Trust and Your Relationship with Your Board
      Thoughts and observations by Gaylen Nagel

What would it be like if your board totally and explicitly trusted you? If they didn't question your motives or your every move? If you could initiate ideas or programs on your own without having to explain them several times or wait months for approval?

What would it be like if you totally and explicitly trusted your Board? If you knew their hearts and motives were good and sincere and you were assured that God could use them to enhance your leadership role? If you knew they were 100% supportive of you <u>all</u> the time irregardless if your ideas succeeded or failed; and that they never talked negatively about you in your absence?

In <u>High Impact Church Boards</u> Tim Addington wrote, "I would argue that two of the defining characteristics of churches worldwide are bureaucracy and control, often fueled by the third characteristic of mistrust. These dysfunctions of the church that are disempowering at every level, prevent individuals from freely carrying out responsibility and using their God-given gifts, and keep the church from being everything God intended it to be."

Addington added, "What lies behind the control that characterizes so many of our ministries? Often it is the dysfunction of mistrust – whether subtle or not: Congregations mistrust boards, so they insist that all or most decisions come back to them. Boards mistrust Senior Pastors, so they don't release them to lead. Boards mistrust staff members generally, and end up micromanaging their work. In turn, entire staff teams mistrust boards because they are not empowered, leading to the feeling that boards are "into" power.
      This culture of control and mistrust bleeds into how staff members work with volunteers in the church as well, often not fully releasing them into ministry but having a need to "manage" them (after all, we are trained and they are not). Mistrust breeds control. In turn, control feeds mistrust. It is an unhealthy cycle."

Patrick Lencioni wrote in his excellent book <u>The Five Dysfunctions of a Team</u>, "Trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Without it, teamwork is all but impossible." It is his premise that the absence of trust is the primary or core dysfunction of an unhealthy team. The absence of trust leads to fear of conflict, which leads to lack of commitment, which leads to avoidance of accountability, and which leads to inattention to results. In the church, the result we strive for is as many people as possible being discipled and reproducing themselves for the eternal glory of God. The realization that mistrust in our churches can short-circuit the results we all desire should stop us in our tracks.

L. Schaller and T. Keller have written about the increasing need for trust as a church grows in size. In the very small church everything stays within the family. If the church grows, the congregation by trust delegates some of the decisions to a select few (the governing body). As the church continues to grow, almost all the decisions, save the major or most significant, are made by the governing body. In a similar manner, the governing body, by trust delegates the daily activities to the staff. In large and very large churches, nearly all decisions other than general policy, vision, finances and facilities, and obviously restaffing the Senior or Executive Pastor positions are delegated to the staff (Senior Pastor). The key in the entire process is trust.

So if we are convinced that trust would empower us to more fully lead, serve, minister, or use our giftedness and passions as we ought – **then how do we develop trust?**

Addington further develops his discussion of "the dysfunction of mistrust" in his subsequent book, <u>Leading from the Sandbox: Develop, Empower and Release High Impact Ministry Teams.</u> In it he says, "Healthy individuals and teams practice three principles that directly contribute to a culture of trust: 1) I will choose to trust you unless you give me a reason not to; 2) I will assume your motives are right even when I disagree with you; and 3) I will be proactive in clarifying issues rather than assuming something to be true." He continues that discussion by identifying ten attitudes or actions that are "Trust Builders" and their counterparts that are "Trust Busters".

Craig Groeschel in his book <u>It: How Churches and Leaders Can Get It and Keep It</u> (he doesn't define "It" but he says you know when a church has "It" and when a church doesn't have "It") has a chapter titled "Unmistakable Camaraderie". In it he refers to teams with "It" as being made up of individuals who are committed to each other and who give each other refrigerator rights. He says "It" can be built into a team by 1) understanding the big picture; 2) having fun together; 3) getting (relationally) naked together; 4) celebrating wins; and 5)fighting hard behind closed doors. It is interesting to note that the Webster definition of camaraderie is "friendly familiarity and goodwill between comrades, good fellowship". Greoschel closes that chapter with the reminder that the early church in Jerusalem had "It".

After 31 years of lay leadership (20 plus years on elder boards and several terms of chairman of the elder board) in a growing evangelical church, I have witnessed the advantages of trust between staff and board and also the paralyzing impact of mistrust. Let me make some personal observations and recommendations:
- You can't assume that it already exists (however, I agree with Addington's principle that a "culture of trust" is preferred and should be developed);
- One's position, experience, or abilities do not dictate trust;
- The ongoing development of trust takes time and effort;
- It requires openness, a real desire to get to know each other's heart;
- It includes the ability and desire to see each other's good intentions; and
- It includes a commitment to work together (not control each other) toward a pre-eminent vision.

If you are a Senior Pastor and looking to build a higher level of trust with your board, I would suggest:
- A monthly lunch or breakfast with your board chairman. Your chairman probably will never be your best friend, but he must know and trust you and vice versa. Discuss ideas and plans with your chairman before going to the entire board; clarifying and perfecting those ideas and plans prior will have advantages. The chair person probably has the trust of the other board members; make sure the two of you are on the same team, going in the same direction;
- Rotate a monthly lunch or breakfast with your other board members;
- Occasionally do fun things together;
- Hold a annual board retreat, get out of town;

- Together read the books mentioned above or others about team building;
- Be involved in the selection process of board members; be sure they are mature, emotionally healthy, committed to your vision, have the ability to be a unifying factor (that doesn't mean a "yes man"), and are trustworthy;
- Don't ignore or pass off too lightly their thoughts, ideas, or opinions; if you don't really listen and respond, they probably won't either;
- Foster open, frank, and honest (but polite) discussion in your meetings; don't assume silence is the same thing as agreement;
- Worship, read scripture and really pray together (more than just the obligatory opening prayer of your meetings); its amazing how many boards don't do this; and
- Communicate, Communicate, Communicate; the more people are asked or expected to trust, then greater is the need for honest and frequent communication to avoid suspicion and the loss of a sense of belonging to or being a contributing part of the team.

If you are in a situation with a board member or lay leader where trust has been lost, make restoration of that trust a priority. Pray. Pray. Pray. Be sure you clearly identify your possible role in that loss; confession may be needed. Ask for a fair hearing and chance to explain your intentions. If you are encountering someone who is unwilling to restore or extend trust after your sincere attempts to do so and the situation has become a hindrance to the ongoing health of the church (possibly someone who vehemently disagrees or wants control) consider asking that person to step aside for the overall good of the church. If that is unacceptable, consider going to the entire board or congregation. In such situations, your attempts to restore the relationship and your desire for the health of the church must be clearly understood by all.

In summary, Stephen M. R. Covey wrote, "prioritizing trust – actively seeking to establish it, grow it, restore it, and wisely extend it – will bring personal and organizational dividends that far exceed any other path".