
- 10 At any given time in the day, I could pretty much do whatever I wanted, wherever I wanted, and no one would know. _____



ADD THE ACCOUNTABILITY RESPONSE NUMBERS. SCORE ANALYSES:

- 10-19**=Accountability systems may be in place and functioning.
- 20-29**=Reassess your accountability issues to make sure they're working well.
- 30-40**=Significant accountability problems that are dwindling your ministry potential.