
7 Critical Conversations That Will Boost Your Team's Engagement

One of your most important jobs as a church leader isn't casting vision—it's creating clarity.

People (even good people) naturally drift away from what's most important and to whatever feels urgent. That's why your job as a leader is to constantly bring people back to the main thing.

You can't accomplish this with sermons, chitchats in passing, or random updates alone.

Great leadership takes *consistent* conversations.

Let me clarify what I mean.

When I say "conversations," I'm not *only* referring to ...

- Texts
- Slack
- GroupMe
- Email chains

What I'm arguing for are actual, face-to-face conversations. The type of talks you have with your staff and volunteer leaders to get everyone on the same

page, help your team improve, and broaden own perspective by getting feedback.

Having these types of conversations with your team is *critical*. But I understand the thought about having them can make you feel uncomfortable or unprepared.

In this post, I want to help you to prepare to have seven critical conversations with your team.

I'm going to cover:

- How to prepare for important conversations
- 7 types of critical conversations

Let's get started!

How to prepare for important conversations

There's more to having critical conversations with your team than just sitting down for a fireside chat.

Your church culture will influence how these conversations are handled and received. For example, if your church culture possesses a negative, accusatory, or performance-oriented vibe, when you have a critical conversation—even if your goal is positive—then the way it's received by your staff member or volunteer *may* be negative.

Think about it.

When your church culture is tumultuous like a stormy sea, then you're already swimming in choppy waters. Practically speaking, if your church has an unhealthy culture, then you'll have to remove the toxins in order to optimize the important conversations you need to have.

This doesn't mean you can't have critical conversations. It can take weeks, months, or years to restore or build a healthy church culture, and a part of moving in a new direction is preparing to have these conversations well.

Let's take a look at how you can prepare for critical conversations in your church.

#1 - Clarify your goal

Below we're going to walk through seven types of important conversations you must have.

The first step you need to take is to clarify your goals.

- Do you need to have a conversation about a staff member's performance?
- Are you seeking to develop a team member's skills?
- Do you need to clarify your vision or expectations?
- Are you interested in getting feedback on a new initiative?

Regardless of the type of conversation you need to have; you need to clarify what you want to accomplish. Now, for some of these conversations, such as addressing a staff member's poor performance, what you want to achieve will take more than one meeting and can be a long-term process (e.g., 1–3 months).

To clarify your goals, you'll need to ask three questions:

1. Does anything (i.e., roles, responsibilities, expectations) need clarification?
2. What are the next steps?
3. When will you meet again?

Does anything need clarification?

Before ending any important conversation, you need to make sure you and whomever you're meeting with is on the same page. In the end, make sure everything is clarified by asking:

- Do they understand your concerns?
- Do they have any questions?
- Do they have any additional feedback?

This isn't necessary for every conversation you have. So don't worry about forcing goals or next steps after every meeting if you don't need to.

What are the next steps?

At the end of your critical conversation, you'll need to determine the next steps.

After you've identified a problem or clarified a goal your staff member needs to accomplish, it's essential to provide the next steps, which will include specific tasks that are measurable and actionable.

Providing a clear plan will help you and your team know what's expected.

When will you meet again?

Finally, the next step you'll need to take before concluding a meeting is to provide a timeline.

When does the work need to be accomplished? When will you meet again?

Go ahead and schedule your next meeting, put it on the calendar, and also plan on following up in the meantime.

#2 – Get your mind right

What comes to mind when you think about having an important conversation?

Do you think about a challenging staff member?

Do you regret the missed opportunities to build morale or create [church staff alignment](#)?

What about the times you could have challenged someone to accomplish a big goal?

Do you feel stressed? Remorse? Anxiety?

If you've avoided or haven't planned on having critical conversations, you'll need to figure out why this is the case. Said another way: What has kept you from having important conversations?

To have important conversations, you need to be prepared to handle them *emotionally* well. If you know these types of conversations cause you an emotional burden or inhibit you from keeping control, acknowledge this ahead of time, and figure out how you can best prepare yourself emotionally.

Don't be scared to seek out help during these times. Seek out advice from a mentor, friend, or Christian counselor to help you work through challenges.

On a different note, there's a good chance you've probably never thought about having one of these conversations, and that's okay. Everyone—including every church leader—is a work in progress, and there's always more to learn.

But have you chosen to avoid important conversations?

If so, why?

Answer this question and identify a solution to whatever is stopping you from having important conversations with key members of your team—both among staff and volunteers.

After working with many church leaders, we often find the reason why they haven't had these conversations is because of concerns about the conversations themselves. Leaders may worry about what someone will think about them personally or may never make a move because they don't have the right words to say or the timing feels bad, but generally, their concern revolves around themselves and what they think.

If this is you, here's what you need to do:

Focus on the goal of your conversation, don't worry about what you'll say, and be prepared to listen, which leads us to the next point.

#3 – Use both ears to listen

In every conversation, you need to be able to talk and listen.

When it comes to important conversations, your ability to listen is even more critical than your normal, everyday chitchats. Think about it.

Are you challenging certain staff members to accomplish a goal or learn a new skill? During your conversation, do they express a willingness to embrace your vision? Do they give you the impression that they're willing to grow or is this something that's your idea?

Do you need to talk with a poor-performing staff member? After you bring up your concerns, be prepared to allow them to share feedback. Listen to what they have to say. Reflect upon their point of view.

Focusing on listening will accomplish two big goals. First, it'll help you to take the pressure off of yourself by focusing less on what you say, and more on

how the person you're talking to responds. Second, it allows whomever you're talking to express his or her thoughts in a meaningful way.

Is there a project behind schedule?

Let them know you're aware, ask them what challenges they're facing, and sit back and listen to what they have to say. Let them know you're there to remove roadblocks—not create hindrances or unnecessary anxiety.

Can the quality of their work improve?

Ask them if they would like to improve their skills. See how they respond, and let them know you want to empower them to do the work they've been called by God to do at your church.

Remember, God gave you one mouth and two ears, so plan on spending twice as much time listening than talking during an important conversation.

#4 - Act now

Benjamin Franklin was full of practical advice, including this gem:

“Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.”

Dr. Franklin may not have been talking about critical conversations. But his advice is spot on.

Many church leaders dread having important conversations or they're too busy to think about putting them on their schedule. In either case, if you're reading this post, then hear me loud and clear:

Today, schedule the most pressing, important conversation that comes to mind.

Don't think long and hard about this.

If something comes to mind, great. Take a moment—right now—to schedule this conversation for this week or next. You can work out the details later.

Nothing or no one comes to mind?

That's okay too.

Just move on.

7 types of critical conversations

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think about having an important conversation?

Confronting a staff member or volunteer?

If so, you're not alone.

As I shared above, many church leaders avoid potentially challenging conversations for different reasons, so it's natural if this is the first thought you have.

But here's the deal:

There are seven important conversations you need to have with your team.

Will you need to confront someone on your team?

Yes, at some point. That's just to be expected when you add one sinner together with another sinner on the same team and in the same space.

But the important conversations you need to have are so much more than this.

Here they are:

1. Evaluation
2. Personal life
3. Goals
4. Clarity
5. Opinions
6. Team
7. Get better

Let's take a look at these in detail.

#1 – The “evaluation” conversation

Alright, let's go ahead and get this out of the way:

You need to evaluate your staff members and key volunteers.

Before your mind goes negative, hang tight.

These types of conversations are not meant to be like this: “You’re doing *wrong*; here’s how to do things *right*.” The evaluation conversation is a regular check-in with your staff or volunteers to see how they’re doing.

By spending time with your team one-on-one, you’ll be better able to gauge how they’re doing personally, professionally, and spiritually. You’ll also be able to discover concerns, fears, and struggles they’re having with their work.

When you spend one-on-one time with your team and ask purposeful questions, you’ll be able to head off any significant problems or avoid potential landmines.

Here’s the deal.

As a church leader, one of your responsibilities is to shepherd your staff and volunteers. To do this well, you'll need to plan on spending time with them one-on-one in a weekly or monthly meeting and once every three months for an evaluation.

As for the one-on-one meetings, these provide more than a to-do to mark complete or a meeting to reschedule every week. Spending time one-on-one with your team places you in an ideal position to shepherd them, helping them to reach their potential.

Don't take these regular check-ups for granted. Make them a priority, and the time you spend in these meetings will save you a tremendous amount of time later if someone chooses to quit or something blows up because you were able to spot it weeks or months ahead of time.

When it comes to your 90-day evaluations, treat these conversations as an opportunity to see how well your individual team members are performing in relation to the church's mission. Are they progressing? Are they falling behind? What roadblocks are inhibiting their performance?

During these conversations, help your team to identify goals to accomplish during the next quarter (90-days).

#2 - The *"personal life"* conversation

Being created in the image of God, the people in your church are social beings.

They desire a relationship with God, and to varying degrees, they're interested in having friendships and encouraging interactions. It's not like people walk around looking for a beat down.

What's the point?

If your staff and volunteers have relationships at church, there's a *really* good chance they'll stick around. As for you, this doesn't mean you can or should be BFF's with everyone on your team. If you're in a position of authority (i.e., you have the power to fire someone), you have to balance things a bit.

However, you want to build trust with your team members, and to do this well, you'll have to have personal life conversations. Said another way, you'll need to share *some* personal things from your life, and ask them about what's going on in their lives.

I'll admit this can be challenging for conversations with the opposite sex. But this shouldn't stop you from developing a trusting relationship with your staff or volunteers.

How you handle meeting with someone of the opposite sex in your church should be discussed with your leadership. If you haven't already, consider putting in place some boundaries, such as meeting with the door open or in public areas, driving in separate cars, and maintaining openness with your leadership team and significant others.

Not sure how to build a trusting relationship?

Here are some ideas to help you get started:

- Be open
- Earn trust
- Have an open-door policy
- Offer to help
- Ask about his or her life
- Talk with him or her about Jesus
- Listen attentively

It takes time to build a trusting relationship with people. Don't rush this process. Spend time with your team, ask questions, and listen well. In time, you'll build a solid relationship of mutual respect with your team.

#3 – The “goals” conversation

As a church leader, you want to set up your team for success.

One step you'll need to take is to help your staff and volunteers set goals.

Not just any goal.

But goals that will develop them individually and support the mission of your church.

Think about it.

You don't want every member of your team going in different directions. This causes confusion, leads to poor performance, and will stunt the forward momentum of your church.

Does this mean that no one will ever be able to explore different interests? Not at all. They may just have to moonlight or do work on the side to develop skills that are not related to their work.

How do you help your team to set goals?

There are five things you should focus on:

1. Connect their goals to the church's mission
2. Lead them to set job-related goals
3. Break down their goals by quarter
4. Monitor their progress
5. Reward them when they accomplish their goals

There are many different tactics you can explore. But if you nail down this 5-part strategy, you'll be well on your way to setting up your team for success.

#4 – The “clarity” conversation

Have you received a clear vision for your church?

Have you shared this vision with your team?

Great, but your work hasn't stopped after making one announcement—it has just begun.

Here's what you need to know:

Your staff, volunteers, and the church will naturally drift away from the church's vision. They don't do this on purpose or because they're bad people. Rather, this is simply natural and to be expected.

To keep your church aligned, you'll have to champion your vision and work with your team one-on-one to fight for clarity.

With your team, there are five things you'll need to clarify:

1. The purpose of your church
2. The mission of your church
3. The most important thing they do
4. Goals and expectations
5. Information

#5 – The “opinions” conversation

As a church leader, you need to plan on listening to your team.

Like everyone in your church, you have blind spots, you don't have the complete picture, and God gave you your team to fulfill the mission of your church.

In fact, [according to research](#), one of the key skills you need to master as a leader/manager is valuing the opinions of your team. As you lead, you want to maintain a two-way dialogue.

Whether you meet weekly or monthly or plan on just asking your team questions, strive to learn how your team feels about their work, how things are going, and if they need clarification or support.

This can feel uncomfortable at first, but, in time, you will reap tremendous rewards in building relationships of mutual trust and respect.

#6 – The “team” conversation

Your church is a church.

In other words, your church is a team. It's not a loose collection of individuals doing their own thing—which is especially true for your staff and volunteers.

For your church to fulfill its mission, you'll need to lead your team toward a common goal. The idea is to have everyone working together, serving one another, and moving toward fulfilling the same mission—not pulling for their own agenda.

For this critical conversation, you'll want to have one-on-one chats, but you'll also need to have team chats where everyone can share from his or her heart.

To help your staff work together as a team, it's vital that everyone is working from the same playbook (mission and goals), collaborating on projects and tasks, while helping each other to love one another well.

#7 – The “get better” conversation

This is similar to the goals conversation, but with a twist.

Instead of focusing on what your team members can accomplish, the goal of this conversation is to help people develop skills.

For this conversation, there are three big ideas:

1. Clarify their role
2. Identify related skills
3. Keep an eye on the future

The first thing you need to do is to clarify their responsibilities. Do you all have a clear idea of what's expected of this position? After you nail this down, then you can move on to the next question.

For your staff or volunteers, what skills or strengths can they further develop to perform their work better? There will be a time when you'll need to train someone to learn something new. But it's best to focus on improving their skills and strengths that will provide the greatest return on investment for the work they've been called to do.

Finally, keep an eye on the future by identifying people on your team you can prepare to serve in a different position or to take on more leadership. In short, identify any gaps they need to fill from who they are now to where God is leading them to be tomorrow.

7 Conversations Guide

As intimidating as having important conversations is, you know the value of them. That's why Church Fuel has created the 7 Conversations Guide. With this helpful resource, you and your team will be able to have meaningful conversations that are also effective. This free resource is available for download now. [Get your hands on it](#) to start bridging those conversation gaps today.