



By Dave Ferguson



REFLECTIONS

Four Secrets of Great Team-Based Leadership

There are some things you would never say out loud, even though you know they are true. If you uttered these secrets people would probably misunderstand you. Or maybe you'd decide they aren't really true after all. So you keep your mouth shut, and they remain secrets.

Fourteen years ago, five people—a childhood friend, a college roommate, a brother, a friend-of-a-friend and I—made up the team who pioneered the adventure called Community Christian Church (CCC). We started as a team partly because of a shared dream and partly because it sounded like a lot more fun doing it together than doing it on our own. And from the beginning when it was just the five of us until today where there are more than 3,000 of us at three campuses, CCC has always been led by teams.

The leadership team I'm a part of today—Jon Ferguson, Troy McMahon, Eric Bramlett and myself—is the finest team of which I've ever been a part. And during those 14 years there have been some things about these teams that I knew were true (I have a hunch we all knew they were true), but we never said them out loud. We might be misunderstood. We might be wrong. So we kept these as secrets.

However, now I'm more confident. I think these secrets are true, and I'm willing to risk being misunderstood. So I've decided to tell all! Here are four secrets of great team-based leadership:

The Secret About the Cause

"We are committed to the cause first and each other second."

Great leadership teams are always clear about the cause. A lot of other stuff may get fuzzy, but the cause is always very clear.

At CCC there is sometimes a lack of structure and policy, but the one clear thing is the cause. It's embodied in our mission statement: "Helping people find their way back to God by reproducing congregations, campuses, and churches that celebrate,

connect, and contribute to the dream of God."

Last week my assistant, Pat, got an e-mail from a pastor requesting a copy of our staff policy manual. Her answer: "Our policy is not to make policy." I love that! Why? Policy is what happens when we can't get people to do what we want them to do because people are not championing a clear cause. Policy occurs when the ethos of a church culture is weak and the cause is not compelling.

Why all this talk about cause? Because I believe our leadership team is committed to die for the cause of "helping people find their way back to God." And when I say "die" I'm not using hyperbole. The four of us who lead CCC today are willing to die for the cause, whether it is one day at a time or all at once.

We are committed to the cause first and each other second. This is scary to say out loud. That's why it's a secret. But the truth is that it's the cause that brings us together and keeps us together. It is when we put other things or other people before the cause that we compromise what God dreamed of in the church and in the Great Commission.

I believe this is at least 50 percent of what it takes to create great team-based leadership, an uncompromising loyalty to a clear cause. There is never a great lead team when the cause is not clear!

In Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith's great book, *Wisdom of Teams*, they make it very clear: "The primary objective of the team must be performance results (cause), not becoming a team." One of the great mistakes is forgetting that the cause is what creates community or team. Ask yourself, "Why do men always remember athletic teams or army platoons as the place where they experienced the most genuine community?"

Answer: because a clear cause created community. The cause of winning a game created a team. The cause of defeating a common enemy created a team.

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Why is it so hard for athletes to retire? Listen to them talk and you'll see it's not the money they miss as much as the team.

The Acts 2 church was also brought together by a clear cause. It was the cause called the Great Commission that brought about *koinonia* or community. That first great leadership team of apostles had a clear cause for which they were willing to die.

The Secret About Community

"We don't know when we are working and when we are playing."

I love the way Eric Bramlett describes working at CCC: "Working here feels like recess." I feel the same way. Sure, there are times we fight about who gets to go down the slide first; but it's still a playground, and it feels a lot more like recess than school. In my 14 years as a part of the leadership team at CCC I don't remember one day (literally) that I looked at my watch thinking, *When is it going to be 5 o'clock so I can leave work?* It sounds trivial, but being a part of the leadership team at CCC is just plain fun! Working and playing feel the same!

When we are looking for new staff, my teammates have been coached to consider the three C's of *character, competency, and chemistry*. For us, chemistry is always the first priority, because that's what draws someone into our church culture and draws us to them.

We have a chemistry test that a prospective hire must pass. We call it the "parking lot test." The "parking lot test" is comprised of one question we ask ourselves before we put someone on our staff team: "When we drive up, are we glad to see their car in the parking lot?" If we are excited about seeing their car and knowing we will find them inside, they pass—there is chemistry! If we feel our stomach sink knowing they are inside, they fail—no chemistry! All this is to say that there is a great chemistry with each of the people on our leadership team.

What contributes to the chemistry of a great lead team? First, complementary gifts help create the chemistry. Second, chemistry comes when we all buy

into a common strategy. And third, none of the four of us can imagine doing anything else. We all have had offers to do other things in other places for more money, but we just can't imagine doing anything else.

The Secret About Chaos

"We may look crazy to you, but there is a method to our madness."

When other churches visit and see the open office concept we use, where almost all of our 35 staff are in the same room with one another, they will often say, "How do you get anything done in the middle of this chaos?" When other teaching pastors find out that we write all our messages as a team of people from not only multiple campuses, but multiple churches using video conferencing, they say, "Oh, my style would never work in that environment." I used to be concerned that outsiders might think we are crazy, chaotic, or even out of control, but now I understand that as one of our secrets.

One of the secrets of a great leadership team is that in their relentless pursuit of the cause they become a community with unique characteristics according to how God made them. This may appear crazy or chaotic to the outsider, but there is a unique method to their madness.

These characteristics are often paradoxical. Here are some of the paradoxes you would see in our lead team:

Highly Collaborative AND Very Competitive—Every person in our lead team is very competitive. We want to win in basketball, and we want to win the argument. But at the same time we know if we are going to win our part of the world for Christ (back to the cause that creates community), this will take collaboration. So we collaborate on everything. I started to make a list of things that we collaborate on, then it hit me that the much shorter list would be those things on which we don't collaborate.

Very Compassionate AND Comfortable with Conflict—Patrick M. Lencioni, in his book, *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* tells us that healthy teams are comfortable with conflict. We are definitely comfortable with conflict—confronting, challenging, debat-

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ing, and sometimes yelling (and later apologizing). But, I also know that when I need a group to rally around me, they will be there for me. There is no doubt about it—my team loves me!

Loves Spontaneity AND Wants Accountability—“Lead with a yes” is a saying you hear from our leadership team. We love being flexible and spontaneous enough that we lead with a yes to new ideas. The new idea could be anything from going for shakes during our lead team meeting to starting a new service in a few weeks. We love leading with spontaneity and the “yes.” That spontaneity however is balanced by our desire (that might be a stretch—I think we just know we need it) for accountability. We want accountability for how we are doing versus the goals we set for ourselves a year ago. We want and expect accountability for the ministries we oversee. We want accountability for our budget areas.

To the outsider we may look like an overly competitive team that is constantly fighting about our goals. But come back next week, and we may look like this highly collaborative group in love with one another. To the outsider it might look crazy, but it’s just how God made us. And it works!

The Secret About Creating Culture

“We REALLY are going to change the world.”

It is the lead team more than any other team that will create the culture and the ethos for a church. When you have a lead team that is clear about the cause, willing to die for the cause, and where serving feels like recess, you have created a church cul-

ture where people start to believe that we *really* are going to change the world!

When people get wind of that kind of opportunity, tremendous sacrifices become normal. Tim, a leader in our church, came to us and told us that he would like to take early retirement and work for the church without a salary for one year. After that year was over he wanted us to evaluate him. If we felt he added enough value to our church, then we would hire him. If not, then he would find another job and continue as a leader in the church.

We said, “Sure!” (Talk about a deal you can’t refuse!) One year later, Tim proved himself so invaluable that we brought him on staff. Now he oversees

hundreds of unpaid servants and all of our ministry teams. I could tell you many stories like this.

Tremendous sacrifice is normal here. Why? Because of a belief (that starts with the lead team) that

this might just be the church that actually does change the world! There is a vibe in our church that we are up to something big and something special. This is not something that we talk about in a prideful manner; in fact we are very careful to make sure that God gets all the credit.

It starts with a lead team that is the microcosm of the rest of the church. They are very clear about the cause and willing to die for it. When they serve it feels like recess, and together they believe that they *really* are going to change the world!

OK, I’ve said the secrets out loud. What do you think? Do you agree, or am I just plain wrong?

In my 14 years here, I don’t remember ever thinking, *When is it going to be 5 o’clock so I can leave work?*

Dave Ferguson is the founding pastor of Community Christian Church, a multisite church with four locations that has grown in average attendance from 5 to more than 3,000 since its beginning 14 years ago. CCC empowers more than 400 volunteer leaders to oversee difference-making ministry throughout the western suburbs of Chicago. As a result, CCC was named one of 16 model small group churches in the United States by Serendipity Publishers and was highlighted in Carl George’s book *The Coming Church Revolution: Empowering Leaders for the Future*. Dave also serves as a founder and on the board of directors for the Institute for Community, whose mission is “to help people build quality relationships where you live and work through the power of genuine community.” After earning an M.A. from Wheaton (Illinois) Graduate School, Dave was the recipient of the Donald McGavran Award at the North American Christian Convention as the outstanding church planter of the year in North America. Dave lives in Naperville, Illinois, with his wife, Sue, and their three children, Amy (13), Joshua (10), and Caleb (6). In addition to enjoying his family and work, Dave also enjoys running, “any sport with a ball,” and reading. You can contact him at davef@communitychristian.org.