



Should a Church Staff Member Report to a Committee?

By Dan Hotchkiss

When board- and committee-centered congregations engage paid staff, they sometimes struggle to find language to describe how staff members should relate to one another and to the rest of the organization. Especially if the staff person leads a program area like education, music, or youth work, which is “owned” by a committee, it seems natural that the committee should hire, orient, and supervise the new staff person.

Dial the clock forward ten years. The staff member is full-time, still working “for” a committee (though by then he or she may actually handpick its members), and in conflict with another member of the staff, possibly the senior clergy leader. What is the process then? Do you assemble the two staff members and their respective committees to try to reach a solution? Do you all go to your mutual boss, the board, and ask it to judge the case? If the congregation elects both the committee and the board, does the congregation have to vote?

Having seen all these methods tried, I have concluded that “a staff member reports to a committee” is one of those things that you can say in English but that makes no sense. . . . Committees simply cannot supervise paid staff, because they are not present when the work is done, and it is too difficult for them to speak with one voice. A staff member deserves a boss who works at least as many hours a week as he or she does.

Others can participate in the evaluation process or in making policies about staff treatment. But a congregation that wants to remain sane will set its staff up as a single team and hold it responsible for sustaining its own working relationships. Designating someone to be “head of staff” or “leader of the staff team” — and requiring the staff team to make its own plans, resolve its own conflicts and carry out its own evaluations (inviting others to participate in all of these except the conflicts) — gives the staff the space it needs to operate effectively.

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