



ESSENTIAL
IDENTITIES
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SENIOR
MINISTRY LEADER

SIX ESSENTIAL IDENTITIES OF A
SENIOR MINISTRY LEADER

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Several years ago, Todd Adkins, the Director of LifeWay Leadership, and the LifeWay Leadership team convened a group of respected practitioners and thought leaders in the realm of leadership development. The goal of the series of meetings was to identify essential competencies in local church ministry so ministry leaders could develop people based on these competencies. After all, for leadership development to be intentional, we must know what we desire to develop in people. For example, if a coach does not know the skill for which he is coaching for, his coaching will be haphazard and not nearly as effective as it could be. In the same way, leadership development without a view of what should be developed will be greatly limited in its effectiveness. So the team worked together to identify essential ministry competencies that could guide development.

The task of building a shared set of competencies was not easy, as initially 286 ministry competencies made the list. The team knew too long a list would result in development that is too complicated and too disparate, so they worked hard to narrow down the list. They debated, combined competencies, eliminated competencies, debated some more, and finally agreed on six essential competencies that must be developed in ministry leaders:

1. Discipleship: *Theological and spiritual development*
2. Vision: *A preferred future*
3. Strategy: *Plan or method for the preferred future*
4. Collaboration: *Ability to work with others*
5. People Development: *Contributing to the growth of others*
6. Stewardship: *Overseeing resources within one's care*

Competencies and Different Levels of Leadership

Leaders grow in their competencies as they progress and mature. Thus, the competencies are more developed and expressed differently as people move into roles with greater responsibility. So in terms of leadership development, training around competencies will look different based on the level of leadership the person being developed holds. An example would be helpful, so here is how the competency of *collaboration* looks based on the different levels of responsibility.

- Volunteer: Works with others
- Leader: Works through others
- Director: Works through teams
- Senior leadership: Works through key leaders

As leaders progress to greater levels of responsibility, they don't lose the aspects of each competency they previously developed. Instead, as they progress through a leadership pipeline focused on development, they add to their competencies. In other words, someone does not graduate from working well with others, but the leader adds to that skill as the leader progresses through the pipeline.

Senior Leaders and Activity Rooted in Identity

As God's people, we are to live the reality of who He has declared us to be. He has rescued us and given us an incredible identity as His children, His bride, His priests, and His friends. As God's people, our activity must be rooted in the identity He has graciously given us. The same is true for those of us who lead in ministry. As someone moves into the role of a senior leader, there is a temptation and proclivity to run to activity apart from identity, to feverishly do lots of things, as the pressure of the role is immense. But senior leaders in ministry must function from a healthy place of continually remembering who Christ has declared them to be.

The competencies that people long for in senior leaders must be rooted in the identity God has given. Based on the essential competencies identified for ministry leaders, here are six identities of a senior ministry leader. While someone who is a volunteer or leader won't have the same level of responsibility, a senior leader should function from this place of identity.

1. Theologian (Discipleship): Teach and guard doctrine.
2. Missionary (Vision): Champion mission.
3. Strategist (Strategy): Provide a clear *how*.
4. Shepherd (Collaboration): Ensure people receive care.
5. Equipper (People development): Develop people to minister.
6. Steward (Stewardship): Faithfully manage resources.

SIX ESSENTIAL IDENTITIES OF A SENIOR MINISTRY LEADER

ministry identity	activity	related competency
theologian	teach and guard doctrine	discipleship
missionary	champion mission	vision
strategist	provide a clear <i>how</i>	strategy
shepherd	ensure people receive care	collaboration
equipper	develop people to minister	people development
steward	faithfully manage resources	stewardship

Sadly, because many churches don't even have a semblance of a plan for leadership development, many senior leaders have never been developed for the roles they find themselves in. Thus, senior leaders are wise to self-identify areas for focused personal development. For each identity/competency of a senior leader, I am going to offer an explanation, a simple assessment for senior leaders to evaluate themselves, and actions senior leaders must take.

Theologian: Teach and guard doctrine.

Without the Word of God, a ministry has nothing transformational to offer because the Lord uses His truth to change hearts and sanctify people. If leaders are not consumed with the Word, ministry will be shallow and discipleship will be scarce. Ministry leaders must care deeply about what the church believes about God. They must be continually teaching and guarding the faith delivered to the saints once and for all (Jude 3). The apostle Paul warned the elders at the church of Ephesus:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock that the Holy Spirit has appointed you to as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And men will rise up from your own number with deviant doctrines to lure the disciples into following them. (Acts 20:28–30)

The passion for the Word of God among the people in the church likely will not surpass the passion of the senior leader. The sheep can be severely harmed if senior leaders stop teaching the truth and guarding the flock from error.

Assessment:

1. I am training leaders to think theologically about the doctrine of our church.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

2. I have a plan to systematically teach our people the Scripture.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

3. I ensure that what is being taught in our kids, students, and adult ministries is rooted in Scripture and sound theologically.

__ *Absolutely* __ *Somewhat* __ *Not at all*

Actions:

1. Develop theologically minded leaders.

Senior leaders must develop other leaders to think, know, cherish, and defend the doctrine of the church. If the pastor or senior leader is the only one who thinks deeply about how the practice of the church is rooted in the theology of the church, then the church could easily drift without the senior leader's presence.

2. Systematically feed the people.

The Lord has entrusted a local body of believers to your care. Just as people who care for their bodies eat healthy and enjoy a balanced diet, the body of believers under your care needs a healthy and balanced diet. A. W. Tozer said, "Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian." So systematically plan to teach your people the whole counsel of God.

3. Think beyond the pulpit.

As a senior ministry leader, you are not only responsible for the teaching that happens during worship gatherings, but you are also responsible for the teaching throughout the whole church. Sadly, many senior leaders have no idea what is being taught in groups or to their kids. Ensure the gospel and doctrine are being communicated in all teaching ministries—particularly kids, students, and groups.

Missionary: Champion mission.

As we follow Jesus, we follow Him knowing His heart is to seek and save that which is lost (Luke 19:10). Believers are invited to join Jesus on His mission of making disciples of every nation, of pursuing and rescuing people from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev. 5:9–10). The commission the Lord has given His people to make disciples of all nations must consume a ministry, and this will only happen as ministry leaders continually remind God's people of their holy mission. If senior leaders don't continually give believers a vision for their local community and a vision of participating with the Lord in His pursuit of people from every people group, the local church will not live on mission.

Assessment:

1. I model and champion a love for our local community.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

2. Our people understand that our church exists, in part, to bless those outside of us.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

3. Our people have a vision to join God in redeeming people from every nation.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

Actions:

1. Love your community.

The people in the flock will catch the apathy or the affection a ministry leader has for the local community. Missionaries know that you can't reach people if you don't love people. As ministry

leaders love the city and the people in the community, people in the church will learn to love those in their spheres of life.

2. Lead your church to bless your community.

In God's providence, He determined when the people in your church would be born and where they would live. Thus, it is no accident that your church is in your community during this time in history. God has your church there, in part, to bless those around you. William Temple said, "The Church is the only organization that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it." Ministry leaders must lead the church to serve outside itself.

3. Long for the redemption of the nations.

God is pursuing a people from every people group. Heaven is being populated with people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. He has commanded us to join Him on His mission. Ministry leaders are responsible to foster in their churches a longing for the redemption of people from every people. Ministry leaders must lead people to pray, to give, and to go or send others to the nations.

Strategist: Provide a clear how.

A church needs godly, Spirit-filled leadership much, much more than a church needs strategic leadership, but a ministry benefits greatly from both. The latter must not overpower the former, but the two are not mutually exclusive. When a ministry leader leads well, the ministry leader will give strategic direction. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said:

A pastor is a man who is given charge of souls. He is not merely a nice, pleasant man who visits people and has an afternoon cup of tea with them, or passes the time of day with them. He is the guardian, the custodian, the protector, the organizer, the director, the ruler of the flock.

To organize and direct the flock well requires ministry strategy. Strategy can sound very overwhelming, but strategy is essentially *how* the mission is accomplished. A ministry leader must do more than declare the mission of making disciples; a ministry leader must provide a clear process for discipleship.

Assessment:

1. Our church has a clear discipleship process.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

2. Our church's programs are merely tools to move people through our process.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

3. I regularly communicate how we are designed to make disciples.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

Actions:

1. Keep the mission central and the strategy simple.

A great football coach does more than yell, “Let’s win,” to the players; he also gives them a strategy for defense and a game plan for offense. Many ministry leaders, though, continue to declare our church is about making disciples without offering a strategy for how the church will accomplish her mission. When the strategy is simple, the most important environments that flow from the mission of making disciples are emphasized.

2. View your programs as merely tools.

At their best, programs are environments that help put people in a place for transformation. For example, the Lord will use a worship service that is rooted in Scripture and points people to Jesus to change hearts. He will use a small group where people shepherd one another and the Scripture is applied to the people’s hearts.

While we must be careful not to equate assimilation with transformation, a wise church leader wants to utilize the church’s programs as tools the Lord will use in the transformation of His people. A church’s programs must be viewed as tools for the people, not the people as tools to run programs.

3. Communicate how programs fit within your discipleship process.

After you have articulated an overarching discipleship process or strategy, line up your programs with your process. Your programs say what is important to your church; therefore, you must define how each program is used to produce the kinds of disciples God has called you to make. Your programs must be submissive to your ministry process. Because you don’t want to create a Christian bubble cluttered with a plethora of programs, consider offering one regular program/environment for each phase of your discipleship process. Abhor an overcrowded calendar because it drowns the strategy.

Shepherd: Ensure people receive care.

Without love for people, ministry leaders are merely clanging cymbals, making noise without making an impact. People need to be loved to receive care. While expressing love for people in a ministry will mean distributing care through others and not feverishly attempting to meet every need, a loving shepherd wants the sheep to be cared for. A loving shepherd is burdened to ensure the sheep are attended to and receive care and compassion. The apostle Peter challenged pastors to willingly and freely shepherd God's people (1 Pet. 5:2), and the Lord rebuked leaders in Jeremiah's day for failing to shepherd people well:

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture! This is the LORD's declaration. "Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who shepherd My people: You have scattered My flock, banished them, and have not attended to them. I will attend to you because of your evil acts"—this is the LORD's declaration. (Jer. 23:1–2)

Assessment:

1. I sincerely love the people the Lord has entrusted to me.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

2. Our church has implemented avenues of care to ensure people are cared for.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

3. When someone in our church is in crisis, our church is ready to respond.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

Actions:

1. Smell like sheep.

Instead of leading from a distance, instead of attempting to lead removed from the people, wise and loving shepherds lead among the people they are called to serve. Thus, they smell like sheep. Because they are familiar with the challenges, the trials, and the joys of the people, their ministry and teaching is deeply connected to where people are.

2. Value both relationships and systems.

Nearly a decade ago, I worked with the research team behind *Transformational Church* to consolidate observations and frame them so church leaders could understand transferrable principles. We observed that healthy churches were “relationally intentional.” They were not good at relationships only and bad at systems. Nor were they good at systems only and bad at relationships. Because they valued people, they implemented systems to help them do so effectively. So that people are cared for, ministry leaders must ensure their culture values both people and systems.

3. Emphasize groups.

In my work with Ed Stetzer on *Transformational Groups*, we discovered that those who are cared for in a group (small group, Sunday school class, etc.) are much more likely to engage in spiritual disciplines that indicate spiritual growth: repentance, sharing the gospel, reading the Bible, serving, and giving. Those in a group are much more likely to be growing because they are receiving leadership and care from godly leaders. It is impossible for ministry leaders to know every person deeply, so groups must be emphasized.

Equipper: Develop people to minister.

There is a typical approach to local church ministry, and then there is the biblical approach. Typically pastors or other staff persons are hired to perform ministry. When this happens, many of God's people are sidelined and a church's ministry is reduced to what can occur through a few people. The biblical approach looks very different. Instead of performing the ministry, pastors prepare God's people to minister to each other. Pastors are to prepare others for ministry, not perform all of the ministry themselves. The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus:

And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. (Eph. 4:11–13)

Paul's exhortation is clear. When pastors/teachers train and prepare God's people for ministry, the result is the body of Christ is built up. Quite simply, a failure to equip people for ministry results in an unhealthy church.

Assessment:

1. I operate as if my role is to equip people for ministry, not do ministry.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

2. Our church understands that all believers are gifted and called to serve.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

3. Our church has a plan to develop leaders.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

Actions:

1. Develop a conviction for equipping.

Two major problems are plaguing many churches: (1) Churches, as a whole, are not healthy, and (2) churches, in general, struggle to equip people for ministry. The scarcity of healthy churches and the lack of passion and plan to train people for ministry are not unrelated problems. In fact, according to the apostle Paul, one is the result of the other.

According to Ephesians 4:11–13, these two problems are deeply connected. A church that values equipping people to minister is a church that is healthy. For the conviction to be a shared conviction in the church, ministry leaders must possess the conviction themselves and teach it to the church.

2. Design a plan for development.

In a study conducted by LifeWay Research, we discovered that only 25 percent of churches have any type of plan to equip people for ministry. The lack of a plan is evidence of the missing conviction. However, one way that ministry leaders can foster a conviction in the congregation is to design a plan for development. A designed plan, a leadership pipeline, shows the people that equipping is valued. A plan to engage people in ministry shows the church how the beautiful doctrine of “every believer is a priest” is lived out in the church.

3. Delegate ministry to others.

Some ministry leaders are hesitant to develop others for ministry because they fear they will become unnecessary. While the desire to provide for his family is understandable and commendable, a kingdom-minded leader loves the idea of “working himself out of a job.” He understands he is an interim leader, given temporary responsibility for a group of people, and wants to fulfill the calling to prepare others for ministry, not to hoard ministry.

Steward: Faithfully manage resources.

In his letter to Titus, the apostle Paul called the overseer “God’s administrator” or “God’s steward” (Titus 1:7). Ministry leaders are stewards, not owners, as Jesus owns His Church. Jesus promised to build His Church, not ours (Matt. 16:18)! The resources the Lord blesses a church with are ultimately for Him. The ministry leader, as a faithful steward, is responsible to ensure the resources are managed faithfully. The ministry leader must not be a lover of money (1 Tim. 3:3) but one who is generous because Christ has been generous to us. As resources are generously given to the church, ministry leaders are responsible to ensure they are leveraged to advance the mission the Lord has given His people.

Assessment:

1. I manage my finances well and am generous in giving.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

2. Our ministry budget reflects our mission.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

3. Our church is growing in generosity in response to God’s grace.

Absolutely *Somewhat* *Not at all*

Actions:

1. Give generously.

Ministry leaders should set the pace in living within one’s means and in being generous. Without doing so, ministry leaders lack the moral integrity to challenge the people we serve to be generous.

2. Budget and spend strategically.

Your budget and your spending are a clear indication of your strategy. What you value as a ministry, you resource. Jack Welch once commented, “Strategy is simply resource allocation.” Your budget should be a reflection of your stated strategy. If the two are not in harmony, your budget wins and your strategy is a nebulous statement with no traction. Align your budget and spending to your strategy and priorities.

3. Embrace and teach stewardship as part of discipleship.

Church leaders are bombarded with advice on “raising capital,” “developing donors,” and “cultivating generosity.” If the apostle Paul were at the table hearing church leaders bemoan the lack of giving in their churches, he would probably say, “The people must have forgotten the gospel or not truly embraced it.” Paul emphasized the gospel in his appeal for believers to be generous in giving (2 Cor. 8:7–9). Though He was rich, Christ became poor so we could be blessed with the richness of knowing Him. And His generosity should motivate believers to be generous givers. Understand that stewardship is part of discipleship, and continually remind people of God’s grace as you challenge them to give.