stuff you wish they taught in seminary

UNseminary

8 Axioms
OF CHURCH STAFF HIRING

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"I am convinced that nothing we do is more important than hiring and developing people. At the end of the day you bet on people, not on strategies."

- Larry Bossidy (Retired CEO & Author)

One of the facts of leading a growing ministry is that you are going to have to get really good at hiring a great team. In fact, as the church grows, **often the core leadership team will spend a large portion of its time in simply acquiring a fantastic team to push the mission forward.** Ministries that scale their impact end up requiring a team of people to get the work of the church done, and therefore, you need leaders who think carefully around the hiring process.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of hiring some amazing ministry leaders. These leaders pushed the ministry forward and took us to brand new levels. **There is a deep satisfaction in surrounding yourself with a team of people more qualified than yourself to help make the ministry grow.** As I reflected on what went right during the hiring process for the top leaders (and what went wrong on people that didn't work out), I've pulled together eight truths for you to reflect on in your ministry hiring.

Past performance is the best indicator of future reality.

When we're hiring people for roles at our churches, we're usually in a blissfully euphoric mood that can impair our judgement. The candidates we're talking to are on their best behavior, saying what we want them to say, and since we feel the pain of the open role we tend to believe them. Church leaders are typically optimistic and hopeful individuals, compounding our ability for self-delusion when it comes to any particular candidate's qualifications for the role.

Simply put, **we imagine skills and abilities that aren't present in the candidate because we want them to work in our organization.** We need to force ourselves to look closely at what they've actually done and accomplished in their past roles and graph those results onto our church.

Use performance-based questions to explore what they have actually done and soberly consider if that exact level of performance was achieved at your church, would it accomplish what you're looking for. Development and growth are a bonus, not a guarantee! In fact, their performance will drop in their early days with your church because new relationships and culture take time to acclimatize to.

Anybody is not better than nobody.

I've made this mistake more than once and the pain has stung every single time. We had an open position that we needed to fill for a long time. We struggled to find the candidate from a number of people who applied. After a while, we started to think that the type of person we needed didn't exist in the world. Slowly our standards for what we wanted to hire started to erode. Eventually, we got to the point of convincing ourselves that anybody is better than nobody. We begrudgingly hired a candidate that we knew didn't have all the past experiences we were looking for, but we told ourselves that it would be ok and that they would be a quick learner. However, this logic never works out!

Your church is surviving without the role currently filled, but a bad hire can actually do a lot more damage than an open role. Resist the temptation to prematurely fill open positions at your church with candidates who would not excel in those roles.

The pain of extracting a misplaced staff member is multiple times worse than the discomfort of an open role in your organization.

Internal to consolidate culture. External to change culture.

When you hire a member of your team from within the church, you reinforce the culture that already exists. However, when you hire someone external to your church, you push the culture in a new direction. Over the years, I've heard church leaders claim with pride that they just "hire from within" as if that is the badge of honor we're all driving towards. This is a sure sign that the church will simply perpetuate its existing approaches and systems. If we're honest though, there are areas of our ministry that need a new sense of life and vision, and those areas should be considered for "external" hires.

The degree of change required in the area that needs change is an indicator of how "external" a hire should be. If you are looking to make tweaks to an area, possibly bringing in someone from a different department within the church would be the best; however, if a ministry needs a complete overall change, you need to go and find the best person from anywhere in the world and get them into that role.

Staff expands.

In 20 years of ministry, **I've never had a manager come to me and say that they believe the next best move for their area is to reduce the total number of staff in that ministry.**

Staff generates the need for more staff. Managers who can keep a close eye on their "head count" and resist the urge to just expand their staff are rare, but a vitally important group in your church.

This is related to the "Parkinson's law" that states that work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion. People find a way to make jobs more complicated and time-consuming, which in the end requires more staff to get the same amount of work done.

Time stewardship is a real issue in most church staff teams. We need to find ways to get more done with the same number of staff members as a stewardship and care for the time that the Lord has given us.

People move towards where they are from.

Hiring people "from away" can be a source of richness in the life of your community. Team members from another state or even country can add a tremendous amount to your ministry because, by definition, they add cultural diversity to your organization.

However, over time people will generally move back towards where they are from. Family is a strong pull for people over the long arch of their lives. **In fact, on average people live only 18 miles away from their parents during their adult years of life.**

This doesn't mean you shouldn't be hiring people from far away, but just be aware that the stress these individuals put on themselves is abnormal behavior and might result in them opting to move closer to home in the long run.

Hire chemistry & character. Develop competency.

You're going to spend at least 2,000 hours a year around these people; so, ensuring that these are solid relational fits is important. Although you don't want your staff team to feel like a "frat house", it should be a fun and enjoyable experience to be a part of.

Moral failures because of character flaws are a more common reason for ministry implosions than ineffective or incompetent leadership. Make sure that through the hiring process you probe the character side of the candidate. Find ways to explore the subtler side of what it means to work in a ministry.

What we "do" in the ministry isn't rocket science and can be developed while someone serves with your ministry; however, chemistry and character are typically more fixed traits and will settle out over time.

"Really wanting to work at the church" isn't a qualification.

I've been easily flattered (and ultimately fooled) by candidates who are really excited to work at our church. Their enthusiasm is infectious when I'm meeting with them and I find myself wanting to work with them simply because they want to work with me. Please resist this pitfall! **Enthusiasm for the mission and community of the church is needed, but it's not an overarching qualification that should blind you to the other aspects of the candidate's background.**

Often times, this sort of enthusiasm will be even more evident in candidates who are considering joining your church from marketplace roles. You need to explore this particular enthusiasm closely because often it's rooted in a love for what the church "does"; however, working within the ministry is a much different experience than benefiting from the ministry. Everyone loves the sausage but not particularly the sausage factory!

Hire ministry leaders, not ministry doers.

What are you actually looking for your staff to accomplish in your ministry? It's important that you are crystal clear on the objectives you are looking to fulfill through this role. My firm conviction is that every staff member needs to be leading the ministry and not just directly doing the ministry. **We're hiring people who can mobilize, train, and release volunteers into the ministry rather than them doing the work directly.** You are hiring ministry leaders, not ministry doers! Paul said it clearly in his letter to the Ephesian church:

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds[a] and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ"
- Ephesians 4:11-12

As you are interviewing candidates, focus on the information they provide about the teams they built and leaders they equipped rather than what they did personally. You're looking for leaders who can scale their impact through leading teams of people to reach the ministry goals and objectives. Don't get caught being overly impressed with people who tell you harrowing personal stories of their one-on-one impact on the people your church is serving.

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