

Power games

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Seminary graduation looms right around the corner. Candidates are interviewing for positions. It reminds me of when I started in my first pastorate. We bemoaned the many things “they never taught us in seminary,” but I’m pretty sure that even if they had, I wouldn’t have taken those courses. As a result, I did a lot of on-the-job study.

The most important thing I learned as I entered the pastorate were the lessons of power. I began as a solo pastor as a five-foot-tall, twenty-six-year-old woman. I was raised to be a submissive Baptist and grew into a job where servant-leadership was the main expectation. None of this helped me as I began to negotiate among lawyers, CEOs, pro ball players, businessmen and Ivy-league professors. They were all present around different tables at that tiny rural church. But all of it was easy to overcome once I began to understand the rules of the game.

Some know the playbook of power well. They come with privilege, subconsciously planted upon the brain, along with a longing for Brooks Brothers suits. If you’re someone genetically embedded with authority, then your job will be to identify the tools, in order that you can eschew them in humility, lest you become one of those narcissistic pastors with an ego as large as your steeple.

Others are placed in a game that we have no idea we’re playing. We spend the first year in the pastorate wondering, “Why doesn’t anyone listen to me?” And, “Why do they *always* listen to that other guy?”

Then we have to learn the game. If you’re young or a woman, your age or gender can be overcome if you know the rules. I have watched men and women from underrepresented racial ethnic communities use the rules effectively (in fact, MLK was a genius at it). You might want to learn the rules in order to use them, to know when they are being used on you, or to reject them. Whatever you decide, just know that around every boardroom in America, they’re playing the game. And you’ll be playing it (even when you don’t realize it) at your church. Here are a couple of rules.

Money matters. No one goes into this job for the money, so it's easy to accept the first thing handed to you, and be grateful to God that you will now be able to serve. After all, pastors often get a pension and insurance, and not many people do anymore!

But if you don't think about what you honestly need, then when you have to start paying off the student loans, things can become very stressful. Figure out a realistic household budget. If the church can afford to pay what you need, negotiate for it. If you don't, you may resent your church, or your family might resent you. Also as a pastor, you will want to know what the pay looks like along the staffing structure.

You need to learn how to read a budget. Take a budget to a trusted colleague and ask him or her every question that occurs to you. You may have spent a lifetime never wanting to think about money, because you are too spiritual for that. You no longer have that luxury. You have an ethical responsibility to understand those numbers.

Office space matters. Do everything you can to have a nice space with decent furniture. Sometimes I've even bought my own furniture and carpets. What are the signs of power in an office? The size of the room, craftsmanship of the desk, comfort of the chair, type of walls, quality of the artwork, and beauty of the view all tell how much power a person has.

Some pastors walk into their office and immediately turn it into a church library, because it's ridiculously overwrought. Others realize that the pastor is actually situated in the janitor's closet, while the choir director has a luxury suite. Again, you can decide what to do with the information, just know that your space says things.

Clothing matters. There is a uniform of power. You know what it is. Black, blue or gray suit. White blouse. Pearls. No cleavage. No thighs. You can wear it, or you can reject it. Just know that if you wear the uniform, people will trust you more. Is that fair? Of course not. It's just the game.

Of course, I'm describing the uniform of the traditional denominational church. In the evangelical culture, the uniform of power is often dry-cleaned, expensive jeans. In other corners of Christendom, it's the number of tattoos or peircings you have.

Personal space matters. Watch around the table at your next meeting. People with power take up a lot of space and people without power try to cram into the

smallest space possible. If you're leading a meeting, you sit at the head of the table. You can take all the space you need. If the door needs to be closed (and the door usually needs to be closed), you can ask someone else to close it. If papers need to be passed, you can ask someone else to do it. It's okay. You're in charge.

Other things that matter. If you're an attractive woman, you lose power when you flirt. You can cry, but try not to do it. If you cry when you're angry, people will pity you and that's probably not what you're going for. Oddly enough, people who talk more are perceived to have more power in a situation (I always thought it was the other way around). You do not need to apologize, unless you need to apologize. I try not to serve coffee unless I'm intentionally showing hospitality. It's amazing how many times I'm asked to serve coffee, but it's not often a simple request. It's part of the game.

This is pretty crass and ugly stuff. I know. If I had more space, I would go into areas with which I'm more comfortable—like long high-minded theological discourses on the servitude of Christ (especially considering it's Holy Week). But...sometimes you just need to know the game.