

Caring Supervision for the Professional Ministry Worker

By Ted Kober, Senior Ambassador



This article is from the series “Supervision Issues in Christian Ministry.”¹

“In my 25 years as a pastor, no one has done that for me. Thank you.”

I was taken aback the first time I heard this reaction from a pastor. I met him for the first time as he shared with me various happenings in his church. As we neared the end of our visit, I asked, “How can I pray for you?” He paused for a moment, and then he shared a significant concern regarding his family that he hadn’t mentioned before. I shared a Scripture verse and then prayed, including some things we discussed and the request he made. When I finished, I looked up to see tears in his eyes. He thanked me for this simple act of care.



I have heard that response numerous times since from professional ministry workers – pastors, teachers, principals, executive directors, ministry team leaders, and more. Many tell me that no one has taken the opportunity to share a devotion or even just pray with them.

The higher the position – including ecclesiastical supervisors, church body presidents, and CEOs – the more likely I hear, “Thank you. No one does that for me.”

One day I asked how I could pray for a professional ministry worker who served in a building with 600 employees. After praying, he commented, “I have worked in this office for six years, and except for my boss, no one has offered to pray for me. Thank you.”

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Actually, I was among those who failed to do that for my own pastor for a number of years, even as a church leader. Don’t get me wrong – I had prayed for him in private, but not in his presence. *He’s the expert*, I told myself, *and he will likely judge my prayer as inexperienced and unprofessional*. Who was I to pray for him? He’s the one who prays for me and my family when we have needs!

¹ See related articles at <https://www.aorhope.org/articles>. Illustrations are drawn from actual cases. However, names and details have been altered to protect confidences.

I distinctly remember the first time I offered to pray for my pastor. Inside, I was trembling with fear of man (see Proverbs 29:25). What would he think of my simplistic prayer? But his reaction surprised me. He thanked me and told me how unusual that was for him. His encouragement emboldened me. I no longer hold back, even if I think I will appear inexperienced. I have since learned that the leaders of Christian ministries often receive the least amount of any kind of spiritual care from their own supervisors. The assumption is that as professionals they don't really need spiritual care – at least from their supervisor. Nothing could be further from the truth. And as a ministry leader myself, I can attest to the blessing of being cared for by those in authority over me.

Who Ministers to the Ministers?

Who ministers to the professional ministry worker?² Who takes time to provide spiritual care when they have a crisis in their family? And who regularly holds them accountable in love? Officially, that leader's supervisor is responsible. Sadly, that responsibility often goes unfulfilled.

In some ministries, individual managers are tasked with supervisory responsibilities and know how to care for those under their authority. But for many senior pastors, Christian school principals, and ministry CEOs, their supervisor is a board or committee.³ Members who serve on supervisory boards most often desire to fulfill their responsibilities well. Yet, as a group they often neglect to provide quality care and supervision for their key ministry worker.

Lack of intention is often the culprit. Supervisors (including boards) need to learn, plan, and implement how spiritual care will be provided for their key leader. Without intentionality, it doesn't happen.

How does a supervisor provide spiritual care? Consider these acts of Christian love:

- Praying for the leader in his/her presence – not only during board meetings, but also between.
- Sharing a Scripture verse or devotion.
- Sending an encouraging note or making a phone call.
- Praying for the leader before surgery or visiting him when his family is hurting.

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With both individual and board supervision, poor human resource practices factors contribute to this neglect:

² When I use the term "professional ministry worker," I mean to include those who serve as pastors and other church staff, teachers and administrators in Christian schools, and key employees of other Christian ministries.

³ Hereinafter, I will simply refer to supervisory groups as boards, recognizing that some are committees working for boards (such as a personnel committee).

- The supervisor lacks knowledge in providing care and quality human resource management.
- The supervisor lacks the discipline to implement a well-thought out process.
- Some feel uncomfortable in implementing normal procedures for regular reviews.
- The supervisor may be blind to observing performance deficiencies.
- If the ministry worker is doing at least an okay job, many feel intentional care and supervision are unnecessary.

Supervisory boards also experience these factors:

- As volunteers who meet monthly or less, other urgent matters tend to dominate their meeting times. Human resource management responsibilities are given lower priority.
- Even if prior boards have provided care and implemented quality supervisory procedures, board membership turnover may result in new members neglecting their responsibilities.

When something goes wrong with a key ministry worker, supervisory boards and some individual supervisors attempt to make employee corrections in a crisis mode without having provided proper care and following policies. In fact, many ministry supervisors have no policies to guide them in human resource responsibilities.

A school board was pressured by parents to terminate a long-term principal. She had been accused of poor administrative practices for some time, but recently she had made a decision that angered many tuition-paying parents in the school. Another group of parents formed to show their support. The board was divided on how to respond, so they placed the principal on paid administrative leave while they conducted an investigation. Her paid leave continued for five months with no action by the board, which did not know how to conduct an investigation.

The principal's job description comprised of three sentences with no detail. She had served as a teacher for six years and principal for nine, but she never received a regular evaluation. Although previous boards had members who brought up parent complaints, the board never provided opportunity for an employee review. Her strengths and weaknesses were not identified, and the board neglected to establish professional growth goals or provide formal support.

Parents were divided over their opinion of the principal. Some threatened to take their children out of the school unless she was terminated. Others indicated that their children would attend another school if the principal was fired.

Because the board was likewise divided, no decision was made. Worse, during the administrative leave, no one from the board bothered to contact her. She felt abandoned and alone, wondering what if anything was happening with the investigation that could end her career.

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Thankfully, Christian mediation helped both board and principal work through the issues. Board members confessed their lack of care and godly supervision, and the principal

acknowledged her failures. The two sides forgave one another. By God's grace, an agreement was made for her release with some extended compensation. Because both principal and board communicated their agreement and sought support from others affected, parents on opposing sides backed away from their threats.

While the performance issue may have arisen regardless of the board's work, this board failed its fiduciary role in providing caring supervision for their key staff member.

As a reconciliation consultant, I have been called upon to mediate a number of conflicts involving supervision shortcomings. Some basic human resource management practices can avoid employment crises or at least minimize their effect on the ministry. Moreover, applying these practices can strengthen your key employee's effectiveness, bless the rest of the staff, and improve the quality of the ministry services provided.

- Document employment expectations in job descriptions, employment contracts (or call documents), and policy manuals.
- Provide annual employee performance reviews and maintain records in a secure location.
- Between annual reviews, document supervisory concerns shared with the staff member.
- Provide intentional care for the key employee and his/her family throughout the year, regardless of employee performance.

Employment Expectations

Who would play a baseball game without agreed upon rules?
How would you drive a car in a society with no driving regulations?

It's sound's ridiculous, right? Yet, many Christian ministries employ gifted people without written guidelines to confirm expectations of employer and employee. One of the ways to provide care for a key employee begins with defining mutual expectations.

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Written job descriptions feature several key components:

- Title of position.
- Summary objective of the position.
- Identification of direct supervisor and accountability.
- List of tasks and responsibilities, including descriptions of relationships with others.
- Delegated authority to accomplish tasks and responsibilities.
- Qualifications for the position.
- Special demands of the job (extraordinary conditions applicable to this position).
- Compensation including benefits.

Job descriptions should be given to prospective candidates for the position and reviewed regularly. They establish the basic expectations between the employer and employee. The job description sets the standard for performance reviews. Failure of an employer to provide a written job description demonstrates a lack of care for the employee and can lead to significant unmet expectations. In other words, it can lead to conflict that may result in a painful separation.

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Written contracts (or call documents) describe terms of employment. As employer and employee agree to a working relationship, this agreement sets forth basic terms of employment.

Proper human resource policies play an important role in supporting a successful organization. These policies include employment and work policies, work schedules, guidelines on performance evaluations, and information on remuneration and employee benefits. They outline rights and procedures for employer/employee relationships that promote a healthy workplace.

Often unwritten assumptions are made that with a Christian employer and Christian employee, standard written documents found in for-profit companies or larger ministries are not necessary. Sadly, this leads to deficient management practices that show a lack of care for the staff. It can also give rise to significant legal liabilities.

Annual Performance Evaluations

Another failure among Christian employers includes the lack of performance evaluations. Annual meetings with key employees provide opportunities to reinforce quality performance and discuss areas for growth. Further, if the supervisor doesn't provide regular performance reviews on key staff members, it exemplifies a poor management practice that is often replicated throughout the organization.

The lack of performance evaluations may seem like a relief or even a complement to some. But in reality, it is just the opposite. It communicates a lack of concern for a key staff member and the ministry as a whole. The annual review should be a time of encouragement and reinforcement.

I find that leaders in ministry often struggle with guilt or feelings of inadequacy, even when they do their jobs well. As Christians, they strive to work hard to serve the beneficiaries of the ministry as well as employees and members. Many leaders realize that there are more needs than they can meet, and this can lead to discouragement and a sense of inadequacy. Leading ministry organizations can be lonely. If the supervisor neglects to give positive reinforcement, leaders can fall into depression or burn out trying to do more.

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Key employees that receive little or no feedback from their supervisors are left to themselves for evaluation. Whether the employee is doing well or not, the lack of official review insinuates

endorsement of all decisions. In cases where improvement is needed, an employee continues serving without understanding what is deficient. Although informal correction may be suggested, the lack of formally addressing an issue leaves the impression that the employee has no need of change of direction.

When a supervisor finally becomes exasperated by the poor performance, or when outside influences pressure the supervisor to take action, the employee is taken by surprise. Ill-will is created throughout the organization as termination occurs.

Correction between Reviews

Certain situations may arise where correction is needed between reviews. The supervisor may become aware due to a complaint or through observation.

The worst thing a supervisor can do is ignore the situation and hope it goes away. This not only can lead to the issue being repeated, but it also represents a lack of Christian love for that servant. Note how God views discipline and the absence of it:

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.... If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons (Hebrews 12:6, 8 ESV).

Moreover, a supervisor who fails to address poor performance of its ministry leader betrays his fiduciary responsibilities. The entire ministry suffers when a leader is allowed to continue unacceptable behavior without correction.

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But note that a conscientious supervisor will not wait until a problem occurs before communicating feedback to its ministry leader. Correction should not be the first contact between annual reviews or board meetings. The caring supervisor supports and encourages regularly *before* a problem arises. That way correction can take place *in the context* of loving care, not just as an authoritarian threat.

The board hired Jake with great expectations. His interview showed great promise, and the board was confident that their ministry was in good hands. From the board's perspective, things went well (or, at least without crisis) for the first 14 months. The board held their regular meetings with Jake, receiving reports and commending his work in general. But no one from the board ever contacted him between meetings.

Early on Jake began to experience problems he had not anticipated. He was challenged by unpleasant surprises in improper accounting practices. He inherited a staff that was inexperienced and untrained. Then, near his first-year anniversary, his wife was diagnosed with cancer, and a teenaged son was hospitalized from a serious car accident. Although he reported work concerns and personal hardships to the board, no one reached out to him.

Complaints began to be conveyed to the board about Jake's handling of employees in the first couple of months of his second year of service. (The board did not have a policy directing employees first go to their direct supervisor.) One staff member had been terminated, and two

others had been disciplined. When the grievances reached the board, they called an emergency meeting with Jake. They expressed their displeasure with his recent actions and placed him on notice that unless corrections were immediately implemented, he would be terminated. Jake chose to resign instead.

The board failed to care for their new employee. They neglected to minister to him before the complaints were reported, even though Jake had reported both ministry and personal challenges. The board's lack of policy and following Scriptural teachings (e.g., directing employees to first go directly to the one with whom they disagreed in Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-16) was the board's breakdown. As a result, many suffered hurt including Jake and his family, the staff, and those benefiting from the organization.

Training of the Supervisory Board

Boards made up of highly competent people often act in incompetent ways. Often, people committed to the organization's mission and gifted in management agree to serve on boards. Yet, serving together as a board, they sometimes act ineffectively.

Boards can be advisory, managerial, or governing. Advisory boards have no authority but only provide counsel to the staff. Managing boards work best in situations where there are few if any staff, and they actually serve in staff roles. Governing boards serve well when an executive leader is employed to manage the organization including carrying out daily operations. Board members may begin their terms with different understandings on what role their board is authorized to serve. With such different perspectives, conflict is inevitable.

I find that in Christian ministry many board members have never received training for their position. They may be experienced as a manager, business owner, or another type of leader. While these backgrounds can provide wisdom, serving on a board requires its own training and experience. Board policy can establish procedures that guide present and future members in their work.

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Board training is especially important for governing boards which have fiduciary responsibilities for supervising the key leader of an organization.

Governing board members benefit from learning some key principles for their service:

- Understanding the distinction between governance and management to avoid micromanagement.
- Committing to a focus on “big picture” responsibilities such as establishing vision.
- Learning to exercise authority together as a board and not as individuals.
- Governing by policy, delegating daily operations to the key executive leader.
- Providing caring supervision for the key leader of the organization.

I was appointed by the governor to chair the newly formed Montana Consensus Council. The purpose of this organization was to build consensus on policies affecting natural resources. Since

Montana's resource issues impacted numerous states, seven native American reservations, and Canada, the mission was immense. Moreover, communities were deeply divided over the issues.

The governor appointed eleven board members who came from different interest groups, including agriculture, utility, extraction industries, environmental groups, native reservations, and recreationists. Board members came to the first meeting expecting to advocate for their special interest. Some actually viewed fellow board members as enemies to be defeated.

We spent the first two board meetings reviewing our role as a governing board and learning how to function together. Using a policy governance model, I led the group in adopting a system and policy manual that would keep board members out of daily operations and focused on our mission. While different members held strongly opposing views on natural resource management, everyone agreed to work as a governing board, supervising our well-qualified CEO and focusing on the mission of bringing communities together for developing policy. We delegated the carrying out of the mission to our CEO, and he successfully brought together many communities for building consensus. We learned how to provide caring supervision for our key leader as a board, and we avoided temptations of micromanagement and assuming individual authority.

But without training, orientation, and policies to guide us, this organization would never have succeeded in its mission.

The process worked so well that by the end of our first two years of state funding, our board members together went to the state legislature to seek ongoing funding. People who initially saw themselves as opponents now joined as partners, collaborating for a common cause. But without training, orientation, and policies to guide us, this organization would never have succeeded in its mission.

Church boards, school boards, and other non-profit boards can all benefit from learning how to work together as a team and how to provide caring supervision for their key staff member.

Consider how you can provide caring supervision for those under your authority.



The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica:

We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brother, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15 ESV).

He also pronounced this blessing:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 ESV).

Leadership Training and Resources

Ambassadors of Reconciliation provides a wide array of training and resources to equip those who supervise ministry leaders. For example:

- *Built on the Rock: The Healthy Congregation* by Ted Kober (Concordia Publishing House, 2017). Learn how you can strengthen the spiritual health of your church. This book provides guidance for leaders and leadership boards.
<https://www.aorhope.org/product-page/built-on-the-rock-the-healthy-congregations>
- *Built on the Rock Leader's Pack* (AoR, 2018). 25 years in the making, this comprehensive resource includes 400 pages of consultation and teaching material. Church leaders will be equipped through teaching on spiritual leadership as well as governance. Additional features include:
 - Sample constitution and bylaws
 - Sample policy manuals for elders, church council, and school board
 - Flash drive with reproducible contents of teaching and sample documents<https://www.aorhope.org/botr-leaders-pack>
- *Leadership Training and Consultation*. Based on extensive experience working with leaders of churches, schools, and other ministries, AoR has developed training to equip lay leaders and professional ministry workers to be more effective and productive in their vocations. We offer standard and custom training and consultation in the following areas:
 - *Spiritual Lay Leadership Training and Consultation*:
<https://www.aorhope.org/sllt>
 - *Structuring the Healthy Congregation Training and Consultation*:
<https://www.aorhope.org/governance-seminar>
 - *Policy Governance for Boards of Directors Training and Consultation*:
<https://www.aorhope.org/leadership-training>
- AoR also provides extensive resources and training to equip leaders in conflict coaching, mediation, and adjudication. <https://www.aorhope.org/practicums>

Also check out the book *Holding Up the Prophet's Hand: Supporting Church Workers* by Bruce Hartung (Concordia Publishing House, 2011).

For more information, see www.aorhope.org
or call Ambassadors of Reconciliation at 406-698-6107.

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