

Always Ready:

Avoiding the Common Pitfalls When People Approach You As a Church Leader

**As new leaders in a church or ministry,
we can easily be blindsided
by people approaching us
with questions and concerns.**

**This is an introductory guide
to the ACTION STEPS
and COMMON PITFALLS
to help prepare for the challenges
that may lie ahead.**

Gerhard deBock © 2022

Table of Contents

THEY MAY NEVER SEE YOU IN THE SAME WAY.....	3
ACTION STEP 1: Elders and pastors will be cautious about sharing their personal opinions.	3
COMMON PITFALL 1: Thinking that our opinion is what people “hear” when we answer their questions.	4
THEY MAY LOOK FOR DISSENTING VIEWS	5
COMMON PITFALL 2: Identifying with the complaints against a decision of the team.	5
ACTION STEP 2: Leaders will publicly support decisions made by the team.	5
THEY MAY INADVERTENTLY GOSSIP TO YOU.....	6
ACTION STEP 3: Leaders will be wary when approached with a “prayer concern” or similarly stated tidbit of information about another person.	6
COMMON PITFALL 3: Allowing people to gossip to you.	7
THEY MAY TRY TO LET THE “MONKEY” OF RESPONSIBILITY JUMP FROM THEIR BACKS7	
ACTION STEP 4: Leaders will gently but firmly resist others’ attempts to pass off personal responsibility to care-front, whether intentional or inadvertent.	8
COMMON PITFALL 4: Allowing the “monkey of responsibility” to jump to our backs.	8
THEY MAY HAVE LEGITIMATE QUESTIONS	10
ACTION STEP 5: Leaders will direct folks with legitimate questions and concerns to people who can answer them.	10
COMMON PITFALL 5: Giving answers or permission about things that we are not in a position to address.	11
THEY MAY INFORM YOU OF ILLIEGAL ACTIVITIES THAT THEY HAVE WITNESSED.....	13
ACTION STEP 6: It is a leader’s duty, per the “whistle blower” policy (Mutual Accountability), to inform the Oversight Elders immediately of any illegal activity they have witnessed within the church.	13
COMMON PITFALL 6: Dealing with information about the abuse/neglect of minors.	15
ADDENDUM ON MICHIGAN LAW REGARDING REPORTING ABUSE/NEGLECT	17

THEY MAY NEVER SEE YOU IN THE SAME WAY

One of the challenging adjustments that one makes after being affirmed as an elder or pastor in a local church is the realization that folks will never see you in the same light as before. You will be viewed as a leader who is informed on almost everything that is happening and is involved in making all most all the decisions for the body. This unspoken perception will be true whether you are an oversight elder, serve on an executive team, or a general elder or an associate pastor (most people will not differentiate these roles).

The good news is that the pitfalls are fairly common and once we know what they are, they can be mostly avoided. To do that, leaders will need to covenant to keep their eyes open through the following action steps.

ACTION STEP 1: Elders and pastors will be cautious about sharing their personal opinions. We must remember that many people will consider that our personal opinions are the same as those of the leadership as a whole. So, when we share our opinions and perspectives, lots of folks hear us speaking for all the leaders.

COMMON PITFALL 1: Thinking that our opinion is what people “hear” when we answer their questions.

- More commonly, people hear the collective “Elders” (or “Pastors,” or “Leadership”) addressing the matter. It is typical for folks to think we are speaking for all leadership.
- **Therefore**, we must be careful to ask more questions to gain a better understanding of their concern. This is to be followed up by giving the individual a clear path that they can take to get a definitive answer. This path may include you checking with the right folks and getting back with them.
- The team may craft talking points that each leader will confine themselves to. Another solution is the appointment of a communication “director” for those issues that are more complex. When asked, the leader will direct all inquiries to that person.
- If there is no “team answer,” be sure to clarify that this is your opinion or personal position. If the church allows for some freedom in the matter, clarify the church’s position of a cautious openness. The “Balancing Points” paper could be a helpful resource. For example, *“I personally lean toward being an “old earther” but our church strongly affirms the essentials of a creationist position, no matter what the timeline of God’s creative work was.”*

THEY MAY LOOK FOR DISSENTING VIEWS

ACTION STEP 2: Leaders will publicly support decisions made by the team. This must even be true if you had some reservations about aspects of the decision. Since leadership decisions of the Elders are usually unanimous or at least by consensus, this should not be a problem. When someone comes to us, questioning a decision, and an elder “takes their side” (even privately) then there is an undermining of the unity of the elders.

COMMON PITFALL 2: Identifying with the complaints against a decision of the team.

- Sometimes we have had reservations about a team decision. Seeking to empathize with the individual complaining, we may state that we “understand” their concern and even share it. What people usually walk away with is a perception that leadership is divided. They may also think that we are now “on their side” of the issue.
- **Therefore,** it is important to remember that disagreement and constructive conflict is fine when meeting with the team. But, after the meeting is over, the team’s decision is now “your” decision. Do not allow people to move into a “*Mom said ‘No,’ so let’s check with Dad*” scenario. Though they may not do it intentionally, “divide and conquer” is an old tactic of the Evil One.

THEY MAY INADVERTENTLY GOSSIP TO YOU

ACTION STEP 3: Leaders will be wary when approached with a “prayer concern” or similarly stated tidbit of information about another person.

It is critical that the leader be wary of gossip. This does not mean that the other person is intentionally trying to gossip since many do not have a good definition of “gossip” in their minds. Often folks believe that if their intentions are not bad, and they believe the information to be true, that they can say what they will. While we can express the judgment of charity for someone’s motives, this is a moment for gentle correction and teaching about their methods.

Remember, a person may not be intentionally gossiping. Help them by responding along the lines of, *“I understand you have a problem with Sally. And, while I believe you, I can’t act on that information alone because I am not a witness of the sin, like you. Would you like me to help you figure out the best way to go talk to Sally? If you’ve already spoken to her, I’m willing to go with you, as Matthew 18 teaches us.”*

COMMON PITFALL 3: Allowing people to gossip to you.

- Very often folks will come and say to a church leader, “Did you know . . .?” This is followed by some information that they feel like they need to do something with. The nature of this information varies tremendously, and our responses should as well.
- **Therefore**, we must first discern if this is information of a practical nature (e.g., a leaking pipe) that needs attention. We can then help these folks find the right person to talk with.
- If we discern that the information is personal, we must evaluate if we are hearing gossip. This is done by applying the three “warning lights” of gossip. **Is something BAD about another person, being shared BEHIND the other person’s back, for NO GOOD purpose?**
- A “good purpose,” behind sharing bad things about someone behind their back, includes seeking counsel on how to approach that person directly. This would be like talking to a counselor. It is not gossip if someone asks us, *“Can you help me figure out how I can go talk with Fred about some things he’s been doing. I don’t know how to do it without making things worse. I could use your help?”*
- Another “good purpose” would be that the person sharing is seeking to “escalate” or step up the process of discipline, according to Matthew 18. In effect, they are asking you to go with them to confront the person. *“I’ve tried talking to this person directly, but they won’t listen. Will you please go with me as a witness of the confrontation?”*

THEY MAY TRY TO LET THE “MONKEY” OF RESPONSIBILITY JUMP FROM THEIR BACKS

ACTION STEP 4: Leaders will gently but firmly resist others’ attempts to pass off personal responsibility to care-front, whether intentional or inadvertent.

People may share with us bad things about another person, behind their backs. If they are asking for our help in equipping them to deal with the conflict, that is fine. If they are asking us, directly or indirectly, to go on their behalf to confront the other person, then they are trying to “hire a hit man.”

As we listen to folks, we must not allow their responsibility to care-front others to jump to us. They are the ones who have seen their brother or sister sinning against them. We must help them fulfill their responsibility.

COMMON PITFALL 4: Allowing the “monkey of responsibility” to jump to our backs.

- If others discuss those not present, it is gossip when we see that the information is being shared in order to get us to confront the other party for them.
- For us to confront the other party would be for us to pass on gossip to them. We would be merely forwarding hearsay (“what we heard said”), even though we were not a witness ourselves.

COMMON PITFALL 4: Allowing the “monkey of responsibility” to jump to our backs. (continued)

- In a real sense, the individual gossiping to us is trying to have the “monkey” of responsibility “jump” from their back to ours. If successful, they will often think that “they did what they could” because they “told on” the presumed guilty party. They may hope that this relieves them of the biblical responsibility to directly care-front a brother or sister who is sinning.
- If this is the case and there is gossip, we must stop the individual immediately, though gently. We may say, *“I understand you are concerned and care about the other person or the reputation of the church or (whatever), and I’m grateful for that. However, if you continue to share with me, I am assuming that you are looking for my help to go and talk directly with the other party. Is that your intention?”* This ensures that the monkey of responsibility stays with them.
- Depending how much was shared, you may want to encourage them that it is their biblical responsibility to go to the individual who sinned, or back to the individuals who gossiped to them about the presumed guilty party. For them NOT to follow Matthew 18’s teaching is itself a sinful choice.
- Ending this time with prayer can help with the “gentleness factor” of this rebuke event. It allows us to share that we know that confronting another person, with truth in love, is very hard. It provides a moment to ask the Lord to give the wisdom and grace needed for us to fulfill our biblical duties.

THEY MAY HAVE LEGITIMATE QUESTIONS

ACTION STEP 5: Leaders will direct folks with legitimate questions and concerns to people who can answer them.

Often legitimate questions will be about specific procedures or programs, rather than about individual people. These inquiries should be directed to the program leader who has the responsibility and authority to answer them.

While sometimes people will approach a leader because “who you know is more important than what you know.” That is, they believe that their personal connection with a leader will help them “get it done.” These folks must be redirected to the responsible persons. At other times, folks may just not know who to talk to. These folks must also be directed to the right people.

When there is a legitimate overarching question or policy concern, they should be directed to the Elder or leadership team chairperson so that the item may be addressed by the team at their next meeting. You might suggest to them that they could write up their concern and then either give it directly to the chairperson or to you to forward it to them. You must be willing to help them get to the right person without letting the monkey jump to your back.

It is recommended that a leader state something like, *“If you seek to follow this up with this ministry leader and you run into any problems, please get a hold of me again and I will help you get through to the right people.”* Be sure to make it clear that “the ball is in their court” and that the next step of action is theirs.

COMMON PITFALL 5: Giving answers or permission about things that we are not in a position to address.

- Using the definitions in the chart below, we see that **the authority to make a decision should be given to the person RESPONSIBLE**. If we are in a role that fits any of the other three headings, we should help the person making the inquiry connect with the RESPONSIBLE person.
- When in the role of being ACCOUNTABLE for something, we may think we can make the call. But “the call” is in the hands of the person or team that is RESPONSIBLE. We may have to be ultimately answerable for something, as an elder, pastor, or ministry leader, but that does not mean we should allow folks to “**do an end run around**” the RESPONSIBLE person, with the delegated authority and responsibility for that decision.
- We also must not forget that while we may be in a role that is consulted about decisions or informed of decisions, neither of those roles entitles us to be the decision maker.
- **Therefore**, after clarifying what the individual is asking about, we are to help them make their way to the person RESPONSIBLE for the decision. It is strongly recommended that we not just say “I’ll take care of it,” since that now makes us their advocate and the monkey has jumped to our backs. It is better to get together the party asking the question and the individual empowered to make the decision. For example, *“I know I used to serve on that ministry team, but I don’t anymore. To get the go-ahead for your plan, you will need to talk directly with the leader of that team. Do you know who that is? Can I help you connect with them?”*

TALK TO THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE	
ACCOUNTABLE	The one ultimately answerable for the task. This person may delegate the work to those responsible. There MUST be only one person or board held accountable for each task.
RESPONSIBLE	Those who do the work to achieve the task. Does NOT include those to whom work is delegated to assist those responsible.
CONSULTED	Those who opinions should be sought and with whom there is two-way communication.
INFORMED	Those who are kept up-to-date on progress, often only on completion of the task. There is usually just one-way communication.

If we do not know who the responsible person is, the correct response is to say that we will get back with them after we find out who is the responsible party. It is best to give them a date by which you will get back with them and then be sure to “close the loop” by getting back with them.

THEY MAY INFORM YOU OF ILLIEGAL ACTIVITIES THAT THEY HAVE WITNESSED

ACTION STEP 6: It is a leader's duty, per the "whistle blower" policy (Mutual Accountability), to inform the Oversight Elders immediately of any illegal activity they have witnessed within the church (who must be informed may be different in various churches or organizations). This will trigger an investigation.

Similarly, **the reasonable suspicion of the endangerment of a minor must be reported.** In many States, including Michigan, clergy are mandated to report suspected child abuse or neglect. Since we treat our elders as "lay pastors," we believe this same duty falls to them.

Should we report our suspicions or only what we absolutely know to be true? The critical nature of keeping minors safe is so important, it changes the boundary between being a direct witness to the sin and becoming privileged to "hearsay" about sin. It is not our responsibility to be the investigator or judge.

For the sake of the minors, we have a duty to report suspected child maltreatment to an appropriate agency, such as child protective services, a law enforcement agency, or a State's toll-free child abuse reporting hotline.

COMMON PITFALL 6: Dealing with information about the abuse/neglect of minors.

- Technically, the clergy-penitent privilege can be grounds for not reporting. While Scripture tells us to confess our sins to one another, **we do NOT believe that this ground, for not reporting, applies to almost any communication pastors and elders might have.** Yet, people might assume that the pastor or elder “can’t share this with anyone.”
- It is important to make clear that the information is not legally “privileged.” *“I need to remind you, that what you share with me I will hold in confidence. But this is a “discrete confidentiality,” because I will report the endangerment of a minor or other illegal behavior to the authorities.”*
- As in our training for working with minors and other vulnerable adults, we require **any suspicions of abuse or neglect within the ministry to be reported the Senior Pastor or Oversight Elders.**
- If the report is made to a ministry leader at any level, it is their responsibility to **make sure the report makes it to the Oversight Elders.** It is the duty of the Senior Pastor and Oversight Elders to make a report to the appropriate government authorities.
- If a direct report is made to State officials, all leaders within Trinity Fellowship are **required to notify the Senior Pastor or Oversight Elders** of the report and make a written copy of the report available to them.

COMMON PITFALL 6: Dealing with information about the abuse/neglect of minors. (continued)

- More often, a **pastor or elder will hear the account of a victim**. Most helpful is the response of helping the victim see the importance of reporting the abuse/neglect to the authorities. They may be hesitant or fearful. You can assure them by letting them know that **you will help them through the process**. You must make clear that **you have a duty to report even if they don't**, but that it would be better if they reported directly themselves.
- **The Michigan Abuse & Neglect Hotline is 855.444.3911**. The person making the report does not have to give their name. If they do give their name, it is subject to disclosure only with their consent or by judicial process.

ADDENDUM ON MICHIGAN LAW REGARDING REPORTING ABUSE/NEGLECT

The following is a partial summary of Michigan Law (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/manda.pdf#page=5&view=Summaries of State laws>):

- **Professionals Required to Report.** Laws § 722.623 Mandatory reporters include: • Physicians, physician assistants, dentists, dental hygienists, medical examiners, nurses, persons licensed to provide emergency medical care, or audiologists • School administrators, counselors, or teachers • Regulated child care providers • Psychologists, marriage and family therapists, licensed professional counselors, social workers, or social work technicians • Persons employed in a professional capacity in any office of the friend of the court • Law enforcement officers • **Members of the clergy** • Department of Human Services employees, including eligibility specialists, family independence managers, family independence specialists, social services specialists, social work specialists, social work specialist managers, or welfare services specialists • Any employee of an organization or entity that, as a result of Federal funding statutes, regulations, or contracts, would be prohibited from reporting in the absence of a State mandate or court order.
- **Reporting by Other Persons.** Laws § 722.624 **Any other person**, including a child, who has reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect may report.
- **Institutional Responsibility to Report.** Laws § 722.623 If the reporting person is a member of the staff of a hospital, agency, or school, the reporting person shall **notify the person in charge of the hospital, agency, or school of his or her finding and that the report has been made and shall make a copy of the written report available to the person in charge.**

- A notification to the person in charge of a hospital, agency, or school **does not relieve the member of the staff** of the hospital, agency, or school of the obligation of reporting to the department as required by this section.
- One report from a hospital, agency, or school is adequate to meet the reporting requirement.
- A member of the staff of a hospital, agency, or school shall not be dismissed or otherwise penalized for making a report required by this act or for cooperating in an investigation.
- **Standards for Making a Report.** Laws § 722.623 A report is required when a reporter has **reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect.**
- **Privileged Communications.** Laws § 722.631 Only the attorney-client or clergy-penitent privilege can be grounds for not reporting.
- **Inclusion of Reporter's Name in Report.** The reporter is not specifically required by statute to provide his or her name in the report.
- **Disclosure of Reporter Identity.** Laws §§ 722,625; 722.627 The identity of a reporting person is confidential and subject to disclosure only with the consent of that person or by judicial process. The identity of the reporter is protected in any release of information to the subject of the report.