

PASTORS

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How to spot emerging leaders, build a development pipeline, train elders and deacons, avoid toxic promotions, and create a succession culture in the local church

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Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.

The Leadership Development Imperative

Moses was destroying himself and everyone around him. He was sitting in judgment from morning to evening, handling every dispute that arose among several million people, while the people stood in lines that stretched from dawn to dusk. His father-in-law Jethro watched for a day and then delivered a verdict that cuts across every pastor who believes his highest calling is personal competency rather than organizational multiplication: "What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone" (Exodus 18:17-18). The mandate was clear: identify capable men, train them, and delegate authority.

The failure to develop leaders is not merely a pragmatic oversight -- it is a theological error. It misunderstands the nature of the church, which is not a professional ministry service delivered by trained specialists to passive recipients, but a body in which every member has gifts, and in which the role of the pastor-teacher is explicitly to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). The pastor who does not develop leaders is not serving the church -- he is stunting it. He is consuming what should be multiplied.

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

-- Ephesians 4:11-13

Ephesians 4:11-13 is the Magna Carta of leadership development ministry. The five-fold gift (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor-teacher) is not the destination of ministry but the infrastructure of ministry equipping. The gifts are given not so that the gifted can do the ministry for the body, but so that the whole body can be equipped to do the ministry. The goal -- "mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" -- is a congregational goal, not an individual one. It will only be achieved when every member is developed, deployed, and growing.

What You Are Looking For: The Marks of an Emerging Leader

Leadership identification is both an art and a science, and the pastor who develops an eye for it will find emerging leaders in places others overlook. Jesus did not select his twelve from the religious establishment. He found them on fishing boats, at tax collection booths, among political activists. The capacity for leadership is distributed far more broadly across your congregation than your current leadership structure reflects.

The FAT Principle: Faithful, Available, Teachable

Before you look for charisma, eloquence, or impressive spiritual gifts, look for faithfulness. The person who shows up consistently, who follows through on commitments, who can be counted on without being chased is demonstrating the character quality that Paul identifies as the primary qualification for leadership entrusted with something valuable (1 Corinthians 4:2, 2 Timothy 2:2). Faithfulness in small things is the pre-condition for authority over larger things (Matthew 25:21).

Availability does not mean having no other commitments -- it means a willingness to prioritize development. The person who says "I'd love to grow in this but my schedule is completely full and has been for ten years" is not yet available in the sense that matters. Leadership development requires that something else comes off the plate. The person who is willing to make that trade is demonstrating that growth matters more than comfort, which is itself a mark of leadership character.

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Teachability is perhaps the most powerful predictor of leadership development potential and the most difficult to manufacture. The teachable person asks more questions than they make statements. They receive correction without becoming defensive. They actively seek feedback. They change their mind when they encounter better evidence or arguments. They are genuinely curious about their own blind spots. The unteachable person -- however gifted, however experienced, however impressive -- will plateau and eventually become a liability. No organization, no matter how excellent its development program, can develop someone who will not be developed.

Additional Marks of Emerging Leaders

Beyond FAT, look for: a track record of serving others without being asked or recognized; the ability to attract voluntary followership (people naturally gravitate toward them for counsel, influence, direction); emotional self-regulation under pressure (they do not escalate, triangulate, or withdraw when conflict arises); an appetite for personal growth that extends beyond ministry (they read, they learn, they are curious about their own development); an outward orientation (they are genuinely concerned about the mission, not just their place in the organization); and spiritual depth that is visible not in performance but in the kind of quiet consistency that marks someone who actually prays, who actually reads Scripture, who actually walks with God.

The Development Pipeline: From Discovery to Deployment

Leadership development is not a single event -- it is a pipeline. People move through a process of increasing responsibility, mentorship, formation, and deployment that takes years, not months. Pastors who expect to identify a leader, run them through a training program, and deploy them as a fully formed ministry leader in a matter of months will be consistently disappointed. The formation of genuine leaders requires the same slow, relational, grace-sustained process that produces genuine disciples.

Stage 1: Observation and Invitation (0-6 months)

The first stage is observation. You are watching for the marks described above: faithfulness in existing commitments, teachability in current relationships, the quiet influence that precedes formal authority. You are also praying -- as Jesus prayed before selecting the twelve -- for discernment about who God is calling you to invest in specifically. This stage concludes with a specific, personal invitation: "I've been watching how you serve and the way you engage with the community, and I believe God has gifts in you that I'd like to help develop. Would you be willing to meet with me regularly to explore that?"

Stage 2: Formation and Apprenticeship (6 months - 2 years)

Formation happens through three channels simultaneously: content (theological and ministry knowledge provided through reading, teaching, and instruction), experience (actual ministry opportunities with increasing responsibility), and reflection (the guided processing of experience that turns it into wisdom). The leader in formation needs all three. Content without experience produces theorists who cannot lead. Experience without reflection produces pragmatists who do not grow. Reflection without content produces well-meaning people who reinvent the wheel.

Apprenticeship is the specific form of formation that works best for pastoral and ministry leaders: the emerging leader works alongside the developing leader in real ministry situations, observing, participating, and gradually taking more responsibility. They see how you handle a difficult pastoral conversation. They watch you navigate a board meeting. They observe your sermon preparation process. And then they debrief with you: Why did you do that? What were you thinking? What would you do differently? This kind of mentored observation is irreplaceable.

Stage 3: Deployment and Sustained Support (Ongoing)

Deployment is not graduation from the development process -- it is its next phase. The newly deployed leader needs consistent support, honest feedback, increasing challenge, and the ongoing relationship with the developer who knows them well enough to see both their growth and their blind spots. The pastor who develops leaders and then abandons them to figure it out alone will find that many of his best leaders flame out, stall, or make costly mistakes that sustained mentorship would have prevented.

Training Elders and Deacons: The Formal Leadership Structure

The New Testament identifies two formal offices in the local church: elder (presbuteros/episkopos -- the terms are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17-28 and Titus 1:5-7) and deacon (diakonos). The eldership carries the responsibility for teaching, shepherding, governing, and protecting the congregation. The diaconate carries the responsibility for practical care and service that frees the elders for the ministry of the word and prayer. Both require specific character qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9), and both require intentional training that most congregations do not provide.

Elder training should cover at minimum: the biblical theology of eldership; the character qualifications and how they are evaluated; the practical responsibilities of the elder (preaching, pastoral care, governance, protection); the dynamics of elder relationships (how elders relate to one another, to the lead pastor, and to the congregation); and the specific challenges and temptations of pastoral leadership. This training is not a one-time orientation -- it is ongoing, ideally through regular elder meetings that include not just business but formation.

Common Pitfalls in Leadership Development

Promoting for the Wrong Reasons

The most common and most damaging failure in congregational leadership development is the promotion of people for reasons other than the character and competency qualifications the New Testament specifies. Churches promote people because they are enthusiastic volunteers, because they have given significant financial gifts, because they have impressive professional credentials, because the pastor is uncomfortable saying no to someone who clearly wants the role, or because there is a functional vacancy that needs to be filled. All of these are understandable pressures. All of them, when they override character assessment, produce leadership appointments that eventually cause significant harm.

Peter's warning against appointing "a recent convert" (1 Timothy 3:6) reflects this principle. It is not that new believers cannot lead -- it is that character is formed over time, that the specific character flaws most dangerous in leaders (pride, entitlement, the tendency to use authority for self-benefit rather than community service) are not reliably visible until someone has been in relationship long enough for their patterns to emerge. The pastor who rushes someone into leadership because they are impressive or needed will often discover, eighteen months later, the character flaw that would have been visible with eighteen months of patient observation.

Developing Leaders Who Lead Like You

A subtler danger: the pastor who only develops leaders in his own image. Every leader brings blind spots, personality preferences, and unconscious biases to his development work. The introverted pastor will tend to undervalue extroverted leadership styles. The theologically systematic pastor will tend to undervalue the prophetic, intuitive leader. The administratively gifted pastor will tend to undervalue the relational, pastoral-care-oriented leader. The leadership team that reflects only one personality type, only one leadership style, only one demographic profile, is a team with significant blind spots -- and those blind spots will eventually become crises.

The most effective leadership development is the development of leaders who are not like you -- who compensate for your weaknesses, who see what you miss, who lead in ways that reach people you cannot reach. This requires genuine self-awareness about your own limitations and genuine humility about the value of difference. It is one of the most difficult aspects of leadership development and one of the most important.

Building a Succession Culture

Every pastor should be preparing for his own succession from the day he arrives. This is not morbidity or lack of commitment to the ministry -- it is wisdom. The pastor who builds a congregation that cannot survive his departure has built something fragile and ultimately self-serving. The pastor who consistently develops the next generation of leaders, who celebrates and releases gifted people to larger spheres of influence, and who is genuinely working himself out of certain roles by developing others for them -- this pastor is building something that will outlast him and multiply his ministry beyond what he could accomplish personally.

Succession culture is built through specific practices: celebrating the departure of gifted leaders to other contexts rather than treating it as loss; refusing to be the indispensable person for any ministry that could be led by a gifted member; naming and developing a specific successor (even years in advance) whose gifts and character are being deliberately developed toward the eventual leadership transition; and preaching a theology of leadership multiplication that frames the pastor's role as equipping rather than doing.

Reflection Questions for the Developing Leader

1. Who are the three most promising emerging leaders in your congregation right now? Can you name them? What specific development investment are you making in each of them?
2. What is your leadership development pipeline? What is the path from new member to elder in your congregation? Is it clear, consistent, and accessible? Or is it informal and personality-dependent?
3. Have you ever promoted someone into leadership for reasons other than genuine character and competency? What happened? What did you learn?
4. Are you developing leaders who are different from you? Who in your current or developing leadership team most complements your weaknesses? How are you investing in their development?
5. What would happen to your congregation if you left tomorrow? What does your honest answer reveal about the health of your leadership development culture?

The most important thing you will leave behind is not a building, not a program, not a legacy of impressive numbers. It is the people you developed -- the leaders who carry your investment into their own ministries, who develop their own leaders, who continue the multiplication chain long after your name has been forgotten. That is the pastoral legacy that matters.

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