

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



5 Reasons

***"DOTTED LINES AND SOLID LINES"
ARE OVERRATED IN MULTI-SITE CHURCHES***

RICH BIRCH



Over the last 20 years, I've spent a lot of time helping multi-site churches wrestle through how to launch and lead thriving campuses.

One of the things that often comes up is the **"dotted line and solid line"** conversation. This is the conversation that attempts to outline how the various aspects of church leadership relate to each other. In particular, this refers to the lines on an organizational chart that define responsibilities and authority.

Solid lines show that the people "down" the org chart have a direct reporting relationship to the people connected to them.

Dotted lines show that the people "down" the org chart have "lesser" reporting relationships than those with the solid lines.

Most church structures resemble a pyramid where everyone in the church reports upwards through someone else to one authority figure or a Board at the top. However, multi-site churches are organized around a matrix comprised of central leaders responsible for functions across all locations and a group of campus leaders responsible for their specific location.

There is a tremendous amount of conversation around where the dotted and solid lines fall for multi-site churches. Some church structures have

the solid lines move towards a central leadership team and the dotted lines then flowing outwards to campus leaders. **To make this conversation even more interesting, you can also find churches that are structured the exact opposite way.** Every multi-site church needs to deliver a common experience across their multiple locations. Dotted and solid lines are a way to structure leadership to achieve that common experience. This type of structure is called a matrix model.

The matrix model is inherently full of tension. **Rather than a problem to be solved, this tension is something that is built into the multi-site approach.** I don't know any multi-site churches that would say they have this all figured out, but through various seasons and times of ministry, this tension might get better or worse. Ultimately, a lack of clarity will provoke the following questions:

- Who is in charge?
- Who is the first mover when things aren't going well?
- Who has authority to change something in a campus or across multiple locations?
- Who takes responsibility for various aspects of what is happening in a church?
- Who needs to know when a decision is made?
- Who do we need to check in with and get their input when we're making a decision?

Over the years of participating in these conversations, I frankly think that the dotted line and solid line conversation is overrated. Instead, we need to look at some of the deeper dynamics behind the matrix and how it's affecting the effectiveness of your church. Here's why I think your church needs to stop talking about the dotted lines and solid lines:

Multi-sites require regular and healthy communication.

At the end of the day, a matrix approach to leadership requires that everyone communicates with everyone else, regardless of whether you are a campus team member or a central team member.

These models are communication-heavy, and they require everyone to ask whether they are consulting with enough people about what's happening in their particular area. **Whether you have a dotted line or solid line connection to others in the organization, they need to be included in the conversation.** We often see this take place through weekly meetings, regular email check-ins, and tools like Slack that allow both the central and campus teams to stay in sync.



Multi-site central teams are concerned with systems and curriculum.

Systems are defined processes that help the church deal with its various aspects of care and growth.

Curriculum is what we communicate from our various areas of ministry (e.g. the morning message, children's ministry, student ministry).

I have yet to encounter a church whose central team doesn't worry about systems and curriculum. These items are rarely defined at the campus level but rather in some sort of central organization.

Multi-site campus teams are concerned with execution and relationships.

In every multi-site model I can think of, campus teams generally spend time considering how they are going to implement the church's vision in a particular ZIP code. They are also concerned with how they can move everyone through the systems to ensure that more people are connected to the church.

Campus teams consistently wrestle with what is best for those in their communities. They spend a lot of time, effort, and energy ensuring that the church puts its best foot forward. Thriving campus teams also are obsessed with bringing people together. At the end of the day, what makes a campus different from any other are the relationships between its people. As such, it's clearly within that campus' scope of responsibility to help form these relationships. If the campus teams aren't focused on relationships, then chances are that campus is suffering.

It's probably going to change. (Really soon, maybe.)

If I were sitting across the table from you and we were having coffee, after we talk through some of these items I would say most churches are oscillating back and forth between these two areas of concern.

Rather than getting stuck on who has the most control or who is responsible for what, it is important to understand that the matrix is more about defining how we interact with each other in a way that pushes the ministry forward.

However, chances are in 18 to 24 months, your church will go through an evolution and decide that you need to change the model. This movement means you need to be flexible in how your teams are structured around the mission God has called your church to.

You need to tweak and refine who is responsible for various aspects of the ministry. If you don't have robust conversations on who reports to whom and who is responsible for what at any given moment, then it makes it almost impossible to develop and alter those structures long-term.

Growing multi-site churches demonstrate how every time you add a new campus, or more people to your existing campuses, you change the responsibility matrix and need to look for new ways to assist those campuses.

People, people, people.

I see too many church leaders caught up in this dotted line and solid line conversation to the point that they lose track of the fact that we should be primarily concerned with how to make a difference in our communities.

The reality is that 47% of all multi-site churches currently don't have more than three locations. [ref] This is a big problem from my point of view. These churches have articulated that they want to expand and multiply, but they're unable to go beyond that three-location mark. A part of why I think this is happening is because church leaders are not having conversations around who reports to whom, who has what responsibilities, and who needs to be consulted on various issues in a way that prioritizes what's best for those who attend our churches.

Unfortunately, when church leaders take their focus off of the people, we become ineffective. **One sign of inefficacy is when leadership spends more time talking about how they are going to do ministry rather than actually doing ministry.** If we spend too much time talking about ministry and not enough time improving its quality and pushing it forward, its effectiveness will quickly wane in the coming years.



Is your church spending too much time talking about dotted lines and solid lines?

At the end of the day, I think it's important for your church to have a clear understanding of how its multi-site teams interact with each other. Like any church, we need to have clear lines of authority and communication. **However, I think we can become overly obsessed with wanting to define the lines to the point where we lose sight of the greater mission in our churches.** Often, leaders who

come out of a strong pyramid approach to leadership are looking to build their own fiefdoms and that simply won't work in the matrix leadership model that multi-site churches demand.

We need humble leaders who are willing to go beyond their positions to communicate with their brothers and sisters in the church to drive the mission forward. We need leaders who are willing to hold the organizational chart loosely and the mission strongly and ask, "What can I do today to push the mission of the church forward?"

I'd love to hear more thoughts from you about how you're working out the "dotted line and solid line" issues at your multi-site church. Leave a comment [here](#).

Visit unSeminary.com for more free resources!

UNseminary

UNLIMITED GRAPHIC DESIGN HELP
for only \$370 per month.

Can someone say Amen?

LEARN MORE @ designpickle.com

DESIGN PICKLE