

## Working Together

Dr. Dan Doriani

Christian ministries ought to seek kingdom goals in ways that please the king. Too often, we “do God’s work” by godless wisdom. The media tends to focus on egregious failures, such as sexual sins, bullying, and misuse of funds, but dishonesty is far more common. No one plans to become a liar or deceiver, but leaders offer up half-truths and quarter-truths to protect a reputation or to avoid disclosing awkward or painful truths, saying “It’s strictly for the good of the mission.” We also get careless, even manipulative. We make promises or policy statements in order to recruit fresh talent or motivate disaffected workers, barely considering how difficult it will be to fulfill those promises. At worst, we hardly ask “Do I believe what I am saying?” We simply tell people what they want to hear.

As I consider these problems, I returned to document that a healthy ministry adopted in order to prevent these very problems. The title was something like “Principles for Working Together.” The original document primarily focused on solid communication and collaboration before, during, and after meetings. The document, apparently from the 1980s or 1990s, had become anonymous. Since no one could point to the author, I treated it like a folk song - a set of ideas that had fallen into the public domain. So, I have revised it every few years in light of experiences, good and bad, and reflection on Scripture.

The list aims to promote loyalty, honesty, and fruitfulness in ministry. Ministries are most enjoyable and effective when people love and respect each other, believe in the mission, and know their roles within that mission. The list also corrects common errors, especially the dishonesty and pride that can degrade even the noblest ministries. Love, faithfulness, and honesty are godly *and* they enhance the fruitfulness of a ministry. The goal is reach kingdom goals in ways that please the king. So, we keep our eyes on both the example of Jesus and the law of God. Theologically, let us ask “How can we show that Jesus is the head of this ministry?” Morally, we ask “How can we restrain pride and dishonesty and pursue love, loyalty, and godliness?” Pragmatically, we can consider the ways teams prepare for good meetings and make it easier to complete the goals or plans that arise from them. By contrast, when we cut off discussion and misrepresent the views and motives of others, we erode trust, love, and respect.

To my sorrow, I have witnessed a lot of dishonesty in Christian organization. We need to avoid lies, deceptions, and misleading half-truths, but there is more to honesty than that. We avoid gossip and flattery, and we don’t praise someone’s work to their face, then criticize it when they leave. We don’t flatter, we tell people when they succeed or fail. Leaders watch what they say to subordinates. They know that any statement can seem like a promise or policy statement. We keep promises and commitments or we clearly admit and explain it when we can’t.

No one follows all of these principles. Each edition of this list convicts and corrects me. After revising the list many times, my sins and failures are clearer than I ever. But let’s not despair, let’s repent and lean on the grace of Jesus as revealed in the gospel. At best, we will grow in love for God and his people and show that love in word and deed.

## Working as a Team: How We Work Together

### **Part 1: Big ideas, covering all of life.**

1. **We love each other as Christ loves us.** We forgive each other, defend each other, and honor each other's gifts, believing that God has scattered his gifts widely. We put others' interests and reputations above our own. We serve God's people, church, and kingdom.
2. **We seek counsel.** Teams consult all members Internally, we hear everyone who properly has a voice in great matters, whether they have formal or informal authority or expertise. We also seek the wisdom of gifted and expert outsiders.

**Explanation:** The doctrines of sin and human finitude require us to assume that all of our proposals have flaws. One pastor says we need friends to "knock the folly" out of our ideas. One politician says we can never assume that our critics or opponents are entirely wrong. Our work will be stronger if we hear them out. We should often ask "What did I miss?" This makes a positive outcome more likely.

3. **We know our mission and our central tasks, and we tackle them.**

**Explanation:** People tend to manage projects that are familiar, projects they can complete, even if modest or secondary. We work on the great issues, even if they are daunting.

4. **We take responsibility.** *Leaders* accept responsibility for the ministry as a whole. *Everyone* labors faithfully in their role; we are willing to join almost any effort in an opportune moment or a desperate time.
5. **We give people the information they need to make their plans.** We tell them what they need to know to work effectively and fruitfully. We don't withhold essential information. We tell others what they can expect from us and what we expect from them.

### **Part 2 Meetings and the main tasks that precede and follow them.**

1. In meetings, **we make proposals** rather than asking open-ended questions.  
**Explanation:** We waste time and dissipate energy when we say, "What should we do about x?" We offer plans that we are prepared to explain and defend. We also point out weaknesses in our proposals. We state reasonable alternatives to our proposals and name their strengths and weaknesses. We accept revision, amendment, or rejection.
2. Before and after we meet, **we involve others in the decisions that affect their work.** We seek their input and wisdom since they know their sphere. We deliberate together on major issues. We consult as needed on minor ones. If we have the authority to make a decision without the vote or consent of the people affected, we at least inform them in private before it becomes official.

3. **We speak before writing** about difficult issues. Phone is better than text or email. We take pains to word significant messages carefully. *We never* communicate by anonymous memo.
4. **We take responsibility for our decisions.** We don't ask others to make decisions or to implement programs that are our responsibility. There may be reasons to report the action of a committee or team, but we don't hide behind, "The president or pastor or elders or board said." We stand together, especially in difficult decisions.
5. **When we make decisions, we pause to confirm them** and state who has responsibility for what actions. The goal is not "Get this monkey off my back." It is: "*All monkeys have owners*, and we know the identity of the owner."
6. **We support team decisions.** We air our disagreements inside team structures. We raise new topics, engage in healthy conflict, and make proposals there. If we think the team made a big mistake, we can ask to revisit the decision after time passes.
7. **We don't surprise others in meetings** - and we don't *act* surprised if we're not. Present news that could seem negative or controversial in private first. Similarly, don't change positions on important matters without telling people who would want to know.

We don't take all six of these steps on lesser matters. We're quick with small matters and slow with great issues. Again, we know we fall short of our own principles. When we fail, we confess, seek God's mercy for ourselves, forgive others, and seek the Spirit's strength for the mission.