

WHEN LEADERS ARE STUCK

A Guide for Communal Discernment

Grady D. King

8:00 p.m. Wednesday night. Elders and ministers meeting. Everyone is present except one elder. People are tired after a long day of work. There are nine items on the agenda and the most difficult discussion is number nine. It's been on the agenda for months and continually postponed.

9:00 p.m. Six items remain on the agenda. Restlessness fills the room. Someone looks at their watch. Another one checks his phone for a message. And someone takes a restroom break. What everyone knows is that the difficult discussion will not happen, again. Some are relieved. Others are frustrated. The chairman speaks up, *"We can't discuss one particular item without all of us being present."* No one is surprised.

10.00 PM. Three agenda items remain. The meeting adjourns with closing prayer.

The Reality of Stuck

If any of this sounds familiar, then you know STUCK first hand. It's understandable. We take for granted that good men who love God and take their responsibility seriously can come together, have an open, difficult discussion resulting in a decision and remain united. When you think about it, what other organization is called to function like an elder group? Companies have chief executive officers, universities have presidents, schools have superintendents, and the armed services have officers—a chain of command. The elder group, however, is not a hierarchy, but rather, a community of equals. Authority lies not in one's individual position, strength of personality, or longevity of service. Rather, it lies by virtue of one's life and character in Christ. No one elder has the final say—it's a group decision. This is, however, not the experience of many elder groups. Every group has the listeners and talkers, the competitive and the avoidant, the agreeable and disagreeable. Being a functioning group is not easy. Group dynamics are complex. Conflict is inevitable and essential. To view conflict as detrimental, something to avoid, keeps the group stuck.

When you think about it, what other organization is called to function like an elder group?

Conflict: Good or Bad?

Stop. Before reading any further, take a moment to reflect on conflict.

- What is my attitude regarding conflict?
- What is my general behavior when conflict arises?
- What is my function in a group in conflict?

Knowing your own conflict style is helpful. Even more helpful is a group understanding of each other's conflict style. TKI is one tool that is helpful for this important relationship dynamic informing decision-making tendencies. The goal is to get unstuck for the sake of the body of Christ and the growth of the kingdom. Communal discernment can be a way to get unstuck. It is not a quick fix and does require commitment, patience, and discipline, coupled with confession of pride and openness to change—all of which is about maturing in Christ, rather than sanctifying our peculiarities as men.

The goal is to get unstuck for the sake of the body of Christ and the growth of the kingdom.

Men will be Men

My wife has a humorous saying that is more truth than fiction—*“Wherever two or three men are gathered, there is a junior high boy.”* It is usually in reference to the kind of humor, competitiveness, and spirit that emerges when men gather. There is, however, one common characteristic of men that works against communal discernment. Men are wired to be fixers. It's not all bad, just as being a warrior and protector has its place with leaders. Since men are wired to be fixers, there is typically an impatience with process and poor self-awareness about the need to change the way we do things. One definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over and expecting different results. Although we understand the reality, we tend to do what we have always done and get what we have always got.

The Red Green Show, a Canadian PBS show that ended in 2006, was one of my favorite shows. It was a Canadian version of *Home Improvement* set in the fictional town of Possum Lake, Canada, and followed the mishaps of Red, the leader of the Possum Lodge men's club, and his nephew in their plight to be

good handymen. They attempted to fix everything with duct tape and had some amazing successes and failures. Each episode ended in the lodge with the men reciting the man's prayer—"I'm a man. I can change. I guess. Amen." As humorous as this is, it is true, and conflict makes it evident. With conflict comes pressure and frustration. When pressure and frustration are at a high level, the proverbial man-card is often played—"Hey, we are all grown men, let's just get it on the table, be honest, take a vote, and make a decision." In baseball terms, what's the batting average of this approach in your group? Has it worked? How was the decision made? Did it unify or polarize the group? What is the residual relationship baggage? Likely, the answers to these questions are less than satisfactory. It is a challenge for a stuck group to make a significant decision.

The Challenge

Godly people coming together to make a decision seems like an innocuous task. It is, however, fraught with challenges. The weightier the decision, the greater the challenge. To believe the primary task is to get everyone on the same page is naive, because it does not take into account the complexities of being human: expectations, fears, motives, intellect, personality, tradition, ego, power, needs, and preferences. All of this is only multiplied and compounded at the congregational level. Yet, all human systems have similar dynamics, and understanding the church as a system provides insight and tools for the process of communal discernment.

Communal Discernment

Communal discernment is a spiritual task dependent upon people who are maturing in Christ, rooted in prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit. Discernment, at its core, is about

judging, assessing, and evaluating. It is not voting or holding out for a unanimous decision. It is a process where the Holy Spirit is active in and through disagreement as well as agreement. Discounting emotions and intuition by not bringing them to bear in the discussion (even without an apparent clear rationale) can hinder process and sabotage decision-making. The reason is that unexpressed feelings often take the form of unstated resistance or postponing a decision in the name of gathering more information. Courage to take a stand: state belief, express feelings, and/or share intuitively is an essential part of the process. If communal discernment is about anything, it is about surfacing latent as well as visible anxiety that shapes our decisions. Anxiety begets anxiety and erodes courage. Chronically anxious leaders are leaderless. Our greatest task as leaders is to manage our own anxiety. This is why an outside facilitator is recommended.

Communal discernment is a spiritual task dependent upon people who are maturing in Christ, rooted in prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Process Guidance

An outside facilitator is advised for the first time working through the process. It cannot be overstated that THE PROCESS itself is essential for healthy discernment. Each part of the process is deliberate and has a purpose in group dynamics. An outside facilitator provides objectivity and active listening. This person can also provide insights into dynamics of engagement, disengagement, pain, and body language.

IF an outside facilitator is not used, then designate a person in the group to coach them through the process with someone who is an experienced facilitator.

The Process

The process is designed as a reflective practice of communal discernment. It acknowledges that everyone makes decisions for a variety of reasons. Decision-making is complex. For the purpose of this exercise, three levels of discernment—biblical, pastoral, and personal—are considered. Each leader reflects on their thoughts and feelings for each level.

- A. **Biblical:** What does the Bible say? What about the nature of God? What does God value?
- B. **Pastoral:** How will it impact the church? What is my level of anxiety?
- C. **Personal:** What is my personal viewpoint? If I wasn't a designated leader I . . .

As leaders, we can be committed to the Bible while differing on the precise meaning of a passage and application regarding an issue. We can also vary greatly as to anticipated congregational response and our own level of anxiety, which impacts the pastoral dynamic. Commitment to a good process is key. The key to good process is specific commitments in the conversation. These include, especially, listening, honesty, and self-control, followed by respect, courtesy, and clarity.

Commitment to a good process is key. The key to good process is specific commitments in the conversation.

Essential Process Tasks for Every Participant

1. **Clarity:** Writing out answers for clear thinking and rationale.
2. **Verbal Sharing:** Articulating thoughts and feelings is about taking ownership of beliefs.

3. *Active Listening:* Eye contact and focus communicates value and engagement.

Personal Reflections for Group Meeting (*Write out your responses for sharing*)

The following questions are designed to till the soil of your thinking and willingness to be fully present in the process. Sharing your answers with each other at the beginning of the meeting is essential. Some of these questions may not be necessary, depending on the nature of the discussion (i.e., searching for a preacher, theological position of leadership, building program, etc.)

1. What did others give up for me to be present for this process?
2. What crossroads is _____ (congregation or group) facing at this time?
3. What possibilities for ministry exist in your local context?
4. What refusal am I postponing?
*What am I refusing to say, "Yes" and "No" to?
5. How am I contributing to the problem I am concerned with?
6. What commitments am I willing to make for the future of _____?

The Process Steps

Pre-Work

1. Respond to the personal-reflection section and bring your written responses with you to the group meeting.
2. Identify the key topic for discernment and state it as a central question.

**This can be done as group discussion, led by the facilitator or chosen leaders. It is crucial that everyone involved knows the exact topic, stated as a question.*

3. Each participant fills out the worksheet, which will be used in the group meeting.

Group Meeting

1. Begin the meeting with prayer and brief period of silence.
2. The facilitator shares conversation commitments (i.e., the ground rules).
 - a. Everyone speaks.
 - b. Everyone speaks without interruption.
 - c. Everyone speaks in first person (I think, I believe, I feel, etc.).
 - d. Everyone checks what they heard by saying, "I heard you say... ." and gives opportunity for the speaker to verify or clarify.
 - e. Everyone takes a position and provides rationale for their position in the discussion.
3. The facilitator reproduces the levels of discernment on a whiteboard for everyone to see.
4. Each person shares the results of their worksheet, and those are recorded on the whiteboard.
5. A time of silence (5 minutes minimum) for personal reflection and implications is given for each person to make notes, consider additional questions of clarification, etc.
6. Numbers are totaled and averaged for group consensus at each level, and then cumulatively.
7. Identify the points of divergence and restate rationale inclusive of intuitive considerations.

**Consider an acceptable range for group consensus in moving forward.*

8. If the group remains stuck, restate the question, take a few minutes for prayer, and call for another consideration of numeric positions and rationale.

**At this point, acknowledge fears, congregational pressure (specific people and/or constituencies), possible member and/or financial loss, and family dynamics, that may impact position/rationale.*

9. Once there is a consensus, affirm the person(s) with the greatest divergence as essential to the process and pray for “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

Special Notes

1. Although the focus of this chapter has been on elders and ministers, the process can be used with any group of people—male, female, or a combination. The basic process has been used with as few as 6 people and as many as 24 in one setting.
2. This process is designed for clearly-stuck groups and not intended to be used for every decision. Neither is it intended to convey that a successful discernment means it is a unanimous decision. Rather, consensus means learning to disagree and remain united.
3. The process has been used with elders stuck on who to hire as a preacher, with two congregations co-sponsoring a church plant, and in working through apparent philosophic and traditional differences.
4. A good facilitator trained in group process will know how to make the necessary adjustments for a meaningful experience. The process should be adapted to varying context and needs.
5. This process takes time—generally, a minimum of 3-4 hours for the group meeting, and elements of the process

may have to be repeated. Rushing the process expecting good results is a recipe for increased frustration.

Next Steps

1. Pray for wisdom and growth in communal discernment.
2. Consider having everyone in your leader group read this chapter and approach to communal discernment. Follow up with a discussion.
3. Read one of the recommended books on Church Systems and share your top 7-10 learnings that apply to yourself and/or your group dynamic.
4. Share your list with other leaders and have them do the same. Compare and discuss.
5. Describe how decisions are made in your present leader group using these reflective questions—
 - What is going well?
 - What could be better?
 - What needs to be different?
 - What if . . .
6. What does your leader-group value based on the content of meetings, time, energy, and resources?
7. Make a list of the topics or areas of conflict that your group has postponed discussing and/or making a decision about. Create a chart and label each one related to the mission, growth, and/or health of the church as:
 - Urgent
 - Important
 - Not necessary

WORKSHEET

The Practice of Communal Discernment

Topic: What is the discernment question?

Levels of Discernment

- A. Biblical: What does the Bible say? The nature of God? What does God value?
- B. Pastoral: How will it impact the church? What is my level of anxiety?
- C. Personal: What is my personal viewpoint? If I wasn't a designated leader I . . .

A. _____ BIBLICAL:

(OPPOSED) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (SUPPORT)

My Rationale:

B. _____ PASTORAL:

(OPPOSED) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (SUPPORT)

My Rationale:

C. _____ PERSONAL:

(OPPOSED) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (SUPPORT)

My Rationale:

The vast majority of church leaders do not have a good process for making decisions and typically, are not patient or disciplined in following a process. Discipline and patience are essential for healthy decision-making. Granted, not every decision requires a process of this nature. But if you are stuck as a leader group and it is draining your spirit and any notion of moving forward, then why not try a different approach?

It is a process that has been utilized and tweaked each time it has been used. I look forward to hearing your experience with this process and how God is moving you forward for the sake of the kingdom.

May God bless you richly in leading God's people.