

Serving the Second Chair

Whether it's a paid or unpaid position, formal or informal, most churches have a strong leader serving under the lead pastor. In smaller churches, this person can be a prominent lay person. In larger churches, the position is often an executive pastor. Numerous titles describe this position, including associate and administrator. Other church leadership positions can be second chairs as well, such as a worship pastor. In this article, I refer to the position simply as the second chair.

The second chair position is paradoxical for two reasons. First, a second chair involves the **tension of submitting** as a subordinate to the first chair while at the same time **leading with a high level of influence**. Second chairs maintain a dependence on the first chair while at the same time managing the significant amounts of freedom found near the top of the chain of command. The second paradox involves being in an ever-changing role that is difficult to define while at the same time trying to add structure to the vision of the first chair. Second chairs often find themselves in the unenviable position of being the Jell-O others are trying to nail to the wall.

While I do not claim to represent all second chairs, I have served in both a first chair role (currently) and a second chair role (at a previous church). This post is about second chairs, but it is directed to first chairs. How can lead pastors serve those whose main job description is to serve them?

Serve first; lead second. All church leaders should take on the posture of serving first and leading second, but a personal example is not enough. First chairs cannot assume second chairs (and other staff members) will follow the example of servant leadership if it is simply lived out and never taught.

First chairs must do more than encourage others to serve; they must teach others how to be servant leaders. First chairs should direct second chairs and staff to be aware of more than just what they should do, but also who they are in Christ. Servant leadership is more than a list of positive and negative traits. Servant leadership is more than a list of helpful or unhelpful actions. Being a servant leader like Jesus is an identity. This identity has a biblical foundation, and it must be taught.

Create a partnership, not a dictatorship. Living servant leadership and teaching servant leadership are important to creating a culture of servant leadership. But this culture is unsustainable (as is just about everything else in the church) without a partnership. Treating second chairs and staff as partners rather than employees will help sustain a transformational environment of servant leadership. A first chair's goal is to create a partnership and not give directives. This partnership of servant leadership can be fostered in with transparency.

A senior leader must be transparent about the inevitable consistency of being a first chair leader in the church. Senior pastors have two personas: one the church sees and one the staff sees. They will act differently around people they work with for hours each day as compared with the people they are tasked to shepherd. This dichotomy will be especially true of a second chair.

A first chair will likely spend more time with a second chair than anyone else in the church. This inconsistency is not necessarily a sign of poor leadership, but it becomes problematic if first chairs love on the people of the church while mistreating the second chair and staff. Such a scenario places the second chair in the awkward position of detesting the senior leader the church loves.

Balance authority and responsibility. The temptation for a first chair is to seize power and authority from the second chair. In the hierarchy of command, it is easier for a first chair to pull authority from a second chair than it is for a second chair to take it from a first chair. One of the ministry tensions of the second chair is leading and adding value to the church without the positional authority of the senior pastor. A subordinate leader can only influence upward if the senior leader gives him or her the corresponding authority to do so.

One of the first chair's primary responsibilities is serving the second chair. Nothing invalidates leadership like abandoning a servant's heart. A first chair's relationship with a second chair is one of a partnership, not a dictatorship. In this partnership it is the first chair's obligation to grant a second chair a high level of authority to accomplish the tasks of his or her responsibility.

Read more from Sam [here](#).