

Making a Place at the Table for Young Leaders

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In high school, I noticed a strange phenomenon. The freshmen got smaller every year. It was really weird. When my friends and I walked onto campus for the first day of our freshman year, we were legit high-schoolers, admittedly a little intimidated by the seniors, but plenty cool in our own right.

Not so with the punks that came in the next year. Something must have happened at the middle school to stunt their growth. None of the new ninth graders were anywhere near as big, smart, or mature as we had been the year before. And by the time I was a senior, the middle school was pumping out mental, physical, and emotional midgets.

As I said, it was really strange.

Of course, that's not what was happening. The freshmen weren't getting smaller, stupider, and less mature; we were getting older, more mature, and arrogant.

Fortunately for each incoming crop of freshmen, the seniors keep graduating, giving last year's freshmen, sophomores, and juniors an opportunity to spread their wings and fly. And sure enough, they always ended up flying a lot higher than the seniors would have guessed.

Unfortunately, in the church, it's a different story. The seniors never graduate. They also tend to hog the leadership table, shutting out the next generation. It's one of the main reasons why so many churches stop growing and lose their evangelistic touch (and cultural relevance) around the twenty-year mark.

Ironically, most churches are started by young eagles. But soon after getting their nest built—nicely appointed and fully furnished—they start to marginalize the next batch of young eagles, asking them to sit at the kids' table and wait for their turn at middle-aged leadership.

To counteract this natural tendency, I've made it a personal priority to make sure that our young eagles have a place at our leadership table. I see it as my role to enhance their influence within our church, making sure that they are supported, protected, and actually listened to. But I have to admit, this priority of mine is not always appreciated, especially by middle-aged eagles who think that tenure should be the primary determiner of influence.

I understand their reluctance. Young eagles can make a mess in the cage. They're impatient. They lack the wisdom that comes with experience. In short, they make the same dumb mistakes that the old eagles made when they first started out.

But that's not the real reason that most churches and leadership teams push young eagles out of the nest. The real reason is that leadership is a zero-sum game. One person's emerging influence is always another person's waning influence. So making room for the young eagles is a hard sell, especially to those who already have a place at the table.

I understand this resistance to granting young eagles a place at the older eagles' table. No one likes to have their influence or status diluted. It's painful. We all love the idea of servant leadership and putting others first—as long as no one actually cuts in front of us or starts treating us like a servant. But making room at the table (and stepping aside) has to be done. If not, a church will inevitably fall victim to the predictable death cycle when most churches stop growing, evangelizing, and making a mark. Whenever I find a church that has grown old, gray, and culturally out-of-touch—far more interested in protecting the past than creating the future—or one that starts to wonder, “What happened to all the young people and families that used to hang around here?” it's a sure sign that the young eagles have been shut out for a long time.

Now I'd be a liar if I said that protecting and promoting young eagles can be done pain-free. It's far easier in theory than practice. I don't like giving up my personal power, prestige, or preferences any more than the next guy. It's kind of a drag.

But young eagles are born to fly. It's their nature. It's how God made them. If they can't fly high in our church, they'll bolt and fly elsewhere. And sadly, when they do, they'll take most of the life, vitality, and the future of the church with them.

So, honestly now, how do you and your church respond to young eagles? Are they written off, tolerated, or celebrated? Are they encouraged to fly, or asked to clip their wings? I guarantee that your answer will determine your church's future.

Here are some of the key things I try to keep in mind when dealing with young eagles:

1. Young eagles need to be trained for both their ministry task *and* their spiritual life.

Early on in my ministry, I thought only in terms of spiritual development, which is obviously important. But Ephesians 4 says that the role of a spiritual leader is to also to train people for the actual work of their ministry; this includes the practical principles of leadership. I find most of us offer little training for this. We either assume our young eagles already know how to lead, or they will pick it up as needed. But the fact is, they don't know the ins and outs of pastoral or organizational leadership, and much of the most important stuff is counter-intuitive anyway. And assuming they can pick it up on the fly is a recipe for failure and discouragement.

2. Publicly validate their input.

I've found that it's incredibly important to use the power of my position and role to validate and actively support the ideas of young leaders. As a senior pastor, I have lots of organizational clout. I can use it to make sure that our young leaders are platformed and their new ideas are offered a fair shake, or I can use it to protect the status quo. Staff members and the congregation often look to me first to determine if a young eagle is worth following. My vocal and public support literally becomes the wind beneath their wings. On the other hand, my conspicuous silence or even subtle criticisms can clip their wings to the point that it becomes impossible to fly in our cage.

3. Back their plays.

This goes beyond merely supporting their new ideas to actually going out on the limb with them. It's a subtle but powerful difference. One says, "Let's try his idea." The other says, "This is our idea - let's try it."

It's one thing to grant permission; it's another to step out and take joint responsibility. Now, I'm not suggesting that we give our young eagles total freedom. But I am suggesting that even if we're not so sure an idea will work, if the price of failure is not too great, why not give it a shot? Who knows, they could be (and often are) right.

Enjoy them! Certainly, a nest full of young eagles can be a challenge. But in the long run, you'll find that the benefits they bring far outweigh the costs. Their energy, creativity, and inspiration are contagious. It's the stuff of the future.

The fact is, young eagles were born to fly. That's what God created them for. As the pastor of a local church, my only two questions are: (1) Will I help them fly higher or clip their wings? (2) Will I make room for them to fly in my cage or force them to fly elsewhere?