

*The Seven Threads
of
Ministry Team Relationships*



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The Seven Threads of Ministry Team Relationships

E. Stanley Ott¹

Vital ministry always centers in Jesus Christ and in relationships among the team members. It should come as no surprise then, that the health of any ministry is directly related to the health and quality of relationships among those on the ministry team. Some of my most painful experiences in ministry have come when team members failed to show basic courtesies to one another. There are times when the stakes surrounding some decision or actions grow and people have more to gain or lose or the risk of opposition and criticism rises. It is surprisingly easy for team members under stress to undercut each other, run around decisions they don't like and avoid working out differences on a face-to-face basis. Any piece of cloth is simply the weave of many threads worked together into a single fabric. The community experienced by a team is no more than the weave many personal relationships. We will look at seven threads of healthy ministry team relationships. Each thread is a basic covenantal agreement of healthy ministry team fellowship.

Thread One: Spiritual Disciplines – we engage in the disciplines of the Christian faith.

Our earnest desire is to grow in loving faithful relationship with our Lord, experiencing his grace and love offering that grace and love to others. Out of love for our Lord, we therefore commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the disciplines of the Christian faith. We know that these spiritual disciplines do not, in themselves, earn God's grace, but are means by which God's grace may grow in our lives and extend through us to others. We know our salvation is by faith, believing in Jesus Christ alone, and that by means of these disciplines we are both serving and pleasing Christ and showing gratitude for the grace God has given us.

We covenant as a ministry team to practice the corporate spiritual disciplines of studying the Bible together, sharing our lives with one another and praying for one another (Word-Share-Prayer). We engage in formal prayer partnerships with one another. We break bread with one another, sharing in hospitality and in friendship. We commit ourselves to attend corporate worship and to build the quality of the fellowship of both congregation and ministry team as we practice humility and mutual service.

¹ For more information, see Chapter 7 of *Transform Your Church with Ministry Teams* by E. Stanley Ott

We covenant to the practices that will help us grow in faith and discipleship together and individually

Together
Bible Study
Pray for one another.

Prayer Partners

Break bread quarterly

Home Alone
Devotional Life
Bible Reading
Prayer

Weekly worship

We covenant to engage in personal spiritual disciplines such as the regular reading of the Bible and prayer in daily devotions and worship with a congregation. We lovingly encourage one another in the practice of personal spiritual disciplines. We covenant to pray for our ministry team and for each member on the team.

Thread Two: Face-to-Face Relationships – we develop friendships with the others on the team

We covenant to build face-to-face real relationships that make personal friendship of higher priority than even our team's ministry. In the context of true relationship we are free to shape our common vision and share ideas with each other. We respect one another, love one another, and serve one another. In face-to-face relationships everything is kept "on the table" without hidden agendas or concerns. We tell one another what we think and we move ahead together.

We practice hospitality with one another, welcoming each other into our lives, spending time together for the primary purpose of growing in friendship. We practice reconciliation when discord surfaces between us when we speak directly to those with whom we disagree. We agree to disagree agreeably and to model love, dignity and unity to the congregation or wider ministry. We adhere to Ron Rand's "Good Report" Principle. When we speak of another person, we speak well of them even if there are things about that person we don't like or agree with.

Thread Three: Confidentiality – we respect the confidences of others.

We covenant to keep one another's confidences. Confidentiality is a trust and when we trust one another within the team we grow in unity and heart. What we hear from one another stops with us unless we have permission to pass it on. Concerns of a personal nature shared within the team as matters for prayer, support and encouragement are to be kept among team members even after the team ends or we leave the team. We do not ask others on the team to betray confidences in order to advance our ministry.

Confidentiality simply means we respect one another enough to trust to each other with what we say. When we experience an atmosphere of affirmation and confidentiality, we are free to be vulnerable and to speak of the deeper concerns

Personal
friendship

"On the table"
relationships

Hospitality of
time spent
together and
not just for
ministry.

Reconciliation
when needed

Good Report
Principle

Keep
confidences

Do not ask
others to betray
confidences

Affirmation
and
Vulnerability

of our hearts. At the same time, however, we will act decisively if we learn that a life is in danger, that a person is considering suicide or if there is physical or sexual abuse going on. To ignore such situations would be the very opposite of Christian community.

Thread Four: Communication – we communicate directly and thoroughly

We covenant to communicate constantly. We seek to communicate face-to-face or by phone, person-to-person, when possible. For routine matters, the use of e-mail, written notes or voice mail are fine, but we don't initiate conversation about issues of significance with e-mail, a note, or voice mail. Significant issues are those that "grab you in the stomach." They may involve some major assignment, a difficult undertaking, or where there is a difference of opinion.

Face-to-face relationships mean we do not communicate with people with whom we are in a direct relationship *through someone else*. Another way of saying this is, *we do not make bank shots*. In the game of pool, one way to knock a ball into the pocket is by banking the ball off the side rail and into the pocket. In human relationships a bank shot happens when one person bounces a message off of a second person in order to deliver the message to the third person. Sometimes this is called *triangulation*. The bank shot is a favorite method of influence used by some members of every congregation. We covenant to speak to one another directly ó face-to-face.

We use e-mail to communicate information and affirmation but not for confrontation or persuasion. If we call someone to a difficult task or something that he or she would prefer not to do, we do it voice-to-voice. If we have something to say that calls a person's actions into question, then we speak to that person. If we wish to say something to a group that is complex or has major ramifications, we do so in person or with a conference call. That way we are able to use most effectively all of the nuances of speech and body language to communicate concern and vision while keeping our personal relationship alive, vital and reconciled. In other words, email is not the best means of leadership and persuasion. If you need to lead a person to agree with some position or task, it is far better to do it face-to-face or voice-to-voice by phone. Remember, too, that e-mail is a public document. What we may send innocently to one person, expecting it to be read alone, is very easily forward to those who will forward it to others. We say with e-mail only what we would put into the newspaper!

Face-to-face communication whenever possible.

No negative bank shots

Email for information and affirmation. Never for confrontation or persuasion.

Email is a public document

Thread Five: Clear Expectations – we clarify our vision what we expect of one another

We covenant to maintain a graceful and clear understanding of the vision we seek to accomplish together and what we expect of one another. Both are crucial to sound relationships and community. Differing expectations can lead to frustration and disappointment. The team regularly reviews its covenantal agreements, which are expected of every team member. Individual expectations for each team member's ministry may be clarified using three simple practices.

First on an *annual or semi-annual basis*, as best fits team life, the team spends extended time in ministry design (planning). An annual overnight retreat is a great way to do this but if not a retreat, then dedicate some extensive time for this planning. We think ahead concerning our vision and what steps next to take. During this time of planning and ministry design, each team member considers the steps he or she will take personally in fulfillment of the team goals. Those steps may be shaped in conversation with the team leader as well as with others in the team member's ministry. Depending on the needs of ministry of the team, those steps may be very detailed or somewhat general. The defining vision and ministry practices of the congregation and the team will help to shape those steps. Such anticipated next steps of each member need not be rigid expectations and requirements but they will give direction to the ministry. We give one another the freedom and flexibility to modify next steps as new opportunities or unexpected obstacles present themselves.

Second, we keep our expectations clear by leading the team to think ahead and plan on a *monthly or quarterly basis*, not in as much detail as the annual/semi-annual experience of ministry design. The annual process looks at overall ministry design issues whereas monthly times of reflection deal with the daily realities of the ministry. It gives leaders and team members time to think ahead together and to stay together in thought and action. Simple questions guide the process such as, "How are we doing? Are we accomplishing what we anticipated? What did we learn? What help do we need? What are we going to do now?" The spirit of a time of thinking ahead is positive and encouraging. Recall God's word in Isaiah 43:19, "See, I am doing a new thing!" We look for the new thing, the next step in our ministry as a team and in our ministries as team members. Regular times of thinking ahead re-clarifies what is to be done and what kind of support may be required. Some teams will do this together in a team meeting. Others will do this in smaller gatherings of the team leader with team members.

Regular review of covenantal agreements ó such as "The Seven Threads"

Ministry Design = Planning

Annual planning process ó goals for the entire team ó goals for each person and affiliate ministry

Goals give direction. Are not used to punish non-achievement but to give direction to ministry.

Monthly or Quarterly review for each person or area of ministry ó How are we doing in relation to our goals.

How are we doing?
Are we accomplishing what we anticipated?
What did we learn?
What help do we need?
What are we going to do now?

Third, we keep in touch with each other on a *weekly basis*. These may simply be informal conversations in person, by phone or by the coffeepot. In simple five-minute conversations, it is remarkable how much clarification of what's happening and counsel may be offered. Such conversations may be informal but they must be intentional. This check up time is essential to sound leadership and warm *koinonia*-fellowship. If misunderstandings develop or problems surface, deal with them immediately. We don't save up our irritation for our next team meeting. We keep our relationships face-to-face, on the table. We work out problems between us and move ahead together.

Weekly updates between ministry leaders such as elders and pastor or committee/team

Essential to the practice of clear expectations is that we don't surprise one another. We keep one another informed of our plans before we act or involve others. "No surprises" simply mean we respect one another enough to communicate thoroughly and to accept in a good spirit the possibility that some of our ideas for ministry will be modified. We let the team hear our plans first, directly from us, rather than indirectly from others. This is the practice of our team leader as well as the team members.

NO SURPRISES

We keep each other informed.

Thread Six: "Loose –Tight" – we serve with freedom and within boundaries

Think of a fleet of ships in which the admiral directs all ships to sail in formation. The looser the formation, the greater opportunity each ship has to set its own course. The tighter the formation the less freedom each ship has to choose its direction. This "loose-tight" concept is a useful way to consider the relationship between a team and its parent ministry and the relationship between a team member and the team itself.²

"Loose" for a ministry team means that in fulfillment of its vision the congregation gives the team tremendous freedom to plan and carry out ministry. With "loose" the congregation says to the team, "How can we help you or support you?" A fruitful power of the ministry team concept is that teams are quite capable of self-direction. Teams given such latitude by their parent ministry can demonstrate astonishing levels of creativity.

"Loose" for a team
 = freedom to plan ministry
 = "You have permission" just keep us informed.

"Tight" for the team means the team conforms its ministry to the defining vision and defining practices of the core vision and values of the congregation and the team's own core vision and values. For example, if the defining vision of the congregation is to grow disciples then the team makes growing disciples

"Tight" for a team
 = Is your ministry centered on our defining vision and values?

² The loose-tight concept is discussed in Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr. In Search Of Excellence (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers 1982)

part of whatever it does to fulfill its team vision. Every healthy congregation exerts appropriate authority in establishing its ministry boundaries by means of a defining vision and why do we exist and what are the practices that we consider essential. Teams within congregational life align their life and ministry with those defining elements.

The *loose-tight* formula also applies to the relationship between the team member and the team. With energetic, enthusiastic, responsible team members we major in loose. We give our team members all the freedom possible to carry out their responsibilities commensurate with their initiative and wisdom as long as that ministry is consistent with the defining vision and practices of our team. Loose means if you are a part of our team and you have dreams and energy then we, the team, get out of your way and say, "Go to it. How can we help you or support you?" Loose means we are permission-givers, "We hear your plan. Fantastic get going." Loose can even mean, "We hear your plan, we (or I) don't think we would do it that way and here is why, but your plan is sound and we want to back your ideas so, to do it, and let us know how we may support you." That's loose.

Tight, on the other hand, means that the leader of our team, or we, the whole team, may ask you to do something you don't particularly want to do or we may ask you not to do something you do want to do. When we ask for *tight*, we explain why. We do not like restricting one another's freedom to act just for the fun of it. However, there certain issues may arise bearing significant consequence. For example, we may ask that when driving to ministry activities that no more people get into a car than there are seat belts. If the guideline is tight, then it is not to be ignored - even if say there were an event for which there aren't enough seats with seat belts and a team member may want to ignore the guideline.

Sometimes a team may be inclined to be too "tight out of fear some team member will rock the boat or because of the level of effort or risk that will be involved. We constantly ask ourselves if such fear represents a truly significant concern. Sometimes it takes courage be a permission-giver and to allow a team member to do something new or for the whole team to move in a new direction. Finding a healthy loose-tight balance is never easy. It is, however, essential.

Thread Seven: Loving loyalty -- we have the freedom to express our opinions within the team while supporting team decisions to those not on the team

Loose for the individual's freedom to initiate consistent with initiative, maturity, and wisdom (centered on our defining vision and values) .

Loose = permission giving

Get Going
Do it
How can we help?

Tight for the individual's living with team boundaries (policies and decisions). Responsiveness to the team leader.

Finding a healthy loose-tight balance. Practicing Loving Loyalty (Thread Seven) when the balance

Loving loyalty means that out of love we stick together in public statements and private conversations even when we do not agree over some issue. We represent decisions as "*our* decisions" or "the staff's or elders' decision" or "the youth ministry team's decision", not as "that stupid idea was Jim's idea or Janice's idea" shifting all responsibility from ourselves. That is the tree limb maneuver again by which I defend myself by blaming you and put you on the limb and saw it off!

We have to have the freedom to disagree. Without it our face-to-face relationship is not real. We want to be able to disagree agreeably and still model love, dignity and unity to the congregation or wider ministry. Since our relationships are a demonstration of the Spirit of Jesus working within us, we have to practice a healthy loose-tight balance of permission giving and permission denying, of giving freedom and defining action. Where that loose-tight balance is healthy, where we respect one another's dignity, and bless one another's vision, then to the watching public, who would love to see us disagree, who sadly feast on conflict among leaders, we show unity, loyalty, and mutual respect and commitment.

My friend Ron Rand speaks of the "Good Report" Principle. When we speak of another person, we speak well of him or her even if there are things about that person we don't like or agree with. Loving loyalty means we use the Good Report Principle as a way of showing honor and dignity to one another even if we don't agree or when others are critical of us or upset with our ministry.

We recognize that personal aims and approaches to ministry may change with time and that some among us on the team may find our personal direction increasingly incongruent with the vision and practices of the team. Rather than practicing "loving loyalty" with increasing sense of dissonance, we believe there are time when it is perfectly okay to ask to be "sent" from the team to a new or different ministry. If you discover that our team, even with its permission-giving philosophy, is too tight for you, consider being sent with our love and affection to a new or different ministry.

Weave the Threads Together: build the covenantal agreements into team life

Adapt the seven threads to fit the needs of your own team or the ministry teams of your congregation. Use them to help your team experience one heart but not as rules with which browbeat each other. Weave each of these seven threads into the fabric of your team life. Model them. Encourage them. Use them as pathfinders to lead your team on the journey of becoming one in spirit and in mutual love.

Review the seven threads every six months. The process of discussing them has a way of helping the team modify its own behavior and build the maturity of its community. And whenever a new person joins the team, explain the seven threads - the covenantal agreements to each new person joining the team and ask for their commitment to them. When you review them, review them with an eye to growing in love for one another rather than establishing some sort of grading system with which to chastise the group. Talk about the seven threads as a team. Bring in supplementary material to enhance your skills.

You can evaluate how the team members feel the team is doing with each of the threads by giving each of them a list of the seven threads with a five point scale. Ask them to anonymously assign a value for each thread, with 1 meaning this thread is virtually non-existent in our team and a 5 indicating our team practices this thread with excellence.

Spiritual Disciplines	1	2	3	4	5
Face-to-Face Relationships	1	2	3	4	5
Confidentiality	1	2	3	4	5
Communication	1	2	3	4	5
Clear expectations	1	2	3	4	5
Loose-tight	1	2	3	4	5
Loving Loyalty	1	2	3	4	5

Compute a team average for each thread. Then discuss the results together. Which threads are strong, which are weaker and why? Celebrate your strengths. Talk about specific action steps by which you will seek to grow in the weaker threads.

Use the Seven Threads to shape healthy team life ó not as rules to hammer each other with ó but as guidelines for a healthy fellowship.

Review the covenantal agreements (Seven Threads) every six months and every time new people join the team

Use a simple five point scale as an anonymous way to assess how your team is doing.

Discuss together ways to improve your team relationships and functioning.