

Strategies of Leadership: Creating a Learning Organization

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Introduction

In an article written in 1983 for *The Wall Street Journal*, Peter Drucker stated and we quote: "No job is going to change more in the next decade than that of the first-line supervision...And few people in the work force are less prepared for the changes and less likely to welcome them."

We're not sure if Professor Drucker was thinking about the position of district superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene when he wrote these words. Yet there seems to be some relationship to what he is saying about business and the situation faced by the denomination.

The theme of the ANSR Conference for 1992, "The Socialization of the Nazarene District Superintendent," is timely. The Church of the Nazarene, like most denominations, is in transition and change. In terms leadership and supervision, no group will play a more crucial role in responding to the challenges before the church than that of the district superintendents.

Our view of the districts superintendency is shaped to some degree by our being raised in a Nazarene parsonage. The district superintendent was my father's first-line supervisor. The first one we can remember (we were ten years old) clearly was Dr. Orville Maish, superintendent of the Michigan District. He was followed by Dr. Fred Hawk, then Dr. Harry Stanley.

The memories are for the most part pleasant. My mother was a great cook and when it came for the annual visit of the district superintendent we stayed around the dinner table on Sunday talking and laughing and sharing stories about the church. Things were going rather well during those days we were in Benton Harbor, Michigan so we can only assume that those visits were positive experiences for my father.

We can remember that Dr. Maish wore nice clothes, had a low and distinguished voice and drove a new car. My parents managed the dining hall at Indian Lake Nazarene Camp for nearly ten years and therefore worked with the district superintendent during the summer activities.

Dr. Hawk was a gracious individual. We developed a personal relationship with him and he performed our wedding ceremony.

Dr. Stanely was a long-time acquaintance of our parents from their days in Three Rivers, Michigan. After he became district superintendent the relationship seemed to change which is not unusual. An individual is a colleague one minute and your supervisor the next.

My former pastor at Danville, Illinois First Church, Keith Bottles, was elected district superintendent of the Chicago Central District upon the retirement of Dr. Forrest Nash. Prior to

this our former associate minister at Danville First, Laurel Matson, was elected district superintendent of the Wisconsin District.

Some of the recently elected and appointed district superintendents are former college classmates and long-time friends. We are not sure what this means for the Church of the Nazarene. In any event, the position is an important one and merits our attention.

What Does a District Superintendent Do to Earn All That Money?

In preparing for this presentation, we took some time to review the “duties” of the district superintendent as stated in the MANUAL. Here is a selected list of what we found:

Duties of the District Superintendent (selected)

- To organize, recognize, and supervise local churches within the bounds of his assembly district, subject to the approval of the general superintendent having jurisdiction.
- To visit local churches in his assembly district at least once a year, insofar as is possible, and as necessary meet with the church board to consult with reference to spiritual, financial, and pastoral matters, giving such helpful advice and assistance as he may deem proper.
- To have special supervision of all the missions of the Church of the Nazarene within the bounds of his assembly district.
- To schedule and conduct, with each local church board, the regular pastoral review according to the provisions of 121.
- All official acts of the district superintendent shall be subject to review and revision by the district assembly and subject to appeal [507.3].

It is quite clear that between the first four duties and the final statement on review, the district superintendent plays a strong role in the areas of appointment, approval and review. And if someone has responsibility they need the authority to carry it out. [This job description is vertical and does not include the horizontal relationship (denominational and college boards, etc.) a district superintendent has by virtue of the office.]

What is missing, though, is the one essential qualitative aspect of leadership that Professor Drucker refers to in his article: That it is time organizations recognized that the greatest contribution a “first-time supervisor” can make is to bring out the strengths of the work force: competence and knowledge and the capacity to take responsibility.

We realize that there is little likelihood that a commission or committee would seek to place such language in the MANUAL. Yet, if a district superintendent makes a checklist out of the “duties” section MANUAL, then he or she will have missed something about their job that is quite significant.

While we have not had the opportunity of participating in any orientation programs that currently for new district superintendents, from the focus groups that we have conducted we can only conclude that they are receiving mixed messages about the kind of leaders they should be.

Twenty-five years ago, IBM, hardly a permissive company, accepted the fact that the traditional first-line supervisor's role had come to an end. IBM set about to replace the "boss" with a manager who is a teacher, an expeditor and an assistant. More responsibility was placed with the first-line worker.

In their best-selling book, "In Search of Excellence," Peters and Waterman refer to the fact that no organization employs all top performers. They wrote that one of the tasks of first-line supervisors is to get more out of the people with 50% ability. Those that know how to do this tend to exhibit strong interpersonal skills.

But We're Not a Business

One of the things that kept going through my mind as we researched this paper is that the church, unlike business, has to live with its own version of the democratic process in the selection of first-line supervisors. It is one thing to carefully recruit and screen applicants for key managerial positions.

It is quite another to elect a district superintendent like we choose a county commissioner, by ballot.

Like other electoral processes, the qualifications for the job rest largely in the minds of assembly delegates. There is a tendency for laity to rely on the recommendation of their pastors when it comes time to vote. This situation is not unlike the voting process at General Assembly for the election of a general superintendent. Here, the district superintendent plays an influential role with the delegates.

There is, of course, another way in which individuals find themselves assuming the role of a first-line supervisor. They may receive a telephone call from a general superintendent informing them they have been appointed to the position. although a few have turned down the invitation (?), most accept.

So What Can We Do About a Somewhat Open-ended Situation?

What we believe would work best in the socialization process for the district superintendent in light of election or possible appointment is to have the highest levels of leadership: (a) determine what the Church of the Nazarene wants to accomplish in mission, (b) identify what role the district superintendent should have in that mission, and (c) set about to train, train, train.

A Strategy of Leadership: The Learning Organization

Of all the options available to the denomination for the development of its present and future leaders the one that appears the most viable is that of creating a learning organization. This could be seen as another management "fad" if it were not for the fact that this approach to leadership development is the only one that can deal with existing circumstances and prepare individuals for those things yet to come. It is possible to teach people how to improve their performance.

One of the forces driving the re-examination of the role of the first-line supervisor is a new kind of worker.

We have heard in the past two years a great deal about the baby-boomers and how different they are. One-out-of-three Americans falls into the boomer category. We're still not quite sure what to make up the baby-busters either and there are 40 million of them. It is enough to cause a district superintendent to consider taking early retirement.

District superintendents tell us that we have looked at changes in the pew (laity) and have failed to study the changes underway in the pulpit (clergy).

Everything from starting new churches to managing millions of dollars in district finances poses challenges and opportunities. But none is quite likely to challenge the district superintendent in the future as much as leading a new "breed" of pastor.

This is one reason for the Church of the Nazarene to strongly consider increasing the role of continuing education and training for its first-line supervisors.

Is There a Model?

Our chairman asked that we present some examples of organizations that provide some type of model. Perhaps the best example is General Electric. This is a company that is respected for its ideas and innovations.

What its Chairman and CEO Jack Welch has done is provide a model worth considering for any organization.

One of G.E.'s main strategies of leadership is its Management Development Institute. Nearly 120 students each week gather at Crotonville, New York to engage in courses ranging from manufacturing and sales to marketing and personnel.

G.E. has placed a high priority on the development of its management and workers. With all the technology and resources at its disposal, G.E. has concluded that these things are of little use unless the workers are properly trained and developed.

G.E. knows where it is headed thereby making it easier to determine what kind of people are needed to get results. The company could send its people to just about any school or continuing education program in the USA.

Yet it has chosen to establish its own “school of learning” in order to meet its requirements, not someone else’s.

Crotonville has developed such a strong program that it is now influencing the way graduate schools teach many of these same courses.

The Institute is a pioneer in the development of action learning and team learning, something that is very important for those who are removed for a time from the actual workplace and then returned shortly thereafter.

What we find interesting about the program is that the head instructor is Chairman Welch. According to a recent article in *Fortune* magazine, Welch was quoted as saying he had missed very few speaking assignments since becoming CEO.

Welch, who has earned a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in chemical engineering, visits each month because it is “a great way to take the pulse of the organization in Q & A sessions with my managers.”

The statistics speak for themselves. G.E. is accompanied with 298,000 employees; a gross income of \$60 billion; and it quite diversified making everything from 65 cent lightbulbs to 400,000 pound locomotives.

There are two other companies that place a large premium on the development and training of its people. Walt Disney Co.’s “Disney University” provides education and training not only for its 58,000 employees worldwide but also for hundreds of companies and non-profit organizations.

Disney’s reputation for providing a very high level of customer service speaks well for its education and training program. Even though people are carefully screened in the hiring process, nothing is left to chance in the University curriculum.

Another good example of learning organization is Proctor and Gamble. It’s P & G College basically does the same thing as the G.E. Institute and Disney University. Again, central to everything is the fact that P & G has a rather clear direction making it easier to know what it needs from its people.

To establish education and training programs without first having a sense of purpose and direction for the organization appears to us to be a waste of time and money.

What’s the Next Step?

Are we saying to the church that “if we only had...” we would be doing better than what we are? Yes and no. The issues are too complex to offer a single solution.

What we are attempting to say is that the role of the firstline supervisor is changing and that gatherings for district superintendents once a year every two years for a few days are probably not going to be enough to impact them deeply.

District superintendents are themselves moving away from a traditional preacher's meeting and going to a workshop/seminar time of learning for their pastors. The recognition is there for continuing education. We believe it is time to consider the same approach for district superintendency.

Let me further define and qualify these observations.

We have worked with the Church of the Nazarene as a consultant for 12 years. We have had the privilege of being on a number of districts for different activities such as preacher's meetings and skills schools.

We have observed a variety of leadership styles among the district superintendents we have worked with. Thanks to the research of Warren Bennis and others, we now know that effective leadership comes in different styles, shapes, and sizes.

You build on your strengths. Someone needs to further study the role of district superintendent and identify the strengths that lie within the system. Some people have the notion that you enact change by zeroing the odometer. Nothing could be further from the truth. You begin to make changes from where you are if it is determined that changes are needed.

We have recently had a committee authorized by the General Board to study the duties of the general superintendents. It may be time to do the same thing with the office of the district superintendent.

Summary

If anything does materialize in the way of a leadership development program for the denomination, it should come from the Board of General Superintendents. The system and the culture of the Church of the Nazarene would make it difficult for the program to originate in any other office. That's not to say that other departments of the General Board should not be involved. They certainly should be.

However, it would be our recommendation that the Board do what G.E. did: retain the services of those who are highly skilled in leadership education and have them custom design a program to meet the particular needs of the Church of the Nazarene.

In implementing the mission of the church, What should be the role of the district superintendent other than authority, approval and review?

There may be other ways to say it, but Drucker's view that first-line supervisors need to be charged with bringing out the strengths of the work force is a good place to begin.

It will become necessary to develop leadership in order to deal with the challenges that we know exist. A further requirement will be to train leaders to face those things which we must inevitably confront but about which we do not know.

Everything that we see only serves to underscore the need for the Church of the Nazarene to becoming a learning organization throughout because effective leadership is required of everyone who holds a position of responsibility.