

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

Creating a Culture of Leadership Development (with Sandals Church) - Episode 313

Empowering Next Generation Leaders (Part 2)

We've seen leadership development modeled in scripture, from Moses and Joshua to Paul and Timothy. But how can churches today effectively create a culture of mentoring and investing in the next generation of leaders?

In this episode, we're joined by Executive Pastor Dan Zimbardi and People and Culture Director Tim Hawley from [Sandals Church](#) (Riverside, CA) to discover how their church has created a successful leadership development model to invest in the next generation.

Interview with Dan Zimbardi & Tim Hawley

Dan, at a gathering of large churches last fall, you suggested that our generation, Gen X, has done a poor job of empowering future leaders. Can you unpack that a bit?

DAN: If you just look at the data, key metrics (membership, attendance, church closures, baptisms) are down across the board. The big question is why? In my opinion, it starts with a real leadership vacuum that exists in the church today. You've got a lot of Boomers who have retired or are retiring and a lot of Gen X pastors that are worn out and transitioning out. What we're finding is there's not a large group of really talented young leaders to come and assume the responsibility for this void of leadership in the church. I do believe that a lot of it falls to us Gen Xers. Matt Brown, the founder of Sandals Church, recently said: "The biggest mistake we can make is removing barriers in front of a young leader." And that sort of exemplifies what I think has happened with Gen Xers: We're removing barriers. We're not creating opportunities.

Tim, you're the "People and Culture Director" at Sandals. Can you explain your responsibilities?

TIM: Our mission as a staff is to deliver life change through real relationships with ourselves, God and others—so that's really what my team focuses on empowering our staff to do. Our team oversees the traditional, operational human resources functions (payroll benefits, employee relations, etc.) but our team's focus is really on shaping our culture by building strategies and frameworks that help support the people so that they can do their life's work. It's my favorite job I've ever had. It's a needed response to the trends that we're seeing in terms of employee relations—it's shifting from traditional HR operations to something more robust.

It sounds like Sandals has an intentional process for equipping and empowering next generation leaders. Will you help us get a picture of what that looks like?

TIM: It starts with our ROGO vision: real with ourselves, God, and others. So the framework is called the "[ROGO Way](#)." Within the ROGO Way, we're heavily focused on a significant through-line of mentorship and we have several very intentional programs that we draw our folks into depending upon their path, their career arc, what's next for them, and their development journey. For example, one of those programs is ROGO Next Gen, which is focused on people who are demonstrating future senior level leadership potential. We draw them into a 12-24 month program where they'll have special projects outside of their normal work, attend almost all of our highest level executive meetings, and be paired with a marketplace mentor.

Certainly developing the next generation is not about *only* having a program, it's a mindset. But part of creating that culture is making a great plan and having a program to do it within.

Dan, when it comes to leadership development, it seems like the churches that are winning in this area tend to be multisite churches. Do you think there's something about the multisite model that provides a more conducive environment for leadership development?

DAN: I think it's really about the leadership of the church having a multiplier's mindset. If you don't have a multiplier's mindset, it's very difficult to create a culture for young leaders to be developed. I mean, that's probably part of what got that particular church to be multisite in the first place. I think another part of it is a passion for the church to thrive after the current leadership team is gone and moves on. So I think it's a multiplier's mindset and a succession mindset that gets a church to be a multisite church in the first place.

Tim, what have the biggest challenges been for you to raise up and empower future leaders at Sandals? How are you trying to overcome those challenges?

TIM: We can be very task focused and achievement focused. But if our leaders are using their influence to execute a lot of tasks, but not spending their time and influence on empowering and building up the next generation, that's a big obstacle. The only thing that can get that mindset changed is to encourage proximity from senior leaders to the more junior leaders. There's no podcast, book, seminar, or conference that can replace how meaningful that proximity has been to my growth and development. (Watch "[The Power of Proximity](#)" by Sandals' Vivi Diaz).

So that's the encouragement I'd give to other leaders: Begin to see your influence not as achievement through individual task completion, but empowering and getting other people ready to do what you've done and go where you've been.

Dan, I think we've been going about raising up next generation leaders all wrong. When we have a young leader/pastor with potential, we make them a student pastor or a campus pastor where they are responsible for preparing a message every week. Because of that, they spend most of their time developing their teaching skills, but they miss out on the opportunity to develop their leadership/pastoring skills. What do you think?

DAN: I think you're right that there are many components to being a good leader and a good pastor—it's not just one particular skill set. I would encourage people to think about three categories of development: skills, character, and relatability (meaning how you connect with people and their experience of you).

So that's a good place to start, ask: "What are the skills we need to train this person in? How do we need to develop their godly character? And how can we help them develop more self-awareness?" We've seen many incredibly talented pastors fail over the last 10-15 years because of character issues or because of how they treat people.

Tim, what are some of the wins you are seeing at Sandals when it comes to empowering next generation leaders?

TIM: We're celebrating that about 70% of our team is a Millennial or Gen Z. Young leaders are also having real influence in making important decisions, which is another huge win. One of our values is unity, so when you have senior leaders working closely and empowering young leaders, there's just a natural collaboration and trust that's forming over time that really has a positive impact on our culture. Another one of our values is honoring one another: Pastor Matt and Pastor Dan regularly talk about inviting the right people to be at the table and deferring to their gifting, and that doesn't discriminate over the generations. People can be gifted at many different stages of their career arc and progression, and we encourage that. ([Download Sandals' Staff Expectations PDF.](#))

Dan, what encouragement would you give to other pastors and church leaders when it comes to leadership development? What are some first steps they can be taking to empower next generation leaders?

DAN: To pastors and church leaders that are discouraged: Get serious about investing in some young leaders and you're going to find great joy. My favorite part of my job is hanging out with young leaders, talking with them and learning from them and watching them flourish. I think it'll help you to battle through a season of discouragement and find joy and passion again.

In terms of next steps, consider these four P's:

1. **Priority.** If you're a church that wants to invest in young leaders, make it a priority and start now. Don't wait until you have it all figured out.

2. **Perspective.** Have a multiplier's perspective that you want the church to flourish when you're gone. The only way that can happen is if you multiply and invest in young leaders.
3. **Proximity.** You have to get young people around you—whether that's in your board meetings, sermon planning, etc. Include young leaders whenever you can.
4. **Plan.** You need a little bit of a plan as you're going forward, but it doesn't have to be great. Don't take too much time on it—just get started.

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Free Webinar: How to Structure Your Staff to Develop Next Gen Leaders

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