



3 ROLES AN EXECUTIVE PASTOR CAN'T DELEGATE

The Unstuck Group

3 Roles an Executive Pastor Can't Delegate

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Introduction

Great leadership requires great delegation. That's the conventional wisdom, right? Great leaders don't try to do everything themselves. They understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and recognize the value—to their organizations, the people they lead, and themselves—of leveraging the strengths of others.

But to delegate well, you need to find clarity around what *not* to delegate. Once you understand the duties and responsibilities that must always remain in your hands, you can begin the process of handing everything else off to members of your team.

When the executive pastor role isn't working right, the results are pretty predictable. Vision stalls. Staff teams can get dysfunctional. Tension can develop in the relationship between the lead pastor and the executive pastor. That's not a good sign for the future health of the church as a whole.

For XPs, maintaining ownership of making vision actionable, driving core initiatives, and building team alignment are imperative. While you'll work closely with others on these areas, they ultimately require your direct oversight and cannot be fully delegated away. When these responsibilities are clearly defined and embraced, it creates the foundation for a healthy partnership with your lead pastor and sets up the entire church staff for success.

So, let's get started . . .

How to Use This Study

We know you're busy and there's a lot on your plate, so we've designed *3 Roles an Executive Pastor Can't Delegate* to be as practical and simple to use as possible. You really only need to do three things:

1. Read

Each of the three roles discussed in this resource has a short reading to introduce you to the topic and help you understand its core characteristics. These roles are complex, so these readings aren't comprehensive. We've designed them to help you get your feet wet.

What you'll discover as you read is that you're doing really well in some areas of a role, while other areas offer opportunities for growth. Once you know where you currently stand, you can take a deeper dive into the specific areas of the topics where you need to grow. There are plenty of resources out there—books, sermons, podcasts, blog posts, videos—that cover these topics.

2. Reflect

After you read, take time to reflect on what you've learned. Think about how the content relates to you and your church. These three roles are universal to all executive pastors, but how they play out can vary significantly depending on the pastor and the church.

To help you reflect, we've provided some questions at the end of each part. Think about them. Jot down notes if that helps you to work out what you're thinking. But keep in mind that this exercise is for you. It's not necessary to share your thoughts or notes with others. In fact, the most important thing is that you feel the freedom to be honest with yourself—even brutally honest—about the areas in which you have room to grow and improve.

3. Apply

Reading and reflecting on *3 Roles an Executive Pastor Can't Delegate* won't change you or your church. But applying what you learn will. With that in mind, we've given you some simple exercises to help you take the first steps of application.

Simple is the key word here. These exercises aren't going to solve some of the complex challenges you'll discover in this resource. But they'll get you moving in the right direction. Depending on where you currently are in these three roles, you may find some of the exercises valuable and others not so much. If you find an exercise irrelevant, it's probably because you're already doing well in that area of your leadership. That's a good thing.

These exercises are designed for you. But if you find a particular exercise helpful, you may want to walk your leadership team through it so they can benefit as well. We want you to use *3 Roles an Executive Pastor Can't Delegate* in whatever way most benefits you, your leadership team, and your church.

Part One: Vision Activator

The first role you can't delegate is owning the responsibility for closing the gap between vision and execution. And you need to be wired for it.

The Strategy Gap

While the senior pastor is responsible for casting vision, the executive pastor must define *how* that vision will be accomplished and then execute an action plan to see it through. As Lance Witt wrote in *High Impact Teams*, “Execution is what fills the gap between intention and progress.” In other words, executive pastors must own the responsibility for closing the gap between vision and execution through **strategy**.

While vision may answer the question, “*Where are we going next?*” A strategy answers, “*How are we actually going to make that a reality?*” Senior pastors need to own the responsibility for clarifying the vision and then release the “*how*” to their executive pastors. From there, it’s the XP’s job to organize the teams, systems and deadlines to see the vision through. They need to manage the tension between delegation and micromanagement, maintaining organizational alignment while empowering their team to do the work.

It’s also their job to drive the strategic planning process for the church and keep the team’s key initiatives and priorities moving forward alongside the execution of day-to-day ministry—but more on that later.

The Right Wiring

To own this part of your role really requires both big-picture thinking and attention to detail. You must be able to see how all the pieces fit together while also understanding the specific steps needed to move forward. This means being both visionary and practical, understanding the dream while creating concrete plans to achieve it. You must be the Chief Strategist.

Excellent executive pastors have certain traits:

- *Strategically Gifted*
They’re wired to drive the creation and execution of organizational goals and priorities.
- *Activator*
They're able to lead strategy and execution in accomplishment of vision.

- *Organized/Systems Builder*
Things won't fall through the cracks because they've created systems for all the things they have to juggle.

All in all, making vision actionable requires an excellent sense of organizational alignment—the ability to play chess, not checkers. You need to constantly work and rework the organizational alignment of staff, finances, facilities, communication, and ministries so they don't become a lid to growth. It's your job to help the whole organization move towards accomplishing the vision.

Critical Character Traits

The right wiring is not in itself all that is needed. For a leader to be successful in making vision actionable in ministry, you also need to have some critical character traits.

1. *Sober-Mindedness*
Understand who you are, come to terms with who you are, and then be who you are. It's not uncommon for young church leaders to think big and want something bigger than they're able to handle sooner than they're ready for it. It takes a deep well of experience built over time to serve well in the XP role—not just talent.
2. *Submission to Authority*
In Matthew 8:5-13, the Roman Centurion demonstrates an incredible XP mindset (seriously, go back and read it). He understands what it's like to be in authority, so he has no problem submitting to authority. Great executive pastors submit to the authority of the lead pastor. They lead up and ultimately understand what it means to both be *in authority* and *under authority* at the same time.
3. *An Ability to Recruit, Place and Develop People*
The church is ultimately about people-development. The theological term is sanctification, the every day church term is discipleship. Whatever label you want to put on it, great executive pastors are skilled at recruiting the right people, putting them in the right seats to succeed, and developing them.
4. *Drive to Grow*
It takes a heart for theology and a head for business to be a great XP. If you've got more of a business background, get some solid theological training. If you have a theological background, you might want to get your MBA.

However, you also have to keep this truth front and center: the Church is *not* a business. It has a clear mission from Jesus about why it exists. There are a lot of things that “smell” like a business in the church (after all, the book of Proverbs in the Bible, too), but it's not a business. The Church is the Body of Christ; it's the family of God. The goal is not to make shareholders happy by having a strong bottom line—It's to be seeing life change happen.

The Relationship with the Lead Pastor

The relationship between the lead pastor and executive pastor can make or break a church staff. It has a profound impact upon the overall ministry of the church. Get this right and you'll end up getting a lot right. Get it wrong, and well, it's going to be tough sledding.

There are some basic no-brainer things that make a great lead/executive pastor partnership. You will not be surprised to read that *trust* must be at the foundation of it. You cannot allow triangulation to take place—the lead and executive pastors need to stay connected and on the same page. We recommend a weekly touch base meeting.

Additionally, you can't allow a "good cop/bad cop" situation to occur. You don't want the staff to love the lead pastor and fear the XP. Fear doesn't make people want to follow you. This means the lead pastor also must own the things he or she cannot delegate (and we have another eBook for that topic!), and he or she must be careful not to delegate all of the tough decisions and execution to the executive pastor.

A great analogy for a healthy partnership between a lead and executive pastor is the way a mom and a dad lead a family together through mutual submission to one another. Lead in your areas of brilliance; submit in your areas of weakness.

Lastly, the executive pastor needs to always support the lead pastor publicly, and when needed, appropriately challenge them privately.

PRO TIPS: Facilitating Access to the Lead Pastor for the Team

- As the team grows there is naturally more distance from the lead pastor. Distance doesn't make the heart grow fonder—distance makes the heart wander.
- One of XP's goals needs to be creating relational accessibility when possible: Your staff should get more access to the lead pastor than the church does.

Vision Activator: Questions for Reflection

Use the following questions to reflect on what you learned in the reading and consider how it applies to your leadership and your church. Jot down thoughts, notes, or answers if that helps you to begin applying what you're learning.

Keep in Mind: These questions are for you. They aren't meant to be shared with others, even those on your leadership team. So, feel free to be completely honest with yourself. It will help you clarify where you're already strong and where you have opportunity for growth.

- How effectively are you currently bridging the gap between vision and execution?
- Do you need to intentionally develop more in any of the critical character traits?

- How healthy is your relationship with your lead pastor today?
- How could you improve your communication with your lead pastor? Communication between staff and lead pastor?
- What are the biggest strategic challenges facing your church right now?
- Where do you see misalignment between vision and operational reality?
- How could you improve your communication of strategy to staff and key leaders?

Exercise: Strategy & Priorities Check

Take 30 minutes to complete this simple but revealing exercise:

1. Write down your church's top three vision priorities for the next 12 months.
2. List all major initiatives currently underway or planned.
3. Score each initiative from on a scale of 1-5 on how directly it supports the vision priorities.
4. Identify any initiatives scoring below three that could be paused or redirected.
5. Create an action plan to better align resources with vision priorities.

Consider a Facilitator

While the lead pastor must own the role of being the primary vision-caster, they do not have to be responsible for defining vision in a vacuum. It's often helpful for the executive pastor to "drive" during vision and strategy discussions to free the lead pastor up to think and fully participate. Or, even more ideally, the XP can own the responsibility for hiring an outsider facilitator every few years to facilitate a planning process so that you can both fully engage in the visioning process.

Self-Assessment

It's common for executive pastors to either micromanage the execution of strategies or avoid giving enough direction. Either extreme does not serve your team well. Where do you naturally land on that spectrum?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
micro									under-
manage									support

Part Two: Core Initiative Driver

The executive pastor cannot delegate the responsibility for driving core initiatives: This frees the lead pastor up to focus on the roles only he or she can do.

Five Steps Ahead

If the executive pastor owns closing the gap between vision and execution, he or she also must captain the core initiatives that emerge from strategic planning.

It's your job to drive—to lead—the execution of those additional strategic priorities that your team identifies as essential steps towards the vision, outside of the day-to-day execution work you manage. To borrow a phrase from *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* by McChesney, Covey, and Huling, your team lives in the “whirlwind” of ministry every week. It's your responsibility to keep core initiatives moving.

A great way to figure out if you're truly leading or just managing the status quo is by asking yourself, “Am I out in front of my team?” If you're not intentionally looking five steps ahead and driving future initiatives, they're probably not going to happen.

To stay ahead of your team, it's your responsibility to keep yourself out of some of the details and focus on the big picture. It's okay to not know everything that is going on.

Practically speaking, this looks like managing your schedule ruthlessly and protecting the time you need for big-picture thinking and problem-solving. You may need to re-evaluate your meeting rhythms to free up enough time for you to sit in the core initiative driver seat.

Building Good Systems

Great executive pastors are able to keep driving core initiatives while also keeping the day-to-day ministry operations on track by building really good systems—and ensuring the team does, too. You need sustainable systems for both the whirlwind work *and* for the out-of-the-ordinary strategic priorities.

Vision + [Systems] + Execution = Results

One key characteristic of a good system is that it empowers people to take ownership and action. Without systems, someone must tell us what to do. With systems, we are empowered to just make it happen.

An effective system will:

1. Remove barriers. An effective system should make the next step clear, rather than providing competing options.
2. Equip. Rather than focusing on teaching head knowledge, provide practical tools and resources.
3. Improve over time. We can't wait until a system is perfect to launch it, but we should be continually analyzing and testing it.
4. Be measurable. Effective systems are measured by their results and outcomes, not their inputs.

KEY THOUGHT:

Good people using bad systems will never produce good results. Average people using good systems can produce great results.

When it comes to systems for keeping core initiative moving forward and on track, make sure you are taking the following into account:

- **Systems for communication** with the senior pastor, with managers, initiative team leaders
- **Systems for creating detailed initiative plans with measurable milestones**, and adjusting course as needed
- **Systems for accountability**, providing feedback and monitoring progress, and celebrating wins

Supporting the Visionary

Another key part of driving core initiatives is keeping the team (including the lead pastor) focused. Visionary leaders are often accused of having a short attention span, of always dreaming up the next thing while the team is still trying to execute the last idea. Here are two ways to keep the focus on completing key initiatives when a lead pastor is continuing to dream bigger dreams:

1. *Help your pastor recognize momentum.*
Visionary people tend to thrive off of energy and momentum, which is what often attracts them to new ideas. Find ways to regularly communicate to your lead pastor the steps your team is taking toward winning with the established strategy so they can *feel* that sense of momentum.

2. *Be the bridge between reality and possibility.*

Don't be a wet blanket on your senior pastor's dreams, but do help translate what their new ideas would require in terms of the team's energy and resources, including how that might impact the progress of other key initiatives that have already been identified.

Driver of Core Initiatives: Questions for Reflection

Use the following questions to reflect on what you learned in the reading and consider how it applies to your leadership and church. Jot down thoughts, notes, or answers if that helps you begin applying what you're learning.

Keep in Mind: These questions are for you. They aren't meant to be shared with others, even those on your leadership team. So, feel free to be completely honest with yourself. It will help you clarify where you're already strong and where you have opportunity for growth.

- How effectively are you staying "five steps ahead" of your team in driving future initiatives?
- How well do you balance being aware of details versus focusing on the big picture to shape culture and drive initiatives?
- How effectively do you manage your schedule to protect time for big-picture thinking and problem-solving related to core initiatives?
- How effectively do you communicate to your lead pastor the momentum and progress on established strategies?
- How well do you act as a bridge between your lead pastor's new ideas/dreams and the team's capacity and resources?
- How effectively are you helping the lead pastor and team stay focused on completing key initiatives?
- Do we have metrics in place to measure the effectiveness of our existing systems?
- What systems are we missing?

Additional Reading

- *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* by McChesney, Covey, and Huling

Part Three: Staff Alignment Builder

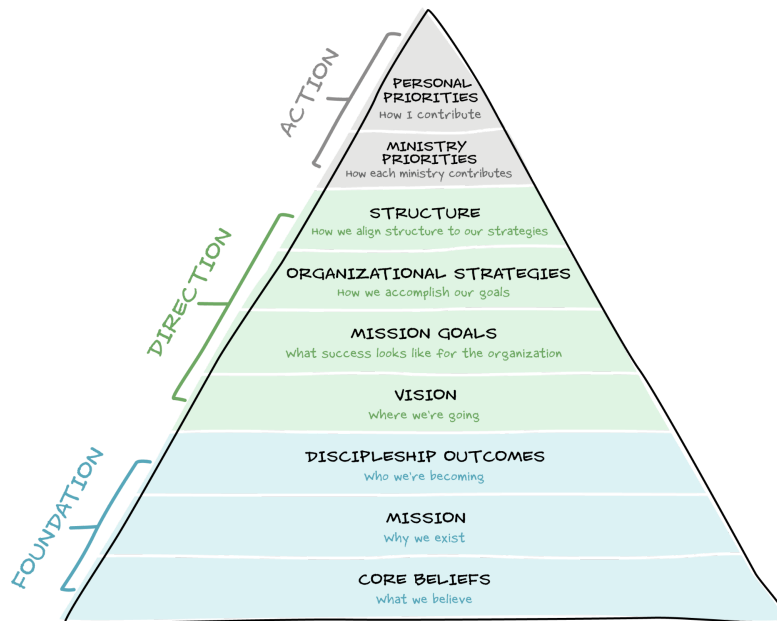
Executive Pastors own the responsibility for building alignment throughout the organization, connecting all “action” to clear “direction.”

Building Strategic Alignment

One of the most critical things an executive pastor needs to do to activate vision and drive core initiatives effectively is help connect the big picture to the everyday work of all team members. When you do that, everyone understands how their work aligns with the mission, vision, and goals of the church.

When this alignment is missing—even for a season—energy and resources are dispersed. There may be agreement on the mission (*why you exist*) and the vision (*where you’re going*), but from there team members pull in different directions.

We like to use a pyramid to visually represent what needs clarity in order to achieve this alignment. And just like a pyramid, alignment is built from the ground up.



Foundation (Levels 1-3)

At the bottom of the pyramid, these foundational levels don't change.

How you phrase them might get wordsmithed, but regardless of the methods of ministry you choose, you're not changing what you believe, why you exist, or who you want to be becoming as disciples of Jesus.

Direction (Levels 4-7)

In the middle of the pyramid, these levels provide organizational direction. There cannot be alignment deeper in the organization if leaders don't provide clarity and around where the ministry is specifically headed.

Unlike the foundational level, these need to be revisited regularly. Vision should be refreshed every 3-5 years. Organizational goals should be updated each year (tied to the vision), and organizational strategies should be evaluated for effectiveness. Organizational structure should then be altered to reflect the key goals and strategies we have defined.

Action (Levels 8-9)

The top of the pyramid aligns the work of the ministry teams and team members to the foundational and directional levels. When this is done, every person knows how their work is connected to the bigger vision, and gets everyone pulling in the same direction.

Core initiatives might be related to different levels of the pyramid in different seasons of your church's life, but viewing them through this lens will always help you articulate to your team what the *right work to do* is right now, and how their individual contributions are driving organizational results. Team members are in tune with what success looks like, and they are able to hold loosely to methods (strategies) and much tighter to mission. Priorities are clear, and pruning is possible.

Monitoring Organizational Goals & Metrics

Is your church healthy? Pastors often answer this question by "feel" alone. An executive pastor needs to own monitoring the key metrics and organizational goals that provide a more objective assessment of church health on an ongoing basis.

Some people fear using numbers and statistics in the Church, feeling that we shouldn't approach something so organic like a business. But metrics don't turn a church into a business any more than a check-up turns a body into a machine. They give you the raw data you need on a macro level to make the adjustments you need on a relational level.

Remember: Every number has a story. You just need to learn how to read them.

In addition to monitoring progress against your specific organizational goals, The Unstuck Group recommends you be tracking 30+ metrics annually, at a minimum. We offer an online tool to help you do that called the [Vital Signs Assessment](#). It's available in the [Unstuck Resource Hub](#). Since no single number can tell the whole story of a church's health, we created this set of metrics to monitor in combination that gives churches a healthier scorecard for ministry, based on benchmarks from 1000s of churches across North America.

Ultimately, keeping a pulse on an agreed upon set of core metrics helps keep the team laser focused on reaching your mission field.

Facilitating the Conditions for a Healthy Staff Culture

Setting and championing the culture is one of the [key roles a Senior Pastor can't delegate](#). That being said, the XP is usually the one who builds systems to reinforce it and monitors signs that the culture is not healthy. You own the responsibility to get the results the church expects, and you also own the responsibility to develop good people who get those results.

Management is not a dirty word; it should not be considered the opposite of "leadership." These three practices are core to good management, and you will be the primary activator and champion of the way they are done in your church.

1-on-1 Meetings

Powerful and effective as a tool, regular 1-on-1 meetings communicate priority and value to your people when they are recurring and protected. As the executive pastor, you need to model effective 1-on-1s with your direct reports, and teach those leaders how to do the same with their direct reports.

Keep the meetings short and compact; 45-60 minute meetings are ideal. Weekly is probably too often, unless the teammate is new. Take good notes for follow-up and accountability.

Leadership Development

Our calling as pastors is to train and develop God's people for ministry. So we need to shift our mindset from our own performance to the performance and development of others. Leadership development is always important but rarely urgent. Manage your calendar to communicate this as a priority.

Try using this golf coaching metaphor: Focus on giving each person one big-picture "swing thought" every quarter. If you were a golf coach trying to help a player improve their swing, you would give them one thing to focus on at a time. They are more likely to see improvement with the

tip to “keep your head down” and a lot of practice swings than they would if you gave them 3-4 tips to try to remember and implement at once.

Dealing with Underperformance

You get what you tolerate. We must view dealing with underperforming staff members as a stewardship issue. Have clear and ongoing performance-related conversations and give people every opportunity and resource to improve.

Also keep in mind: What gets noticed gets repeated. When you catch people doing something right, that can have an even bigger impact on their overall performance than repeated attempts to point out where they are missing the mark.

When things still aren't working, it's time for a warning conversation: Identify a timeline for improvement that must be made, or they will be released from the team. Once the decision has been made, don't linger. Prioritize timely termination and avoid long goodbyes.

As you own this role of building staff alignment, your team will feel valued, you will be confident the *right* work is getting done, and everyone will be pulling in the same direction.

Building Staff Alignment: Questions for Reflection

Use the following questions to reflect on what you learned in the reading and consider how it applies to your leadership and your church. Jot down thoughts, notes, or answers if that helps you to begin applying what you're learning.

Keep in Mind: These questions are for you. They aren't meant to be shared with others, even those on your leadership team. So, feel free to be completely honest with yourself. It will help you clarify where you're already strong and where you have opportunity for growth.

- How well do you connect the church's mission, vision, and goals to the everyday work of your team members?
- Do you consistently articulate to your team what the "right work to do" is right now, and how individual contributions drive organizational results?
- What opportunities exist to improve the clarity of mission, vision, goals, strategies, and individual roles within your church?
- Are there areas where strategic alignment is currently missing or weak within your team or the organization?
- What development opportunities are you currently providing for your team members?
- Where do you see the greatest potential for growth in your leadership team?
- How effectively are you addressing performance issues when they arise?
- What systems do you have in place for regular feedback and communication?

- What systems do you have in place to monitor culture?

Exercise: Strategic Alignment Pyramid

With your lead pastor, walk through each level of the Strategic Alignment Pyramid. Use a Red, Yellow, Green scoring system to rate how clear your church staff are on each level of the pyramid.

For any that score a Yellow or Red in the Foundational level, consider bringing this topic to your next lay leadership or Senior Leadership Team meeting. You need to make a plan to bring clarity to Core Beliefs, Mission and Discipleship Outcomes as soon as realistically possible.

For any that score Yellow or Red in Directional level, consider your next steps. Do you need to bring in an outside facilitator (like The Unstuck Group!) to help you clarify future Vision, Mission Goals, Organizational Strategies, or Structure? Ideally, these Directional conversations are revisited annually.

For any that score Yellow or Red in the Action level, consider how well the Ministry Priorities and Individual Priorities are currently being articulated. Are the supporting levels clear enough for Ministry Priorities and Individual Priorities to even be set? Are certain ministries healthier than others in terms of mission alignment? Are there pruning conversations that need to happen in the near future?

Use the Strategic Alignment Pyramid regularly to do a “gut check” and ensure you are continuing to build great alignment on the team as you lead new core initiatives in the future.

Additional Reading

- *The Advantage* by Patrick Lencioni
- *High Impact Teams* by Lance Witt

In Closing

Great leaders own the roles only they can play. Only once you understand the duties and responsibilities that must always remain in your hands, you can begin the process of handing *everything* else off to members of your team.

Your growth as a leader will strengthen your church and set the stage for dynamic organizational growth. As you consider your next steps, let us leave you with some resource recommendations for further study:

- **3 Roles a Senior Pastor Can't Delegate** [YouTube]
- **Leadership Cohorts** - We host a few leadership cohorts for Executive Pastors each year. Learn more and get on the waiting list at theunstuckgroup.com/cohorts.
- **Unstuck Resource Hub** - We're adding new resources to equip pastors all the time: Stay up-to-date at theunstuckgroup.com/resource-hub.

About The Unstuck Group

The Unstuck Group helps pastors grow healthy churches by guiding them through experiences to align vision, strategy, team and action. Our core services include ministry health assessments, strategic planning, staffing and structure reviews, and multisite consulting. Learn how it works by visiting theunstuckgroup.com.

Special thanks to Paul Alexander and Lance Witt for their contributions to this eBook. In addition, much of this content was initially produced by Tony Morgan and has been updated by The Unstuck Group staff in 2025. Tony passed away in 2024, leaving behind a legacy of thought leadership, innovation, and a deep commitment to helping churches thrive. We continue to share his work in his honor.