



**LEADING** FROM  
**YOUR STRENGTHS**

Building Close-Knit Ministry Teams

**Revised Edition**

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## Chapter One

# Ministries Hanging in the Balance

IT'S 10:20 P.M. AND A PIERCING winter wind refuses to relinquish its iron grip on an early spring night. Kevin sits alone in his office. Normally this senior pastor of a growing church would have raced home from work, wolfed down his dinner, and gotten ready for a weekly small-group study at his house. That study was a high point of the week for Kevin and his wife, Karen.

*Not tonight.*

Tonight, Karen got a call saying Kevin was staying late and to go on without him. The florescent lights from his office shine out onto a dark, empty parking lot as he sits at his computer and struggles with the words on the screen.

*Kevin isn't wrestling with the right phrases for Sunday's sermon; he's working on his resumé. In fact, he's seriously thinking about getting out of pastoral ministry altogether.*

For twelve years at his last church, Kevin experienced a fruitful, fulfilling ministry. He'd built a small, close-knit staff; worked well with his deacons; and been able to focus on preaching and teaching his flock. Now, after only *a year and a half* at his new church, Kevin had become so frustrated—so deeply angry with Rick, the senior music minister—he dreaded even coming into the

office. That wasn't the worst. His internal tension level had risen so high because of the conflict that it often overflowed at home. He snapped at his kids and even pushed back from his wife.

Day and night the emotional burden of these unresolved issues weighed on Kevin like a seventy-five-pound pack. That weight became a constant feeling of failure—a nagging heaviness that he had let down his family, his God, and especially the people in his flock. As Kevin typed his resumé, struggling to paint a positive picture of his gifts and strengths, he thought about adding words like *hypocrite, loser, failure, and quitter*.

How could he talk about reconciliation and forgiveness on Sunday and yet have so many unresolved issues with Rick? It wasn't from a lack of prayer or face-to-face effort to make things right. He'd never tried harder in his life to get on the same page with another person. But these two committed Christians were polar opposites. On every issue—from the look of the bulletin to the style of music on Sunday—they had different points of view. And every time Kevin tried to bridge the gap and make things better, he seemed to make things worse.

You might ask, "As the senior pastor, couldn't he just fire the source of all this frustration?" Kevin knew this wasn't an option. There were no ethical or moral problems and no question that Rick worked hard and wanted the best for the church. This, added to the fact that Rick had been at the church for seventeen years and Kevin less than two, meant that Rick went with the furniture.

His unsought adversary wasn't going anywhere.

*Which was why on this dark, windy night, Kevin thought of going somewhere—anywhere—where there wasn't so much pain.*

## **STEPPING INTO A POWER STRUGGLE**

Sandy was a new Christian who had answered the call to be part of a volunteer committee for her church's women's ministry. When the Sunday bulletin announced that they were looking for

someone with marketing and promotional ideas to help with special events, Sandy felt God's Spirit tap on her shoulder. After all, she was a full partner at a noted advertising agency and had won industry awards for running entire brand campaigns. Using her marketing skills to serve the Lord on a committee at church seemed right down her alley—until she discovered the back-alley politics going on in the group.

The politics began before Sandy even got inside for the first meeting! That's because a lady named Jennifer met her in the parking lot as soon as she stepped out of her car. Between the parking lot and the meeting room, Jennifer quickly explained to Sandy "the way things operated" on the committee. Of course, during the first break in their meeting, another vocal lady named Michelle made a point of cornering Sandy. It was clear Michelle was on a mission to tell her "the way things happened" in the group from her standpoint.

For years Sandy had walked into clients' offices where there was an obvious culture of conflict. She expected that in the rough-and-tumble corporate advertising world, but she never thought she'd see such intense lobbying and politics inside a church. While their focus was to be on helping women in the church love and serve Jesus, the friction in the room was equal to or worse than anything she'd seen in a corporate meeting. Instead of getting to use her strengths to serve, Sandy and the other committee members basically watched Jennifer, the irresistible force, spar with Michelle, the immovable object, from the opening prayer to the closing prayer. The constant verbal and nonverbal tug-of-war between these two kept anything positive from happening in the group. So much so that after bottling up her emotions for weeks, one night Sandy blew up and walked out of the meeting.

*As she started her car in the church parking lot, brokenhearted and discouraged, Sandy vowed she'd never volunteer for anything at her church again.*

## **RUSHING TO REJECTION**

And then there was Dan, the only single man that this historic church had ever asked to serve as a deacon. He was honored when he'd been asked to become a deacon, and he thought that his accounting skills would help resolve some of the financial difficulties he knew the church faced.

The day before his first deacons' meeting, he received a package containing the most recent financial audit, a set of deacons meeting minutes for the past three years, and a copy of the proposed annual budget that the deacons were to vote on the following day. What he saw shocked him. For three years running, the ministry expenses had exceeded donations by more than 20 percent each year. Virtually every area of the ministry was consistently over budget, and the shortfalls were being covered by a fund that had actually been designated for other purposes.

What concerned Dan most was that the deacons had approved every departmental request for more money without a single dissenting vote. He spent most of that evening pouring over the audit, the minutes, and the budget details with a fine-tooth comb. Then, in a burst of energy, he outlined a plan.

At Dan's first deacons meeting, barely five minutes into his tenure, Dan raised his hand. Breaking into a discussion that had just started on hiring a new staff person, he used that new expense as a way to launch into a litany of proposed accounting and spending reforms. He even detailed program and personnel cuts he felt were necessary, with some of the people affected by his cuts in the room. By the time he finished his proposal twenty minutes later, you could hear a pin drop in the conference room.

With a "Thank you, Dan, but let's look at what's on our agenda tonight," the deacon chairman finally broke the heavy silence. Two hours later Dan walked out of the meeting feeling nothing but disappointment and rejection.

*Instead of feeling welcome or that his ideas had merit, the only*

*thing Dan felt was resentment and cold stares.*

## **WHAT IF THINGS REALLY COULD CHANGE?**

If you've ever worked or volunteered at any level in a Christian organization, church, small group, or association, you can probably identify with at least some of the feelings of isolation, frustration, and disappointment expressed in the three lives above. In far too many ministry teams, what's common is discord and division rather than the unity of the Spirit. Instead of exercising our spiritual gifts and callings, many times we feel pressured and stressed, frustrated instead of fulfilled.

But what if we told you that the solution to these common conflicts was closer than you ever dreamed?

What if there really was a way for a team to eliminate predictable problems before they happen? What if there was an effective solution for conflict that already exists between team members? What if you really could put people in positions on a team that matched their strengths so that they felt useful and energized? What if there was a way to keep the focus of a ministry team on ministry and serving the Lord with honor and excellence instead of division and defeat?

The Leading From Your Strengths® process is all about knowing your God-given strengths, understanding and valuing the strengths of others, and blending the differences to reduce frustration, increase closeness, decrease conflict, and dramatically increase caring and commitment on your team. It's about each person you labor with understanding and using his or her strengths instead of feeling used or unnecessary.

## **LOOKING BACK AT WHAT TIPPED THE BALANCE TOWARD CLOSENESS**

In 1 Corinthians 12:18, the apostle Paul concludes his discussion of how God's people are like members of a body by stating, "But now God has placed the parts, each one of them, in the body just as He wanted." We believe that is absolutely true today. The group of people you're working with isn't the result of a random coincidence. These people you're working with are part of God's story for your life. That's an amazing thing to think about in itself. It's also why investing time in building a healthy, functional, effective, empowering team is essential, not optional. By working through this book as a team and having each person take his or her Leading From Your Strengths® assessment, which will come along later in the book, our prayer is that your team will bear more fruit, work together more freely, and use the collective strengths of the team more effectively than ever before.

Which takes us back to Kevin, Sandy, and Dan, three people whose ministries hung in the balance as we began this chapter. They were also three people who, during a turning point in their lives, used the Leading From Your Strengths® process outlined in this book.

For Kevin, working through the concepts in this book and the results from his Leading From Your Strengths® assessment made working at church fun and fulfilling again, and he never did finish that resumé. But what amazed him was what happened with Rick, his senior staff adversary. In the process of working through the material, they not only turned the corner on their long-standing animosity, but their relationship turned into a genuine friendship!

For Sandy, a wise pastoral staff person, who saw the women's ministry melting down, had the entire committee go through the material presented in this book. That process brought Sandy back to the table, broke up the Michelle-Jennifer logjam, tore down the walls other team members had put up, and set the stage for a revitalized women's ministry at their church! We hear this time and time again. The insights gained through the Leading From



Your Strengths® process can break down barriers to closeness and growth in committees and teams and among individuals.

And for Dan while sweeping changes were eventually made to the church's accounting practices, going through the Leading From Your Strengths® material with the deacons spurred dramatic changes in Dan's personal life as well. As a part of the deacon ministry team, Dan saw some things about himself that led to real changes in how he approached problems and people in general. Instead of being a full-throttle bulldozer, Dan actually started listening and asking questions instead of attacking. He became an effective, much appreciated deacon for two terms. Even more, what Dan learned in relating to others in his ministry team helped him become a better, more sensitive person overall—including the way it spilled over into a relationship he had with a woman at the church who later became his wife.