1-2015

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Cover Page Footnote

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TRANSITIONING TO LOCAL CONFERENCE PRESIDENT: A STUDY IN NORTH AMERICA

Abstract: This study probes the preparation of individuals who transition into a senior executive role within a governance unit of the Seventh-day Adventist church organization. It describes their transition experience, probing what effect it had on their personal identity, relationships, spiritual life and family. Results of the research indicated a need for intentional leader preparation and support in the form of mentors, assessments, and cohort groupings. This research could be applicable to organizations formulating leadership development and individuals transitioning to a new role.

Keywords: *Leadership development, transition to president, faith-based organizations*

Introduction

Successful organizations are intentional about leadership development and create opportunities for their future leaders to obtain the necessary development to function effectively in new leadership roles (Van Velsor, Moxley, & Bunker, 2004). Leader development is a process whereby individuals learn the skills and develop the character necessary to be effective in various leadership roles (Dragoni, Tesluk, Russell, & Oh, 2009; McCauley, Kanago, & Lafferty 2010). Effective leader development strategies often use the way leaders learn from experience (McCall, 2010; Yip & Wilson, 2010). The transformative learning theory, incorporating the value of reflection, has been an effective tool in assisting leaders as they learn from their work experience (Closs & Antonello, 2011). Sparkman (2012) researched the "lessons of experience" as he explored the leadership development experiences of church executives within one African American denomination.

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Within the North American Division (NAD) of the Seventh-day Adventist church, local conferences provide support and oversight for a given region of churches and schools. Each conference has an executive officer team and committee, of which the president is the primary leader. Conferences are vested by their constituents to manage various assets and to support the mission of the organization.

Being the leader of a local conference within the Adventist organization equates to a senior executive leadership position (*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 2010). Such a role is fraught with its own unique set of responsibilities that are greater and more complex than those of lesser tier positions (Olmstead 2000; Zaccaro 2001). Several authors claim that executives operate in extreme environments and are expected to meet certain performance and task challenges set by their organization and/or in some cases themselves (Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannela, 2009; Munyon, Summers, Buckley, Ranft, & Ferris, 2010).

First-time local conference presidents in the NAD occupy their new roles without any leadership-equipping programs mandated by administrative levels of the organization. How do they manage the transition? Is it possible for them to make the transition based on past experiences? Can they readily learn on the job? While research has addressed pastors and leadership training, no research to date has explored the experience of first-time presidents in positions for which intentional leadership development does not exist.

The Research Approach

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership preparation for and the transition experience of first-time local conference presidents in the NAD. A qualitative research design was chosen because, as Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) point out, the explorative and probing nature of a qualitative study provides a better understanding "of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants" (p. 7).

Twelve first-time conference presidents, meaning none had ever served as a president in another field, were interviewed from eight of the nine union conferences within the NAD (union conferences are governing bodies within the organization that support and provide oversight for the 59 local conferences). Local presidents normally transition from one of three different conference roles: pastor, department director, and executive officer. For this study, four presidents from each category were interviewed, exploring their experience transitioning from one of these previous roles to that of president. Of those interviewed, 10 were Caucasian, one was Black, and one was Hispanic. Eleven of the presidents were men. There was only one female conference president in the NAD and she was included in the study. The study participants represented

a cross-section of experience in terms of year(s) in office: four had one year or less, five had two to three years, two had five to six years, and one had more than eight years. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study. All participants gave permission to use their experience to enrich the understanding of transitions.

Findings

Following a careful analysis of interview data, eight salient themes were identified. These themes are described below under the two major research questions guiding this study.

Research Question #1

How do local conference presidents describe their transition to being a conference president? Five themes are related to this research question: (1) overwhelmed, (2) spirituality, (3) relationships, (4) identity, and (5) impact on the family.

Overwhelmed. Participants from all three categories acknowledged feeling overwhelmed as they began their work as president. *Former departmental directors* spoke about their being overwhelmed due to the added responsibilities and pressures, particularly chairing the conference executive committee and being tasked with leading and managing an entire conference. Don felt so overcome by the thought of being the chief administrator that he wondered whether he could actually do the job and was even losing sleep over it. This group used various metaphors to describe their current situation: drinking from a fire hydrant, dealing with answers from backseat drivers, and sinking or swimming.

Former pastors attributed their sense of being overwhelmed to a number of the same reasons given by leaders from the other two categories, but added others not mentioned by them. It was the feeling of being ill-equipped to do the job of president which created a lack of confidence in some of them, causing one to describe his experience as a baptism of fire. Mark put it this way:

> I had never done anything within the context of a conference-office environment—no departmental or officer's tasks. I had never even sat on a conference executive committee, let alone lead one. Then all of a sudden, I found myself looking at the faces of a conference executive committee and I had never had a front-row seat to see how this is done.

Former *executive secretaries* attributed their sense of being overwhelmed to (1) the new intensity of the work, (2) no longer being able to "punt" difficult issues, and (3) the new level of responsibility. However, one of the former executive secretaries who had worked in the same conference for over 20 years said she did not necessarily feel overwhelmed, although she was quick to qualify that, had she begun in an unfamiliar place, she felt that she would be

significantly more challenged.

A number of the study participants explained how they coped with the new experience, sharing that they depended upon their faith in God to assist them.

Spirituality. All of the conference presidents commented on how prayer and trust in God aided them not only in making the decision to become a conference president, but also in executing their duties as an administrator. They agreed that being submissive to God's will was a necessary prerequisite to accepting the new position. Several individuals who moved to their new post directly from a pastorate said that they had not desired the duties or the sacrifice involved in being a conference president. By contrast, several who advanced to the presidency from a departmental director position had sensed God calling them to the post since early in their careers.

Presidents from each of the three categories of prior jobs discussed the necessity of maintaining a meaningful devotional life in order to effectively execute the duties of their position. They advocated this discipline in order for the Lord in His own way to be instrumental in the life of the leader. As Tom, a former executive secretary, said, "His 'God-ness' rubs off on us." They considered serving as the spiritual leader for the conference to be one of their most significant and difficult responsibilities. A former departmental director, Leroy shared these thoughts:

> I believe that a president needs to be a spiritual leader and, if nothing else, needs to be an example of spiritual leading. In the same way that a congregation will rarely rise above their pastor spiritually, I believe that a conference will rarely rise above the spiritual leadership of their president. The president is the key spiritual leader.

Those who had previously worked as pastors found it especially tough to deal with an increased workload, including travel expectations, and yet maintain the Bible study habits of a responsible preacher. One former departmental director believed that the longer a president stayed in office, the greater would be his or her risk of moving from reliance upon God to human dependency.

Relationships. Leaders transitioning into the role of president experienced a change in relationships with their fellow conference workers. Some spoke of how they now had more "friends" (employees desiring favors) and yet would eventually create new "enemies" (coworkers who were impacted negatively by certain decisions). In the new role, most spoke of how they purposely kept from establishing close friendships with their employees in order to avoid the appearance of favoritism and to maintain a level of objectivity. In addition to this avoidance tactic, the following factors also contributed to a sense of aloneness in their new leadership role: (1) the need to assume responsibility for making final decisions, (2) a demanding travel schedule that restricted time for building meaningful relationships, (3) a change in their social stature because of

new authority vested in them, and (4) the loss experienced from leaving a previous position in which they had enjoyed a sense of "community and support."

Those transitioning from pastoring especially missed the camaraderie they'd had with fellow pastors; being the boss instead of "one of the guys" required an adjustment period. Former pastor Bob shared the cost to relationships:

> I literally had to go back through relationships and identify the benefits and the shortfalls of that relationship and then make a conscious decision of whether or not this is something I can really do at this stage of my life in terms of relationships. That has been very difficult. That blindsided me. I didn't see that coming.

Participants claimed that they utilized various strategies to manage the sense of aloneness that accompanied their new job. Those who considered themselves introverts welcomed some solitude, which gave them time to be "alone" and recharge; one study participant admitted that "being around people all of the time drains me." A number of them employed all or some of the following methods to offset their sense of aloneness: (1) designating their conference office leadership group as their new "community," (2) believing that God would sustain them in following their convictions as they made certain unpopular decisions, and (3) depending on "outside" friends.

Identity. Individuals from all three categories in this study sensed a difference in the way they were treated by employees, lay members, and peers when they transitioned to being a local conference president. Some of the differences consisted of deference, respect, and an acknowledgement of the authority vested in the position.

The presidents acknowledged that an increase in deference shown by constituents and peers does affect the personal identity of conference presidents. While some recognized that they had experienced a change of self-identity, others declared that they personally had not but had instead observed such a shift in their peers. Both the former executive secretaries and former departmental directors experienced an identity adjustment in their new role, with the latter being the most poignant in describing how constituent behavior affected them. Former pastors claimed that they had not experienced such a phenomenon and yet shared anecdotes revealing some sort of a shift in personal identity. In addition, some did express a feeling of uneasiness in moving from the pastor persona to that of boss.

Jennifer, a former executive secretary, claimed that some of her work associates were unaccustomed to the manner in which a female administrator communicates and deliberates upon decisions versus how a male administrator might approach such issues. However, she maintained her natural approach and engaging openness, which helped her colleagues gain a new perspective.

Impact on Family. As the study participants described how their families

were affected by their transition to president, they shared how the changes created both challenges and benefits. Individuals in all three groups reported the following challenges: (1) less time to spend with family due to the president's travel commitments, and (2) relocation issues that affected a spouse's employment and personal relationships.

Challenges unique to a particular group included (1) anxiety of a spouse who was unsure how to fulfill the new role of a conference president's wife, as described by former departmental directors and pastors, and (2) loss of a spouse's unique ministry that had flourished in a local church setting, as reported by a president who had moved to the conference level from a pastorate.

At least one president in each of the three groups considered travel to be a job benefit that provided the privilege and enjoyment of traveling more often with his or her spouse. In one case, a study participant said that his family life improved when he became a president because the employing conference hired his wife to work with him in a team-ministry arrangement. A positive result of the new position that was mentioned only by former executive secretaries was that their children expressed pride that their parent had been chosen as the chief administrator of a conference.

Research Question #2

How did previous leadership experience prepare them to serve as a local conference president in the North American Division? The findings related to this research question were (1) job experience, (2) intentional or desired preparation, and (3) mentors or support.

Job Experience. All of the study participants who had worked as an *executive secretary* or *departmental director* asserted that participating in conference-level administration prior to becoming president provided knowledge they considered indispensable in their new position. Recalling the huge learning curve they had encountered upon entering conference administration, they stressed the value of being able to observe another president performing his or her role. In addition, these executives listed the following previous job experiences as valuable preparation for their current post: (1) church-related positions, such as pastor and/or academy principal, and (2) healthcare training and/or work experience.

However, the presidents who came directly from *pastoral ministry* described how they had acquired people skills and learned leadership principles as they dealt with a wide variety of personalities, church types, and congregational issues. In addition, one former pastor claimed that he gained his most valuable leadership training while serving as a military chaplain. Last but not least, this group believed that God had been at work in their lives, preparing them in His

own special way to eventually carry the responsibilities of a conference president.

Intentional Leadership Preparation. Participants in all three of the study categories spoke of strategies they had utilized to improve their leadership competence prior to serving as a conference president. Most were motived simply by a desire to increase their knowledge and praxis in order to be more effective in the position they held at the time. Only the former conference departmental directors indicated that a desire to eventually serve as president had prompted them to improve their management skills. They spoke about purposely accepting calls to conference-office leadership roles in order to position themselves favorably for the chief administrator's job. As Jonah confessed, "I always wanted to take calls that in a sense were going up the ladder, to bigger responsibilities."

The other two groups claimed they had not been intentional in preparing themselves to be a president. These presidents resonated with a common understanding expressed by a number of participants, specifically, that one doesn't prepare to be a president for fear others would interpret such intentionality as being motivated by selfish ambition.

Some of the former executives described a steep learning curve in their transition to the job of conference president and expressed a desire for more training and education in organizational leadership, specifically technical business skills and financial management. Former pastors were the most explicit in revealing perceived deficiencies in their understanding of certain management practices necessary to lead effectively as president.

Mentors. The study participants agreed that mentors played a vital role in preparing and supporting a new conference president. Their support system consisted primarily of one or more of the following: mentors, peers, friends, consultants, and conference or union administrators. Former executive secretaries and departmental directors spoke about mentors being an important part of their preparation prior to becoming a president, with the former group specifically identifying the conference president, who they worked closely with, as the one who mentored them. However, former pastors reported a lack of mentors in their professional development. They also said that they did not develop a support network until after being elected a conference president. Former pastors and departmental directors mentioned the value of obtaining insight and advice from seasoned church administrators during meetings such as the union presidents' council and the annual NAD gatherings for conference presidents. Specifically mentioned were the presidents' retreat and/or the Black Caucus.

Finally, participants in all three groups noted a deficiency in the leader development program for conference presidents within the Seventh-day Adventist Church organization.

Discussion

This section connects the findings of this study to other academic literature. It highlights how others have described the concepts of being overwhelmed, loneliness, identity issues, changing relationships and transitions.

The sense of being overwhelmed with their new position is not surprising given the level of responsibility senior executives in organizations are required to carry (Olmstead, 2000; Zaccaro, 2001). DeRue and Wellman (2009) identified five work-related responsibilities considered to be "developmentally challenging," all of which are a part of a conference president's new experience leading a conference: "unfamiliar responsibilities, high levels of responsibilities, creating change, working across boundaries, and managing diversity." Research indicates that some executives believe transitioning into a new leadership role to be one of the more stressful times in life, second only to divorce (Levin, 2010). In addition, not feeling fully equipped to do the job of president can create anxiety and a sense of being overwhelmed (DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

Executive leaders in various disciplines experience loneliness in their respective roles (Pratt, 2001; Sarros & Sarros, 2007). Research has demonstrated that an individual in an authoritative position, possessing more "power," views self-disclosure regarding personal information to individuals of unequal status as a losing proposition (Earle, Giuliano, & Archer, 1983; Slobin, Miller, & Porter, 1968). Numerous participants from the three different categories purposely distanced themselves from co-workers in order to remain objective in decision processes. Such practice is consistent with the literature on how executives actually create social distance with co-workers (Magee & Smith, 2013; Pratt, 2001).

Participants remarked how people treated them differently as a president than they did in their previous role. The literature is rich with examples that show how a person's identity is affected by how others relate to them (Ashforth, 2001; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Burke, 1991; Stryker, 1980). And such research informs us that a transitioning leader, moving from the frontline to administration, needs to undergo a role-identity transformation; in fact, it is necessary if one is to succeed in the leadership position (Crow & Glascock, 1995; Ortiz, 1982).

Another phenomenon reported in this study by Jennifer, the only woman president, was the new awareness she and her close work associates had regarding the gender differences between how women and men leaders communicate and process decisions. Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) report that various authors claim a female leader tends to be "less hierarchical, more cooperative and collaborative, and more orientated to enhancing others' self-worth" (p. 782).

William Bridges (2009), a noted professor on the many facets of transitions,

suggests that there is a method one can utilize to assist in understanding the impact of change and how to manage it. He outlines a three-step process for managing a transition: The first step involves "letting go of the old ways and the old identity people had" (p. 4). In this step, individuals must acknowledge and recognize an end to what they had known before and face a realistic loss. The second step involves "going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational." This is referred to as the "neutral zone" where critical "psychological realignments" and "repatternings" happen (p. 5). Finally, the third step involves "coming out of the transition and making a new beginning" by actually creating a "new identity," sensing a "new energy" and "purpose" in the new position (p. 5). Though recognizing a new identity was difficult for some for various reasons, numerous participants related how they believed God had placed them in their current position and that this very fact energized them with a sense of purpose.

Bridges (2009) advocates discerning the subtle difference between change and transition. According to Bridges, "change focuses on the outcome that the change produces" (p. 7). Transition is different because the starting point for dealing with it is not the outcome but rather "the ending" one must make in order "to leave the old situation behind." This involves primarily delving into psychologically letting go of the old reality and identity (p. 7). But the salient point in this process is the "failure to identify and get ready for endings and losses"; according to Bridges, this is one of the greatest causes for failed or difficult transitions (p. 8). Pastors appeared to struggle most with this issue: they claimed that they did not sense any change in their identity, believing that they lead in the president position with their previous role-identity. But according to the literature, while a president may lead with a pastor's heart, he or she needs to undergo a fundamental identity change in order to execute the role of the chief executive officer of the conference.

Former executive secretaries and departmental directors learned by observing an acting president in his leadership of a conference over a period of time. Experienced-based learning is the primary method leaders utilize to increase their understanding of how to perform a certain job or task (McCall, 2010; Van Velsor et al., 2004). Brown-Ferrigno (2003) observes that field-based learning, in which apprentices are able to observe leaders performing their duties, is a rich experience for "developing skills and professional behaviors" necessary to effectively execute a given leadership position.

DeRue and Wellman (2009) discovered how leaders who are confronted with unfamiliar tasks and responsibilities could surmount these challenges and actually transfer them into a developmental experience if they have a mindset to learn from them. However, there is a point of diminishing returns on learn-

ing and development if the challenge is perceived as too great and in essence overwhelms the leader—just the situation created by placing an individual in a position for which he or she has not been adequately prepared.

Support is a major element in two distinct areas for leaders: (1) in their own leader development plan prior to shouldering the heavy load of senior executive leadership, and (2) after being installed in the new role, especially the first couple of years. Learning is enhanced when developing leaders are supported, especially if they are supported by their immediate supervisors (McCall, 2010; Yip & Wilson, 2010). This was evident in the participants' experience prior to becoming president; however, this support was lacking after they assumed the new role. Former pastors were most poignant in expressing the need for support in the form of a mentor/coach relationship with a seasoned administrator. McCauley et al. (2010) claim that leaders develop best when three elements exist: (1) a stretch assignment, (2) assessment, and (3) support. In a study of church executives from another denomination, Sparkman (2012) suggested utilizing mentors to provide support for such leaders. Former pastors and departmental directors found support networking with peers and friends, especially at various professional meetings held by the organization.

Being spiritual leaders, all participants found support in their faith relationship with God. Findings indicated that this relationship assisted them both in processing the invitation to assume the role of president and in effectively becoming the spiritual leader of the conference. Clinton (2012) believes that God is active and supportive in developing leaders and provides valuable guidance when they transition to new challenges or roles orchestrated by Him. It was this trust relationship with God, along with human support, that enabled new presidents to manage and carry all the new responsibilities and expectations placed upon them.

Recommendations

1. An intentional network of support should be instituted by the local unions and the NAD. This support could facilitate (1) a viable mentorship program, (2) an assessment and feedback process on leader performance that includes input from union leadership, (3) a social connection time for presidents while attending requested meetings, and (4) a continued focus on how such leaders can maintain a vibrant spiritual life.

2. The NAD and local unions should develop an intentional leader development program that incorporates cohorts of newly elected presidents (minimal two-years) to meet together for support, including social time for connection, and to receive presentations on leadership principles and application. The NAD and unions should also provide resources and accessibility for online aca-

demic level tailor-made business courses for conference leadership.

3. When hiring pastors into the presidential position, particular attention should be given to their lack of experience with conference administrative responsibilities. A plan should be established to support them. Those responsible for orientating new local conference presidents should educate them regarding how to manage letting go of the previous role identity and to recognize the subtle changes the new role demands of an effective leader.

4. The NAD should address gender uniqueness in its diversity training, with special attention given to educating current conference administrators (executive officers—president, executive secretary, and treasurer) and departmental directors.

A Final Thought

Without instruction, most people have a difficult time learning to swim, drive a car, or even ride a bicycle. Yes, it can be done without training; however, it is fraught with avoidable accidents. Many individuals have become leaders in senior executive positions with little or no formal training in leadership. However, it doesn't have to be that way. There are numerous models to assist organizations in intentional leader development strategies. Current and future conference, union, and division leaders within the NAD and other organizations need to awaken to the value of being intentional about developing individuals to lead in senior executive roles.

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