

THE CHALLENGE OF THE WORKPLACE 'SHEPHERD'**By Rick Boxx**

Of all the terms used to describe leaders, among the least-mentioned is “shepherd.” Have you ever heard a leader – your boss, another company’s top executive, or even yourself – referred to as a shepherd? If so, you are in a small minority. However, for those who are striving to follow Jesus Christ, the shepherd role is part of our job description.

Very few of us have actual experience as a shepherd, so it is difficult to comprehend what God expects when He encourages us in the Bible to be good shepherds. But that is exactly what He does. In the book of Jeremiah 23, for example, God gives a glimpse of the contrast between a bad and a good shepherd. Through the prophet, Israel’s leaders were warned, “‘You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds,’ declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:2). The leaders had demonstrated their failure as shepherds.

In that same chapter of Jeremiah, we find three primary ways God instructs us to be good shepherds. The first challenge is: **To care diligently and even sacrificially for our flock.** When God calls us to lead and care for our team members, He desires for us to consider what is best for them, not just what serves for achieving our self-interest. This is what the leaders of Israel had failed to do.

Our second challenge is: **To create a peaceful and safe environment for your team.** Working directly with customers can leave some employees fearful and anxious. If they do not feel adequately supported by management, this lack of support can result in fear and anxiety and undermine trust. When other members of our team are striving to do their best, they need to know that, to borrow the phrase, “I’ve got your back.” In other words, I will come to your defense if necessary.

In Jeremiah 23:4 we read, “‘I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing,’ declares the Lord.” Sheep are naturally timid animals with no means to defend themselves. They must rely on their shepherd. In a similar sense, if you desire to see your team members thrive emotionally, you need to create a peaceful environment where they feel supported and protected.

Our final challenge is: **Being able to retain the people God has called to your team.** Much earlier in my career in the financial industry, I had a person working for me who became verbally abusive and rude to many of our team members. But I faced a dilemma: This person was adding significant value to the organization in other ways, causing me to move slower than I should have in confronting his abusive behavior.

Because I was slow in responding, our workplace environment became toxic, a very unfriendly place to work. As a result, several good employees left the organization before I finally

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determined to address the problem appropriately. This was a painful but important learning experience for me.

Jeremiah 23:1 provides these words of caution that we should take to heart today: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”, declares the Lord.” To retain good people, we not only need to care for them, but also address any challenging people and circumstances promptly before they cause significant distress for our “flock.”

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. When you hear the term “shepherd,” what comes to mind? Have you ever heard it used within the context of the typical work environment? If so, in what sense?
2. What are some other words used to describe leaders? Think of terms that are used both in positive and negative ways. In your own role as a leader – whatever capacity that may be – how do you think you are (or should be) described?
3. Describing people as “sheep” might seem like an insult, but as Isaiah 53:6 indicates this description is justified. It says, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” What do you think that means – especially as it applies to us as human beings?
4. How important is maintaining a safe, supportive working environment for maximizing productivity, as well as for worker satisfaction and building camaraderie?

Challenge for This Week

What do you know about sheep and their behavior? This week might be a good time to do a little research and learn about the characteristics of sheep, how basically helpless they are when in danger, and how dependent they are upon their shepherd.

Then, consider how effective you are as a shepherd of others you oversee or work with every day. You might discuss this with a friend, trusted advisor or mentor, or your small group to determine how you can become a better shepherd for your team or colleagues.

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages: Psalm 23:1-6; Ezekiel 34:16; Luke 15:3-7; John 10:1-15; 1 Peter 2:24-25