

The Fabric of Leadership

Moody's President Spells Out Important Leadership Practices

By Sarah Loehndorf

The same man who once said, "It takes a changing life to change a life," is living up to his word. During the past two decades, Joe Stowell, while serving as the president of Moody Bible Institute (MBI), Chicago, Ill., has led the organization to record application and enrollment levels, developed Moody Online, overseen the addition of four new buildings to the campus, and expanded the broadcasting network from 11 to 33 stations.

But for the man who has helped transform the world around him with his countless books, radio shows and leadership, it's time for change. His resignation is effective the end of this month.

He said he knew it was time to move on when his heart was 'relentlessly' urging him to spend the next season of his life and ministry singularly devoted to the preaching and teaching of God's Word. When expressing his concern to the board, they initiated an administrative restructuring, cutting back his administrative tasks. "But once you've offloaded as much of the administrative stuff as you can, there's still an 8,000-pound gorilla on your desk with responsibilities only the president can fulfill," he said.

Stowell recently accepted the role of teaching pastor at Harvest Bible Chapel, which has locations in Rolling Meadows, Elgin and Niles, Illinois. "At this point in my life, I'm far more energized for teaching and preaching than administrative duties, so the opportunity to serve in this way at Harvest Bible Chapel is a gift from God," he said.

When asked to reflect on his years with MBI, sharing the key lessons learned on leadership, he was quick to say, "Leadership highly depends on solid relationships, trust and process. If relationships are crumbling and people wonder about your integrity, and your process is faulted, you're going nowhere."



Joe Stowell

Building Solid Relationships

Stowell said one of the most important things managers can do is build solid relationships with their employees. For him that means not just with the ones he sees every day in the office, but throughout his entire organization of more than 600 people.

"The leadership pyramid, with the manager at the top and the employees clustered at the bottom, is skewed," he said. "The people who make it work, that broad area at the bottom of the pyramid, ought to be on the top. We need to get to know all our staff."

An effective practice at Moody involves a weekly prayer bulletin that's circulated throughout the staff. Oftentimes, Stowell will talk with an employee he doesn't know well, based on what he's read in the prayer bulletin.

He recommends this practice as a way to build community within the organization. A periodic email to all employees from the

president is also a great connecting tool, particularly if it's not about some policy reminder. And, a friendly greeting as you pass people in the hall can mean a lot, particularly if you remember their names.

"Distance tends to create distrust," he said. "And that's harder to bridge in larger organizations."

Trust Is a Two-Way Street

"Trust doesn't come immediately, it takes time," he explains. At MBI, he's watched the trust levels soar and falter. MBI has been a finalist in the Best Christian Places to Work Survey, which provides empirical data for employee satisfaction. The survey, conducted by Best Christian Workplaces Institute (BCWI), includes a trust index which analyzes trust levels between employees and their managers.

Stowell said he wasn't happy with Moody's recent score in that area. "The survey was like a mirror for us," he said. "Just

like it says in James (1:23-24)—you need to look in the mirror and then not forget what you see.” After seeing the results, Stowell said he had to ask himself if there were things in his leadership that would cause distrust.

In the previous year, MBI had to cut a significant amount of jobs as it discontinued several of its programs and reconfigured others. Among the decisions was the difficult move to discontinue *Moody Magazine*, which had been a 100-year-old tradition.

Change that includes laying people off has a high potential for interrupting a sense of trust. Job cuts tend to create fear, and fear grows in the absence of information. Cutbacks may also unintentionally communicate a lack of compassion, and even the perception that leaders don't know what they're doing. In sensing this, Stowell made an intentional effort to listen carefully to employees, while at the same time trying to clearly communicate what was happening.

It was then he implemented a plan to reconnect with groups of key employees. He met with these groups during a series of lunch meetings and leadership team meetings, where he asked them to be open and honest, telling him what they'd like to see changed, and where MBI had problems.

“An organization can't love people,” he said. “It's the people in your organization who bring love to the table. It's all about relationships and being close enough to create relationships. It's the leader who must model that. Trust is a two-way street. Do employees feel you trust them to get their work done?” he asked.

“Trust is easy to lose and very hard to regain,” says Al Lopus, BCWI president. “Joe's emphasis on the importance of trust in leadership also coincides with our research. The most important factor in building effective organizations is in establishing a high degree of trust

among the various levels of employees. Joe's example in building trust through relationships and having a servant's heart are good lessons for us all to learn,” say Lopus.

The Leader's Fabric

“If we're going to lead our team on to God's agenda,” Stowell explains, “it's not really about the principles of leadership as much as it is about the character fabric of the leader. Many people who are highly gifted in leadership and management know all the principles, read all the books and go to all the seminars, yet end up crashing.”

It happens, he suggests, because leaders don't pay enough attention to who they are. “Leaders fail because at some point they cease being a follower of Jesus Christ, failing to be an example of a true believer. It's a matter of progress, not perfection, in letting Christ build our character.” If the leader has enough character to breed respect in people's lives, they'll be willing to come along with him or her and join God's agenda.

A leader's faith will help people bond with God. “Do your people know how much you rely on God in your life?” he asks. “Do you pray about everything? Do you talk to your people about praying? Do they see you as someone who's unshakable? And most importantly, when your shadow as a leader is cast over the organization and people look to the source of that shadow, do they see Jesus?”

Where's Your Personal Identity?

Even with all the books, radio messages, speeches and more, Stowell says he's worked hard to ensure that his position as president of MBI hasn't gotten in the way of his calling. Many leaders have a difficult time separating their jobs from their personal identity. Staying humble and sane, he warns, is an important aspect of leading a Christ-

5 Important Leadership Practices

By Joe Stowell

- Build solid relationships with your people, getting to know all your staff, not just the senior management team.
- Develop trust, realizing it's a two-way street where your staff needs to feel they can trust you, and that you trust them.
- Make sure you give your employees an active part in the planning and development process of the programs and activities they're going to help implement.
- Be real to your staff, letting them know the leaders in upper management are human and capable of making mistakes. And when you're wrong, admit it and seek forgiveness.
- Make sure your identity is in the right place, in Christ, and not in your position.

filled enterprise. A lot of applause can come because of your position, not because of who you are, he adds. “Positions come and go, but I can't validate my personal identity in being president of Moody. My calling is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. That's where my identity is.”

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