

Exploring Leadership Relational Skills Toward Staff Unity Sustainability in the Church

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Abstract

This article examines the critical role of leadership relational skills in fostering staff unity and ensuring the sustainability of the Church. Leaders who prioritize building trust and collaboration create an environment where staff members feel valued and connected, strengthening unity and enabling effective teamwork toward shared goals. Leadership relational skills in the church empower staff to take ownership of their roles, fostering innovation and resilience crucial for navigating contemporary challenges. Through qualitative approach, the study clarified key concepts of leadership relational skills, staff unity, and the Church emphasizing their interdependence in cultivating a foundation for long-term success within the church context, which are integral to understanding the importance of these skills within the church context. Exploring the transformative role of leadership relational skills addresses the challenge of sustaining staff unity. The article opines that leadership extends beyond administrative tasks, requiring authentic relationships, open communication, and mutual respect to inspire a sense of belonging; These skills bridge divides, encourage collective problem-solving, and sustain a unified vision, ensuring the Church remains vibrant and impactful authentic relationships, open communication, and mutual respect to inspire a sense of belonging. These skills bridge divides, encourage collective problem-solving, and sustain a unified vision, ensuring the Church remains vibrant and impactful.

Keywords: Leadership, Relational Skills, Staff Unity. Sustainability and Church

Introduction

In the contemporary context of church dynamics, fostering sustainable unity among staff has become an urgent priority for church organizations. Maintaining harmony presents a significant challenge with the increasing growth of congregations and the diversity of backgrounds, viewpoints, and roles among staff members. Such disunity not only hampers the effectiveness of ministry efforts but also weakens the overall well-being of the congregation. As churches work to fulfill the divine missions, the importance of a cohesive and cooperative team cannot be overstated. The ability to sustain unity among church staff largely hinges on the relational skills exhibited by leaders. Relationships are central to leadership and are the foundation for trust, effective communication, and collaboration. According to Kouzes and Posner (2023), successful leadership fosters meaningful connections and enables teams to thrive collectively. In the church setting, relational leadership creates an atmosphere where member-team feel valued and empowered, enhancing their capacity to work toward shared goals. Sustainable staff unity, therefore, depends

on the leader's ability to prioritize relationships to build a healthy, mission-driven organizational culture.

This paper examines the challenge of sustaining staff unity by highlighting the transformative role of leadership relational skills. Effective leadership extends beyond administrative expertise and technical knowledge; it fosters authentic relationships, promotes open communication and teamwork, and nurtures trust and mutual respect. By practicing these relational skills, leaders can bridge divides, inspire collaboration, and cultivate a sense of belonging among staff members, ultimately supporting the Church in achieving its mission and objectives. The paper begins by defining key concepts such as leadership relational skills, staff unity, and the Church, which are central to the discussion. Clarifying these terms offer a more transparent framework for understanding the paper's direction and purpose, ensuring its practical relevance and application. Through this approach, the study aims to shed light on how relational leadership can transform organizational dynamics within the Church, fostering unity and alignment with its mission.

Conceptual Clarification

Leadership Relational skill

Olabode (2020, p. 516) asserts, "Every institution, including the Church of God, is established and sustained by relationships. Every leadership knows that relationship is a fundamental and intrinsic part of every being, distinct to our existence." It highlights the critical role of interpersonal connections in the life and functionality of the Church. Church leadership requires theological knowledge, administrative competence, and relational skills to foster and sustain unity among staff members and the broader church community. These skills are essential for maintaining mutual trust and enhancing interpersonal relationships within the church context.

Olabode further emphasizes that church leaders must employ a combination of knowledge, principles, and strategies to nurture effective relationships that align with the Church's covenantal mission. Maxwell (1998, p. 567) refers to relational skills in leadership as "the proficiencies that enable leaders to build and maintain effective relationships within their organizations." These proficiencies are pivotal for creating an environment where staff members feel valued and connected, which enhances productivity and harmony. A leader adept at relational skills cultivates an atmosphere of trust and openness, encourages active participation from congregants and motivates staff effort alignment with the vision and mission of the church.

Relational skills are not merely tools for interpersonal engagement but fundamental to building a thriving organizational culture within the Church. Such skills enable leaders to inspire collaboration, resolve conflicts, and foster a sense of belonging. Leaders who excel in relational skills create spaces where church members and staff can work together cohesively toward shared objectives, strengthening the overall health and impact of the Church as a body of Christ. Relational skills empower church leaders to connect deeply with their congregants, enhancing ministry's spiritual and operational aspects. These skills are transformative, allowing leaders to navigate complexities of human relationships effectively, especially in diverse church communities. Ultimately, they are instrumental in achieving the dual goals of fostering interpersonal unity and advancing the Church's mission in a way that resonates with its members and the broader society.

Staff Unity

Charles (2020) emphasizes, "Every leader wants the organization, team, or Church to be unified. Without it, teams lose, churches flounder, and businesses drift." Unity in a group brings

excitement, refreshment, energy, motivation, and productivity. For instance, the biblical leader Nehemiah could not have accomplished the monumental task of rebuilding Jerusalem's wall without unity. In Nehemiah 3, the involvement of numerous projects and people highlights how unity, with a shared sense of purpose, propelled the work forward. Charles also clarifies that unity does not mean uniformity; everyone must be the same or have identical preferences. Instead, unity involves embracing a common purpose, even when personal preferences differ. For Nehemiah, that purpose was fulfilling God's command to rebuild the wall, which overshadowed individual differences.

In organizational leadership, staff unity refers to the collaboration and cohesion among team members. It is grounded in mutual respect, teamwork, and a collective commitment to shared goals. A unified staff is more likely to communicate effectively, provide support, and work towards common objectives, resulting to higher productivity and inclusive organizational success. Shaheen (2017, p. 389) asserts that staff members are essential to an organization's progress, describing them as the "key that unlocks the organization's doors." In a church or any organization, staff unity is critical in ensuring smooth operations and achieving the collective mission. The team's strength lies in working together, leveraging each member's unique skills while prioritizing the organization's broader goals. Fostering staff unity is vital for any organization, as it enhances collaboration, improves morale, and helps achieve long-term success. This idea is supported by leadership scholars who emphasize the importance of building strong, collaborative teams to navigate challenges and accomplish strategic objectives (Shepstone & Currie, 2008).

The Church

When many individuals hear the term "church," they often think of a physical building where people gather to worship. However, biblically, the Church is much more than just a structure. Some would argue that the Church is not defined by buildings but by the people who make up the congregation. According to Nden (2005, p. 1), the area of theology that seeks to explain every aspect of the Church is known as ecclesiology. It is derived from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which refers to a gathering or assembly. There were no designated buildings in the early Christian Church as we see today in the early Christians, who were often persecuted and met secretly, typically in homes. As Christianity spread, buildings were eventually constructed for worship, evolving into what we recognize as churches today. In its truest sense, it highlights that the Church is the people, not the physical structure.

Ishola (2022, p. 16) further asserts, "The popular idea of the meaning of the Church is that it is an assembly, a movement, or a congregation of people, but the bigger picture behind the word is more than that. It refers more specifically to a people whom God has called out to be different." The Church, therefore, transcends the physical space where believers meet and reflects a collective of people chosen for a distinct purpose. Fellowship, worship, and ministry are the functions carried out by people, not buildings. While church structures serve to support and facilitate the activities of God's people, they are not the fulfillment of the Church's mission. These understanding challenges the conventional notion that the Church is simply a place, encouraging believers to focus on the community and the divine calling of its members.

The term "Church" commonly refers to a community of believers in Christ and the physical building where they come together to worship, affirm their membership in Christ's kingdom, and engage in gospel preaching and ordinances (Leeman, Jonathan 2012, p. 62). Based on this understanding of the Church, it becomes clear that church leaders must possess creative and professional skills to manage and lead such communities effectively. These skills are essential for

achieving the Church's objectives, such as fostering spiritual growth, ensuring effective ministry, and maintaining unity within the congregation.

Leadership Relational Skills and Staff Unity

Ducharme (2023, p. 327) observes that the modern work environment is marked by uncertainty, complexity, high demands, and rapid changes, making work increasingly transactional and less relational. This shift is undermining workplace culture and causing a disconnect among individuals. In the context of leadership, establishing positive relationships with team members is crucial for fostering positive attitudes toward the organization. Church leaders who prioritize relational skills and recognize members and employees as unique individuals are more likely to achieve their goals. Building trust can positively impact engagement, productivity, and job satisfaction, essential for maintaining a healthy and thriving church community.

Anyone can be positioned in a leadership role, but thriving in that position requires strong leadership and relational skills. Fred (2022, p. 96) emphasizes that if a leader cannot connect with employees beyond delegating tasks, they will feel neglected, perceiving that the leader cares only about productivity. This lack of support and understanding can significantly reduce employee motivation and productivity. Leadership relational skills are among the top competencies recruiters seek when hiring or promoting individuals within an organization. These skills are indispensable in professional and personal contexts, as they facilitate effective teamwork, drive success, manage change, and promote growth. Major global companies prioritize candidates with strong leadership relational skills for their most prestigious executive positions (Chikwe, Eneh & Akpuokwe, 2024).

The responses of followers can often measure the effectiveness of a leader. There are instances where a leader excels in one position but struggles in another or where a leader who was average in one role becomes outstanding in a new context. One key factor behind this phenomenon is the relational aspect of leadership—how a leader interacts with others. As Scott (2013) notes, leadership effectiveness is deeply tied to relational dynamics; sometimes, leaders relate well, and other times, they do not, but how leaders engage with others always influences their success. In church leadership, the question arises: how can church leaders relate more effectively to unite the staff, members, and employees? This paper proposes several straightforward yet essential strategies for improving leaders' ability to foster unity within the Church.

Expression of Concern and Care

Expressing genuine care and concern for staff, whether in secular or private organizations, is a crucial skill for relational leaders. According to Edinger & Edinger (2018), a relational leader demonstrates concern by asking staff questions such as, "How are you doing today?" and "What challenges are you facing with the tasks assigned to you?" and then listening attentively to their responses. This approach of asking meaningful questions and genuinely focusing on the answers is one of the best ways to build strong relationships within an organization. In addition, Scholars highlights results of a Gallup survey, revealing that only 24% of employees agree that employers care about staff well-being. It is concern, as employees who feel uncared for are 69% less likely to stay in their roles and are more likely to seek alternative employment (Filippi et, al 2024).. The well-being of employees has a direct relationship with productivity, making it vital for leaders to prioritize their staff's mental and physical health to foster a thriving and engaged workforce.

Effective and Open Communication

Effective and open communication is an essential relational skill that every church leader, particularly pastors, should embrace to foster strong relationships with the congregants. Clear and effective communication enables church leaders to provide guidance, motivate staff and align everyone with the organization's shared goals. As Ishola and Adetola (2019) noted, achieving the Church's goals and mission without a solid communication framework becomes challenging. The objectives and vision of the Church can thrive within an atmosphere of open, cordial relationships. Communication between leaders and staff should encompass the Church's vision, passion, and expectations, ensuring that staff members are well-informed and equipped to perform their roles effectively. Leaders should communicate relevant information about completing tasks or updates on upcoming projects that might impact the team. Stone (2020) emphasizes that transparency is crucial, stating, "There has not been an organization where people are kept too informed and going out one's way to share information that affects those around you transparently. By prioritizing effective communication, leaders can help build and sustain a healthy organizational culture in church settings and other organizations.

Building Relationships and Trust

Building relationships and trust is essential for leaders who seek unity in the workplace. Effective leaders invest time in getting to know their team members personally, recognizing their contributions, and supporting their professional development. Relationship-building and trust are foundational elements of successful leadership, as leadership effectiveness largely depends on how well a leader fosters positive relationships with those they lead. While many leaders possess vision, energy, intelligence, and discipline, their ability to succeed is often hindered if they lack the skills to build strong relationships with others. Gehman (2008) argues that no leader can genuinely succeed without fostering trust and healthy relationships with their team, noting that productivity declines when people are not well-related. In essence, leadership is about guiding people, and a leader who has not learned how to connect and work effectively with others will struggle to achieve meaningful success. Without harmonious relationships, organizational goals remain unattainable (Gehman, 2008).

Understanding your Staff member

One of the most essential relational skills a leader must develop to unite the staff within an organization is the ability to connect with team members on a personal level. When leaders invest time in understanding their staff, it fosters trust and respect, creating an environment that encourages open communication and collaboration. By getting to know employees individually, leaders can better tailor their approach, leveraging each person's unique strengths and providing the necessary support for their development. This relational investment ultimately strengthens team cohesion, improves morale, and boosts overall performance, leading to a more engaged and productive workforce. As Cribbin (1972) aptly puts it, "The truth is that you cannot lead people, you cannot serve people, and you cannot manage people unless, to some considerable extent, you take the trouble to know them and to understand them" (p. 78). To foster unity among staff, leaders should extend their engagement beyond the workplace, participating in life events such as weddings and funerals and building friendships by sharing meals, fellowship, laughter, and tears. Leaders can cultivate meaningful relationships essential for long-term success by truly understanding their staff's challenges.

Avoid staff embarrassment

One crucial relational skill leaders must possess is avoiding embarrassing staff members in private or public settings. Humiliation can severely damage relationships, erode confidence, and demoralize staff, leading to disengagement and decreased productivity. Leaders who demonstrate respect and support create an environment where staff feels safe to express their ideas and concerns without fear of ridicule. Maxwell (2011) emphasizes that "a considerate leader who uplifts rather than undermines their staff cultivates loyalty and encourages a positive workplace atmosphere, leading to overall team performance" (p. 104). Leaders must correct staff behavior privately rather than publicly, as public humiliation can damage relationships and undermine trust. When leaders correct employees in private, they preserve dignity and foster respect. On the other hand, public confrontations can create resentment, breed hostility, and undermine team unity, ultimately harming the organization's success. Maxwell outlines several forms of embarrassment, such as publicly criticizing, belittling, or dismissing staff in front of others, all of which should be avoided to sustain a positive and productive work environment.

- i. **Public Criticism:** Criticizing a team member's mistakes or shortcomings in front of the whole team can be humiliating. Even when feedback is intended to be constructive, it should always be delivered privately to avoid putting the employee on the spot or causing unnecessary embarrassment.
- ii. **Unintended Comparisons:** Making comparisons between employees, especially in a public setting, can lead to feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment, particularly for the employee being less favored. Such comparisons should be avoided to maintain a sense of fairness and respect among team members.
- iii. **Ignoring Contributions:** Failing to recognize employees' contributions during meetings or discussions can make them feel unappreciated and overlooked. Employees feeling their efforts are not acknowledged can lead to embarrassment and demotivation.
- iv. **Sharing Personal Information:** Disclosing personal details about employees without their consent, even with good intentions, can violate their privacy and cause embarrassment. Leaders should respect the confidentiality of personal matters and ensure that such information is shared with consent (Maxwell, 2011, p. 109).

Maintain Fair Treatment of Staff

Favoritism undermines unity and demotivates staff. When a leader exhibits preferential treatment toward specific individuals while neglecting others, it creates feelings of resentment, damages relationships, and negatively impacts productivity. Favoritism can stem from various sources, including race, ethnicity, family ties, social class, education, personality, or personal interests. However, leaders must maintain fairness in the treatment of staff, regardless of an individual's status or position (Gehman, 2008, p. 248). Fairness is essential for fostering unity and enhancing productivity in any organization. When leaders treat everyone equally and justly, trust and respect within the team are cultivated. This sense of fairness promotes inclusivity, encouraging staff members to share ideas and concerns freely.

By consistently demonstrating fairness, leaders foster an environment of belonging, transparency, and openness, boosting morale and strengthening staff loyalty. Employees are more likely to perform at their best when they believe their contributions are valued and recognized equally, without bias or favoritism. Leaders who ensure fairness in their decisions and treatment

of others create a positive work culture where all individuals feel empowered and appreciated. Some common forms of unfair treatment within organizations that can harm unity include:

- i. **Discrimination:** Employees may experience unjust handling based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, disability, or religion. It can manifest as being passed over for promotions, receiving lower evaluations, or being subjected to derogatory remarks tied to these attributes.
- ii. **Pay Disparities:** When employees with similar qualifications and experience are paid differently, wage discrimination is pointed out. This issue is particularly concerning when it reflects gender or racial inequalities, contributing to a sense of unfairness and division.
- iii. **Retaliation:** Employees who report unfair treatment or engage in investigations might face retaliatory actions, such as demotions, denial of promotions, or even wrongful termination, discouraging openness and transparency within the organization.
- iv. **Favoritism:** Leaders who display preferential treatment toward certain employees foster resentment and discontent among other staff members. This favoritism often leads to unequal opportunities for advancement or recognition, which undermines unity and morale within the team.
- v. **Unjust Termination:** Employees may be wrongfully terminated without proper cause or justification, often lacking adequate documentation or transparent reasoning. This unfair treatment can lead to distrust and insecurity within the workplace (Deanne & Annebel, 2009).

Staff Motivation

Staff motivation is crucial in fostering unity within an organization, especially for leaders who genuinely seek to cultivate a cohesive team. Motivating employees involves inspiring and encouraging them to perform at their highest potential. Effective leaders recognize that motivated staff is more engaged, committed, and willing to collaborate toward shared objectives. Leaders can promote a sense of unity by inspiring the team, boosting morale and enhancing productivity. This unity contributes to the organization's overall success and strengthens employees' sense of belonging, leading to lower turnover rates and a more harmonious workplace (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Stone, 2020).

Church administrators should consider organizing annual celebrations or appreciation events to recognize the staff and volunteers' efforts publicly. These events, such as festive gatherings, provide an opportunity to acknowledge hard work throughout the year, with bonuses and awards as tokens of appreciation. Such initiatives foster camaraderie, strengthen unity, and enhance morale, creating a positive work environment. When staff members feel appreciated and celebrated, they are more likely to stay motivated and committed, contributing their best in the coming year. Effective organizational leaders integrate celebration activities into the corporate culture, from monthly birthday parties to annual events celebrating the organization's accomplishments. These celebrations offer more than just enjoyment; they also provide intangible rewards that promote loyalty and cohesion (Johnson & Buhalis, 2022).

Actively Listening

Active listening is vital for leaders seeking to unite their staff and foster a collaborative work environment. This practice involves entirely focusing on, understanding, and responding

thoughtfully to what a staff member communicates while retaining the information for future reference. By actively listening, leaders show respect and appreciation for their staff's perspectives, which helps reduce misunderstandings and potential conflicts. When employees feel heard and valued, they are more likely to engage openly and contribute positively to the organization. Moreover, active listening fosters trust and rapport between leaders and staff, creating a supportive atmosphere that enhances teamwork and morale. When leaders prioritize active listening, they cultivate condition where individuals feel empowered to share ideas, ultimately boosting productivity and organizational success (Brownell, 2010; Hackman & Johnson, 2018). To engage in active listening effectively, leaders should adopt the following strategies:

1. **Avoiding Interruptions:** Leaders should allow employees to express their thoughts fully without interrupting. It demonstrates respect for their opinions and promotes open communication.
2. **Providing Feedback:** After listening, offering reflective feedback shows that the leader has understood the staff member's concerns. For example, "I appreciate your perspective on the team's dynamics; addressing this could improve our collaboration."
3. **Scheduling One-on-One Meetings:** Regularly meeting with staff members as individuals allows for more personal interactions, making staff members feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns.
4. **Reflecting Emotions:** Acknowledging the emotions behind what employees say demonstrates empathy. For example, "I can sense your frustration with the workload, and I'd like to discuss how we can provide more support. These steps enhance communication and contribute to a unified, productive workplace (Brownell, 2010).

Conclusion

Examining leadership relational skills is crucial for fostering staff unity and ensuring sustainability within the Church. Leaders who prioritize building strong relationships create an environment of trust and collaboration where staff members feel valued and connected. This relational approach strengthens unity and encourages collective problem-solving, enabling church staff to work together effectively towards common goals. Church leaders who embody these relational skills inspire their team to embrace a shared vision, reinforcing the Church as a unified entity.

The sustainability of the Church's unity is deeply tied to its capacity to evolve and grow through the contributions of its staff. By investing in relational skills, church leaders empower the member teams to take ownership of their roles and engage more actively in church initiatives. This sense of empowerment fosters innovation and resilience, which are critical for navigating the challenges that churches face in today's dynamic environment. Maintaining strong relationships and unity among staff establishes a solid foundation for long-term success, ensuring the Church remains vibrant and impactful.

This paper has addressed the challenge of sustaining staff unity by exploring the transformative role of leadership relational skills. Effective leadership goes beyond administrative functions; it requires building authentic relationships, fostering open communication, and cultivating trust and respect. By applying these relational skills, leaders can bridge divides, encourage collaboration, and nurture a sense of belonging among staff members. Additionally, the paper has clarified key concepts such as leadership relational skills, staff unity, and the Church, all of which are integral to understanding the importance of these skills within the church context.

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