
Improving the Ineffective Leader: Moving from Bad to Good

Leadership literature is chock-full of ways in which an average leader can become great. We all believe we're good. Greatness is just a book, a conference, or a degree away. Indeed, I believe run-of-the-mill leaders can become better with training. A desire to learn, self-awareness, and a solid work ethic go a long way.

Some leaders, however, are just bad. They don't lead well. Poor decisions are normative.

I believe most pastors want to lead their congregations in a way honoring to God. I believe most pastors care about their flocks. And God uses different types of leaders in different contexts. A rural setting, for example, requires a different type of leader than an urban setting. One is not superior over the other simply because of contextual expertise. But not all leaders—or shepherds for that matter—are great. And some pastors are poor examples of leadership, even if they really do care.

Years of practice entrench bad habits.

At some point, enough imbedded weaknesses transform an otherwise mediocre leader into a bad leader. Sometimes bad leadership is caused by context or position. The church leader is a poor match for the church, ministry focus, or setting. What makes a good senior pastor does not make a good middle school pastor. What makes a good worship pastor does not make a good children's pastor. While environment and position influence bad leadership, not every case of poor leadership can be blamed on a mismatch. Some leaders are just outliers on the wrong side of the bell curve.

There are two types of bad leaders: the inept and the unethical.

Prominent malicious leaders tend to make the news. Unfortunately, scandals and scoundrels abound. But another category of bad leaders involves those who do not intentionally lead people astray. They are not malicious, just incapable. I've [written previously](#) on what makes a pastor a bad boss. These leaders desire to make ethical decisions, but they are oblivious as to how their decisions affect others. They shoot from the hip and trigger collateral damage.

The focus of this post is improving the ineffective rather than redeeming the unethical. What are some ways in which bad leaders can become better? A [recent study](#) sheds light on behaviors helping a leader transition from bad to good.

- **They shared their knowledge.** One of the main drivers of poor leadership is poor interpersonal skills. Many people get promoted because of their expertise in a specific area, but leadership is more than technical knowledge. Bad leaders are stingy with knowledge. Bad pastors can guard theological and methodological black boxes. Good leaders use their knowledge to develop others.
- **They raised the bar of expectations.** Expecting little of your church or staff is usually a reflection of low personal expectations. Raise the bar of personal expectations and

improvements are bound to occur in the people around you.

- **They shifted from a discouraging posture to an encouraging posture.** Bad church leaders become better when they stop focusing on why something can't be done and rather focus on how something can be done.
- **They worked at becoming proactive change agents instead of reactive change agents.** If all you do is put out fires, then you're not seeing the forest for the trees. Little flare-ups always exist. Bad leaders reactively move from one to the next. Good leaders proactively discern the dangerous fires with the potential to affect everyone.
- **They began to encourage cooperation rather than competition.** Bad leaders divide people, creating opposing camps. Bad pastors use theological nuances as a wedge. Bad church leaders pit style preferences of one group against another. Good church leaders are bridge builders, demonstrating how different people can cooperate rather than compete.

Bad church leaders fail in many areas, but average leaders have weaknesses in specific areas.

Good, bad, or ugly—we can all improve our leadership. And the best pastors recognize continual improvement is the only option for leadership. While only a work of God can redeem unethical pastors, I believe every incompetent pastor can become a good leader. Bad leaders are not locked into poor decisions. Greatness is a noble goal, but good is an achievable step.

Read more from Sam [here](#).