

Elders and Senior Pastor Relationship Evaluation Guide

Elders and Senior Pastors – A Complex Environment

It is no easy task to navigate the relationship of Elders¹ and Senior Pastor. The church is a complex environment that is different because of the nature of the pastoral and leadership role.

Some of the complexities and unique aspects are:

- The Senior Pastor is often ascribed an authority because of their position – they are seen as a spiritual leader
- The Senior Pastor develops deep relationships with people which often creates huge ripples in the church when they finish. This makes any decision to end a Senior Pastors' tenure difficult, which often leads to delay.
- The elders/board have Industrial Relations responsibilities like any employer to employee relationship – in one sense it's no different from any job and yet it is unlike any other job.
- We use the language of "calling" to a pastoral role. If God has orchestrated this then how do we evaluate and hold a leader accountable?
- How do you quantify performance in a ministry role where many of the outcomes are qualitative?
- The church voted the Senior Pastor in and yet the elders manage the pastor. How do the elders effectively manage their employee if the pastor claims a mandate from the church members?
- The Senior Pastor may be an elder, a peer of the other board members, yet also an employee.
- The Senior Pastor has embedded their entire life (family, friends, vocation, and house) in their role with the church. It's difficult for them to move on without uprooting everything which often delays decisions about finishing from both the pastor and the elders.

It's not surprising that most churches struggle to do this well.

The Elders < > Senior Pastor Spectrum

The Elders and Senior Pastor relationship sits along a spectrum in terms of where the balance of decision making and leadership of the church sits. Many churches may not even be aware of where they sit on this spectrum.

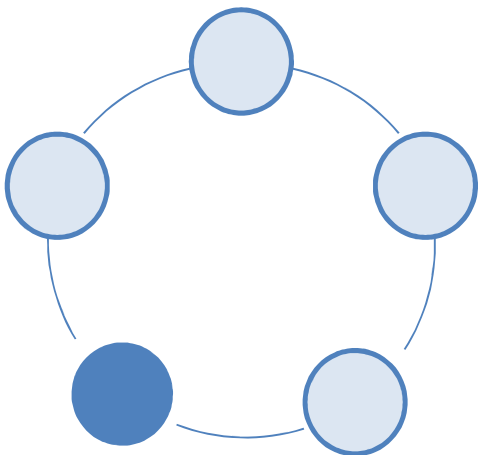


¹ Eldership or Board refers to the leadership/governance group that the Senior Pastor is accountable to in your church

Senior Pastor effectively leads everything and the Elders become passive:	Elders control all decisions and the Senior Pastor is constrained:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often occurs inadvertently when the pastor has been present for a long time and done a relatively good job. People enjoy the stability and general smooth running by a trusted leader. • Sometimes pastors seek to impose this model and try to sideline the elders and take all the decision making. • Often runs into problems when there is conflict or the pastor is removed or leaves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often occurs inadvertently because pastors come and go and elders perceive the need to take all leadership responsibility in order to “get things done” and provide consistency. • Sometimes elders seek to impose their view and develop a dysfunctional connection to the eldership role where they have to have things their way. • Can limit the leadership of the church and ultimately it may struggle to grow or be as effective as it could be with an empowered Senior Pastor.

Eldership as a Team

The biblical language around eldership is one of team where the elders together take responsibility for the overall health and spiritual leadership of the church. In this instance the Senior Pastor is part of a team, but has specific leadership responsibilities.



For an Eldership team to operate in harmony with their key leader (Senior Pastor) there must be a clear distinction between **governance** and **leadership** in the church. The following are key things to be clear about:

- Elders understand their role and the difference between when they have the authority to govern and when they are just a volunteer.
- The Senior Pastor is the “one agent” of the eldership who is empowered to lead the church.

- There is genuine clarity around the limits of the Senior Pastor's authority and scope of decision making.

Action Steps

To review the status and health of the Elders and Senior Pastor relationship, use the following checklist as a guide for thought, prayer and discussion.

1. Clarify your working relationship – developing Eldership as team

- Identify where the church is on the *Elders < > Senior Pastor* spectrum. What about this is a strength and what may need to change?
- Does your leadership have a clear understanding of the distinction between Governance (Elders work) and Leadership (Senior Pastor work)? Are the elders able to take off their Eldership "hat" when they are not in an Elders meeting?
- Is the Senior Pastor the "one agent" of the Eldership, charged with leading the church on behalf of the Elders? If not, how is the unity of leadership maintained in the church?

2. Empower your Senior Pastor – moving away from Elders controlling everything

- How is the Senior Pastor invited to provide input into shaping the vision and direction of the church?
- What is the process by which the Elders and Senior Pastor settle on the agreed vision/direction of the church?
- Do the resources of the church (finances, people, and property) line up with the agreed vision and are they put at the disposal of the Senior Pastor to use to achieve the agreed vision?
- Would the Senior Pastor feel that the elders are "with them" in the pursuit of their agreed vision or are they working alone?

3. Develop a plan to evaluate the Senior Pastor – moving away from the Senior Pastor leading everything

Identify your rhythm of evaluation:

- We have a set term for the Senior Pastor which allows for a natural point of evaluation
- We have a regular cycle of feedback and evaluation each year which captures the positive and growth areas of their work

Be clear about what success looks like:

- We have clearly written down our expectations of the Senior Pastor and what we want them to focus on in terms of ministry for the next season
- We provide straight-forward feedback from our performance reviews so the Senior Pastor understands areas they need to work on
- The strengths of the Senior Pastor are identified and they are encouraged to focus in these areas

Build a culture of evaluation:

- We regularly review the Eldership/Board to ensure they are performing their role well
- We have a mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness church in an holistic way – not just staff
- We do not wait until there is a problem before evaluating – it is built into the regular work of our team

Keep evaluation mission-focused, not personal:

- We work hard to communicate that performance short-comings matter because they are holding us back from what we believe God has called our church to do
- We understand that leadership inadequacies do not equate to personal failings
- We provide training in areas where we want our Senior Pastor to grow
- We actively look for alternative ways to solve a leadership gap rather than simply assume we need to replace the Senior Pastor