

NONSTANDARD DEVIATIONS

INSPIRATION AND DESPERATION

By Michael Nielsen

MY WARD NOW has a new bishopric. As the previous trio had served in their callings for five years, the change had been looming on the horizon for months. It seems that after five years, most bishops have endured nearly all of the blessings they can stand, so God inspires the stake president to replace them.

In my ward's case, it happened rather strangely. The stake president wanted strict secrecy and so instructed the bishop-to-be and his wife not to tell anyone. Apparently that goal was achieved, because both of the outgoing bishop's counselors were away on vacations that had been planned for weeks. The stake president managed to telephone the one who continues as a counselor in the new bishopric. But the other counselor was released in absentia and learned of it from his children, who were away at college and heard from friends here at home.

Obviously, this is a less-than-ideal way to learn about being released from a calling. After all, he didn't get the reward of seeing our congregation's perfunctory "raising of the right hand" to thank him for his good service. At least the bishop was in town, so he could hear directly from the stake president that he was being released. There were other annoyances at how the transition was handled, but it's past and best forgotten.

As happens in all wards, many members had begun to speculate about the change before it happened. Who? When? Questions like this were discussed in the foyer, hallways, and elsewhere.

THERE is a saying that "all politics is local." Maybe the same is true with church leadership. For the average Latter-day Saint, a bishop's actions have a more immediate impact than do those of the stake president, who in turn typically creates

more of an effect than do general Church leaders. When something extraordinary happens, such as the 1978 change in the priesthood policy, or when a new temple in your city is announced, the president of the Church affects the typical member's religious life. But for better or worse, local Church leaders affect my life more than do general ones.

So, what makes a leader effective? Classic books on organizational behavior often suggest that leaders have the most success when they match their style to the situation. For example, some situations demand a focus on the task at hand, while others require more attention to the people involved.¹ Another view emphasizes differences in the style of leadership, such as how autocratic or collaborative the leader is, and how well that style matches subordinates' needs.² In other words, leadership is not "one size fits all."

Theories like these are sometimes applied to religious organizations. One example is found in *Prophetic Charisma*, by Len Oakes.³ According to Oakes, the style of leadership needed in a small, new religious movement is charismatic and energetic; more established religions need stability and predictability.

We can see this in LDS Church leadership. The early years of the Church were marked by significant and rapid changes in doctrine and practice. People had easy access to the prophet and other general authorities. Men went to conference wondering whether they would be called to leave their wives and children behind in order to serve a mission. Lesson materials were unstandardized. Polygamy came and went.

But with the passage of time and church growth, access to general authorities has diminished to the point that we're now asked *not* to contact them. Announcing the thousands of new mission calls in general conference is unthinkable. Correlation has

standardized and homogenized our lessons. Whenever the opportunity arises, the Church now seems to distance itself from polygamy. As an institution, the Church has changed through the years, just as any organization would be expected to change from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

What about our leaders? Many tasks Church leaders faced early in the Church's history are quite different from those they face now. We no longer have mass migrations. The Church has a good relationship with the government and does not face bankruptcy nor the confiscation of its assets. No army is marching to Salt Lake City. Now the Church needs administrators skilled at managing buildings and budgets, people familiar with purchasing shopping malls and the like. I mean no disrespect by this remark, but with just a few exceptions, the general Church leaders now seem nearly indistinguishable from one another, like distant figureheads. I am not saying that this is good or bad; it just is.

Even though bishops and other local leaders have different personalities and interests, there is great pressure toward sameness among them. Correlation has left us with not only with interchangeable lesson manuals but also, sometimes, interchangeable leaders. Whether it is how to conduct an interview, how to bare (or bear) one's testimony, or how to dress, leaders and other Church members feel pressure from both ends of the LDS hierarchy to do it *the* right way. That's too bad, because leading a ward is a demanding and complex job. And as in most things, there is more than one way to achieve good results.

A friend who served in a bishopric once let show some of the challenges that go with local leadership positions. While announcing some callings and asking for people's sustaining vote, he neglected to ask if there were any objections to the new callings. When reminded, he said something along the lines of, "If there are any objections to these callings, raise your right hand. But this has been a hard set of callings to get filled, so please don't object unless you would like to serve in these positions yourself!" He said it with his wonderful, dry sense of humor, but I think the entire congregation knew that it was, indeed, hard to staff positions in a small and growing ward.

J. Golden Kimball told many colorful stories about the trials of serving in ward leadership positions. He once went to Cedar City to call a new bishop, without knowing beforehand whom to call. He looked out at the congregation and picked Will Corey, an inactive man. Asked later about his selection of



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Corey, Golden replied “Well, I know he isn’t a church man, but I tell you something: I wanted a man who could kick the hell out of those people, and he looked like just the sort to do it.”⁴ Corey is said to have served as bishop for twenty-five years. Either he did a good job, or he wore out his boots from all of the kicking.

As another “Golden” anecdote illustrates, local leaders can cause tremendous problems. Kimball went to Spring City to help the ward there. It seems the Relief Society president was basically running the ward. Things went so far that she told the bishop whether or not someone should be called to the Sunday School because they failed to return borrowed items. Apparently, the bishop did enough of her bidding that people’s complaints alerted Church headquarters. After talking with the bishop and Relief Society president, Kimball took care of things in sacrament meeting.

At the close of the meeting Golden was called to speak. “I want to ask you all a question. Would you please show by the raise of hands: How many of you have ever had a sliver in your ass?”

One little girl who’d recently gotten one going down a slippery slide raised her hand. Slowly other people started raising theirs.

Good—you know you need somebody else to help you take it out. You can’t do it by yourself. Well, that’s why I’m here. You have a sliver in your ass, brothers and sisters, and I’m here to help you take it out.

Now, all who can release Sister Brown as the Relief Society president, would you do so by the usual sign? Are there any opposed? Good. Thank you.⁵

I WAS reminded of this issue of leadership styles in a conversation with a friend from my ward. While catching up on what was new, he mentioned that the advice he’d received years ago from a particular bishop had really helped him get through some tough times.

“Really?” I thought to myself. While that same man had been bishop, I had attended my meetings in spite of him. To me, he represented what is sometimes called the Nazi Mormon who zealously, rigidly, and dogmatically applies rules to all situations. In many ways he struck me as an authoritarian, eager to hold bishop’s courts to sit in “righteous” judgment of others, substituting hurt for Jesus’s message of help and healing.

He had presided at my daughter’s baptism. Many tears flowed in the room that day, especially from me. The bishop commented about the tears of joy and the strong spirit that was obviously present. What he didn’t know was that my tears were from a conflict I felt. I didn’t want to baptize her into a church where the bishop made me feel so unwelcome. Others’ tears that day may have been expressions of happiness. Mine were angst.

Hearing my friend describe the good things he learned from that same bishop reminded me that needs differ greatly within a ward as well as from one ward to the next. I’m glad to know that our former bishop helped at least one of my fellow ward members.

Do you ever wonder whether it is inspiration or desperation that determines who is called to a given position? J. Golden Kimball seems to have

sided with *inspiration* in at least one instance. When Reed Smoot was called to be an apostle, Golden told him, “You truly were called of God, Reed, because no one else would have thought of you.”⁶ On the other hand, Kimball’s encounter with Will Corey might illustrate *desperation*.

Whatever the reasons, there often is little surprise when a calling is announced. Maybe this is because inspiration usually works in predictable rather than in mysterious ways. Or maybe it is because God leaves people to their own judgment more often than we might realize. I don’t claim to know the answer to this question, but it seems to be one worth pondering.

NOTES

1. Fred E. Fiedler, *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).
2. Victor H. Vroom and Phillip W. Yetton, *Leadership and Decision Making* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973).
3. Len Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Perspectives* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997). See my review, “What Makes a Prophet?” in *SUNSTONE*, March 1999, 71–73.
4. James Kimball and Pat Bagley, *More J. Golden Kimball Stories* (Salt Lake City: White Horse Books, 2002), 110.
5. James Kimball and Pat Bagley, *J. Golden Kimball Stories* (Salt Lake City: White Horse Books, 1999), 47.
6. *Ibid.*, 57.



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