

Principle 1: *Set boundaries.*



All leaders, including pastoral leaders, have an ethical responsibility to set appropriate professional boundaries. Unfortunately, the media is filled with scandal headlines and stories of grave harm done to individuals when leaders violate these boundaries, or act inappropriately or immorally when boundaries are too permeable.

In order to ensure the safety and well-being of patients, most medical schools require physicians to take a modern version of, or something similar to, the Hippocratic oath. This oath is a pledge of their commitment to do no harm whenever it is possible to avoid it and to work on behalf of the well-being of their patients. Leaders in ministry have a similar and sometimes a more powerful influence over those they lead because they can be perceived as the direct representative of God. Therefore, it might be appropriate to require all pastoral leaders to take a similar oath. Failure to keep that promise would be sufficient reason to remove someone from ministry.

Boundaries are the limits set by what is ethical for a person in a leadership position. They serve as a demarcation point. Any behavior that exceeds these boundaries is inappropriate. This is especially true when there is a violation of emotional, sexual, or genital boundaries by a leader who holds a differential of power.

Some Church leaders have trouble setting personal boundaries. They believe they are acting Christ-like when they set no restrictions on their availability to those they are serving. This is a misrepresentation of the Jesus portrayed in the gospels. Jesus often set limits even when faced with extremely needy individuals.

Four Reasons Why Boundaries Are Violated

Rationalization

Church leaders with a diminished sense of self-knowledge and self-awareness frequently rationalize inappropriate behavior. They attempt to justify what they have done, rather than to admit their inadequacies and are often able to commandeer an army of rational reasons for their behavior. Without adequate supervision or consultation, these leaders can perpetrate extreme harm, especially to individuals who have a strong or excessive need for the approval of their leaders.

Loneliness

Church leaders who are lonely or who have not developed their capacity for intimacy are vulnerable. They can manipulate others to inappropriately meet their needs for intimacy. Those who are in a milieu that fosters intimacy, such as spiritual direction and pastoral counseling, for example, must establish and keep very clear boundaries and communicate well-defined expectations for relationships with those they lead and work alongside.

Narcissism

As reported in a Fall 2000 *Human Development* article, “Narcissism Sets Stage for Clergy Sexual Abuse,” by Paul Drucko and Marc Falenhain, professionals who cross sexual boundaries are often diagnosed as narcissists. Because of an inflated view of

themselves, they do not feel compelled to restrict their behavior according to any societal norms. This attitude and consequent behavior are true in all areas of their lives, not just the sexual. They believe that they are exempt from the restrictions placed on “ordinary” people.

Inattention to Transference and Counter-Transference

Transference and counter-transference are psychological phenomena that, if ignored by pastoral leaders, can lead to major problems in relationships between themselves and those to whom they minister. No one enters into any close, intense, helping relationship completely free from one’s personal past. Transference is the phenomenon by which the follower projects onto the leader characteristics and traits that belong to some significant person in the past. Unconsciously, there is a hope that by acting out this scenario in the present, unfinished business with these significant others from the past will be resolved.

Counter-transference is the same phenomenon but with unresolved experiences of the leader being projected onto those being led. This is a convoluted process by which a leader projects onto those being led characteristics and traits of significant individuals from the past, often parental figures or siblings.

Both of these phenomena are unconscious, at least at the outset. The individuals involved are unaware that they are reacting to another, not as they are, but as they want the other to be. A particularly intense emotional reaction to the other is often a good indication that transference or counter-transference is present. There is a greater likelihood of transference and counter-transference occurring in more intense relationships, such as pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, formation work, or leading a parish.

Since the process of counter-transference is unconscious, it often requires the input of another—a peer, supervisor, or consultant—to help bring the phenomenon to consciousness. Even then, there will be resistance, since this forces the individual to deal with difficult and, at times, traumatic issues from the past.

Realize that these phenomena of transference and counter-transference are asexual. Regardless of the sex of the significant person from the past, these emotions, hopes, and feelings can be projected onto a male or female in the present.

Negative Example

While in college a young woman entered therapy because of depression. Her therapist, a minister, would hug her and shared that his marriage was breaking up and how much he looked forward to the sessions with her. He called her to say that he had awoken at 3:00 a.m. experiencing a sense of guilt for not doing as much for her as he could.

Clearly, this was a situation in which the leader's own needs were propelling him into a violation of boundaries with a fragile, needy person. It was a situation that ended in confusion, pain, and destruction of trust for a young woman who had reached out to a professional for help and hope.

Positive Example

A formation director described his experience of working with a number of generous young men, individuals who came to religious life with the intention of giving themselves completely to God. On occasion, he found himself reacting intensely and inappropriately to some of them. There were individuals toward whom he had a strong negative reaction. He was unaware of any logical reason for this antipathy. There were other men in formation that he identified as "outstanding" candidates, but found he had an inexplicable need to have them admire him.

The formation director consulted a wise older priest. They lived in the same community, so the older priest was not only hearing the director's version of what was transpiring, but was actually observing it. The older mentor was an astute, psychologically trained counselor. He demanded that the two of them spend time looking at the formation director's internal dynamics. On one occasion the mentor inquired about how much the director understood about the phenomena of transference and counter-transference. The director said he saw his work as "holy" not psychological. The mentor gently and patiently helped him come to an awareness of his counter-transference responses to the men. What could have been a negative experience eventually became a positive one because of the eventual realization of these dynamics of transference and counter-transference. As a result, the formation director set clearer boundaries in his relationships with the men he was leading.

Stop and Think

Are you aware of a time when you experienced a leader inappropriately crossing boundaries? What effect did it have on the individual or group being led?

Since transference and counter-transference are unconscious, it will take the assistance of another to help bring them to consciousness. Where do you get help keeping aware of and attending to your unfinished emotional business?

Are you aware of any time that you have been the recipient of someone else's transference? Did you react to their behavior? How would you like to respond differently in the future?
