

Six Simple Suggestions for Improving Financial and Operational Efficiency

Have you become prey to a common epidemic facing church administration and finance teams? There is a noticeable and consistent trend for business administrators or the finance and accounting teams to be over-worked, overwhelmed, and in some cases a little underappreciated. Although the nature of accounting and finance is inherently detailed, there are factors that compound the issue in an organizational setting and exacerbate it in a ministry setting. Also, in a growing church it is easy to remain behind the curve of anticipating work load and staffing needs.

God designed ministries to function in a way that allows them to serve people effectively. The suggestions below can help alleviate some common problems in ministry and enable your organization to operate more efficiently.

1. Volunteers or employees serving in a financial capacity should have the competency to do so. It takes a special skill to handle the finances of an organization. Yet in some churches, finances are managed by kind-hearted members or volunteers who have a heart to serve but lack the competency or aptitude to do so properly and effectively. This causes waste and creates additional work.

Moses chose *skilled* leaders to do the work of judging cases (see example below). David chose *skilled* musicians to sing in the temple (1 Chronicles 25:6 - 7) and his son Solomon chose *skilled* craftsmen to construct the temple (2 Chronicles 3 - 4).

Volunteers are helpful and provide great donated services that your organization would otherwise have to pay for. However, if they are not skilled in performing certain finance functions, it is not appropriate for them to assist in those roles.

2. Delegation is very important. Many administrators have the mentality that if something needs to get done they need to do it themselves, so they neglect to delegate. If we approach everything in this manner, however, we deprive another person of growth, development, and the ability to use their gifts — and create the impossible burden of trying to run an organization while also performing the day-to-day

functions. The lack of delegation is an age-old problem dating back as far as Moses. Exodus 18:13 - 24 tells us how Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, saw that Moses sat all day judging cases for the children of Israel. Jethro told Moses to appoint capable men as officials over the people and have them serve as judges, with only difficult cases coming to Moses. Otherwise, Moses would get worn out. Management via delegation is the most effective, productive long-term approach.

3. Train, nurture, and encourage, because this is beneficial. Staff needs to be nurtured, trained, and developed, but managers sometimes refrain from upfront teaching because it takes time. If work tasks are explained ahead of time and the necessary background provided, your staff will be equipped to “own” and complete a job quicker and better. When a person does not have the knowledge necessary to complete a job and see the big picture, it takes longer and items could be overlooked. The time “saved” up front actually ends up adding more time to the project. It's also important to encourage staff. When King Hezekiah called the Levites into service before the Lord in the temple, it was said that he “spoke encouragingly to them” (2 Chronicles 30:22). Another biblical example is Moses' encouragement to Joshua to be strong and courageous because he was the one to go and lead the people into the Promised Land. Training and encouragement are intangible but will go far in getting a project done.
4. Cast a financial vision to ministry leaders. Sometimes program-oriented ministry leaders tend to forget the great value “back office” functions bring to the ministry. This is a common, unintentional problem, so it is a good idea to provide your ministry leaders with a financial vision and an occasional friendly reminder. Let's take the example in the Book of Ezra. When King Cyrus sent the Israelites out of exile and back into Jerusalem to build the temple, he gave them gold, silver, and articles for the temple. Notably, the gold, silver, and articles were given to Mithredath, the treasurer (Ezra 1:7- 8). This story shows that it was important to build the temple but also very important

that the resources to do so were placed in the most capable hands. When the Israelites finally arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra told them, “You as well as these articles are consecrated to the Lord... guard them carefully until you weigh them.” (Ezra 8:28 - 29) This powerful reminder shows the value of carefully safeguarding the resources we have been given to build a program or ministry.

This is often said and often preached, but not always put into action. When back office functions are sufficiently supported, the organization will have the resources to ensure program money is used efficiently and effectively. There will be increased waste if there is not adequate support to monitor funds. It’s important to remember that almost everything has a financial impact.

5. Have a contingency plan to deal with turnover. Quite a bit of stress is caused by turnover within administrative and finance functions. Regardless of who leaves, payroll still needs to get done, deposits need to be recorded, and vendors need to be paid. Yet while turnover is disruptive and stressful, hardly anyone plans for it. The general reaction is to see how the department can cope financially and pull together to split up the work after turnover has occurred. While that is a necessary short-term solution, it is not viable in the longer term. Your organization should have at least a mental plan — or better, a written plan — for how to navigate turnover before it happens. Both a short-term plan and longer-term plan should be sketched out. While this won’t prevent the pain of staff turnover, it will allow for better navigation and less time strategizing in the midst of the battle.
6. Be armed with an overall vision for your role and the finance administration of the church. Many church administrators seem to forget that God has called us to a Sabbath day of rest. Have a vision for a taking a Sabbath every week. This will provide you with the rest and reflection you need for creating a larger vision of implementing the suggestions above and getting out of the never-ending cycle of tasks. Vision drives and prompts us to work in accordance with the plan.

In summary: cast vision, get the right people, always have a plan, and never accept an endless, insurmountable stream of processing and reporting as the norm. Although we are called to serve, God has also called us to rest and be in a place where we are able to serve.

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