**The TEN Dysfunctions of a Senior Pastor - Executive Pastor Partnership**

**By Jim Baker**

Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor Partnership – *A relationship between the two senior leaders of the church characterized by shared authority, joint responsibilities and mutual cooperation to achieve the mission and amplify the reach of the church.*

Arguably, no church relationship is more vital yet more complex and tenuous than the Senior Pastor and Executive Pastor partnership. In the course of my journey as an Executive Pastor of 23 years and my experience in coaching and consulting Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnerships, two critical truths have become clear to me.

First, healthy Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnerships are elusive because they are made up of fallible human beings who all suffer from some degree of personal dysfunctional. Second, the Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnership fails because they unintentionally fall prey to 10 natural but dangerous behavioral pitfalls that breed dysfunction.

Effective and healthy Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnerships comes down to acknowledging sources of dysfunction and mastering behaviors, disciplines and practices that overcome destructive behavioral tendencies and build cohesive partnerships.

This article is designed to provide a clear, concise and practical guide to using the Ten Dysfunctions to improve your Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnership and achieve together more than you could ever hope for alone.

**The TEN Dysfunctions**

The following is a list of ten potential sources of Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor relational dysfunction. Every Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor will recognize themselves somewhere in this list. They go to the heart of why Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnerships, even the best of them, often struggle.

1. Absence of **Trust**
2. Abnormal **Fear**
3. Unresolved **Conflicting Ideologies**
4. Superficial **Interpersonal** **Harmony**
5. Breakdowns in **Communication**
6. Lack of **Role** **Clarity**
7. Improper **Engagement**
8. Avoidance of **Accountability**
9. Failure of **Buy-In**
10. Inattention to **Personal** **Growth**

**Understanding and Overcoming the TEN Dysfunctions**

For better understanding we begin with a brief overview of the dysfunction and then distill the problem through specific examples of negative and positive behaviors.

In order to help practically apply the material we offer actionable strategies for overcoming, preventing or lessening the impact of the dysfunction. We conclude by provide questions to encourage the Senior Pastor and Executive Pastor to openly dialogue around the dysfunction.

In reality many of the following healthy and unhealthy behaviors may be evidenced in more than one dysfunction and the strategies and questions for overcoming, preventing or lessening may be applied to multiple dysfunctions as well.

Finally, though presented as distinct issues, each potentially exhibited by both parties and lethal for a healthy Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnerships, they actually form an interrelated model that should be addressed as a whole rather than in isolation. Like a chain, if a single link is broken, the partnership can deteriorate if even one dysfunction is allowed to thrive.

**Dysfunction 1: Absence of Trust**

**Absence of Trust** may well be the single greatest predictor of success or failure in the Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnership. In the context of the Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor relationship, trust is the confidence that the others’ intentions are for the best of the church and the Kingdom, they have each other’s back, and each believes the other has the competence, character and commitment to help them achieve their objectives. In the absence of such trust the partnership is doomed.

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| **Partnerships with an absence of trust:*** Jump to judging motives and intentions without clarifying
* Betray each other in conversation; breach confidentiality
* Question aptitude and attitude without specific supporting evidence
* Hesitate to ask for help
* Hold grudges
* Over promise and under deliver
* Act and speak inconsistently
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| **Partnerships with trust:*** Give each other the benefit of the doubt before jumping to negative conclusions
* Honor each other in conversation; disagree only behind closed doors
* Exhibit solidarity and loyalty; the relationship is more important than any single outcome
* Demonstrate competence, integrity, concern and reliability
* Ask for help and offer assistance
* Take personal responsibility for poor performance
* Communicate in advance and never blind-side
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| **Strategies for building trust:*** Pray with each other; forgive each other; demonstrate grace
* Follow through with commitments, agreements and responsibilities
* Admit mistakes; don’t play the blame game
* Bring solutions to the table along with the problems
* Help each other reach personal and organizational goals
* Listen intently to each other and offer assistance
* Trust building is relationship building, spend time with each other outside the office
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** What do I/We do that contributes to building trust?
* What do I/We do that undermines trust? How have I disappointed you?
* What do I/We believe are the sources of our mistrust?
* Do we have any unresolved concerns? Where do we need forgiveness and restitution?
* What things do you find most difficult to talk with me about?
* How could I improve my side of our partnership?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to cultivate greater trust?
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**Dysfunction 2: Abnormal Fear**

**Abnormal Fear** is generally the result of acute insecurity and expresses itself in ego driven behaviors and is often masked by arrogance, confidence and self-assuredness. Micro-managing, excessive control, and angry outbursts towards anyone or anything that threatens self-esteem characterize this dysfunction.

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| **Partnerships with a presence of fear:*** Feel threatened by the competence and status of the other
* Exhibit egocentric and narcissistic behaviors
* Are highly controlling
* Are defensive when challenged or threatened
* Constantly need to prove themselves
* Misuse and abuse personal and positional power
* Without empathy throw each other under the bus
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| **Partnerships without a presence of fear:*** Are vulnerable with each other about fears
* Are open and honest with each other without filters
* Share on a heart-to-heart rather than superficial basis
* Delegate and empower without hesitation
* Share credit and express heartfelt gratitude for each other privately and publically
* Delight in each other’s success
* Apologize and forgive sincerely
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| **Strategies for overcoming fear:*** Identify and name fears to each other
* Risk providing humble and unvarnished feed-back
* Enlist a support network including:
* A Counselor to examine how unresolved past issues impact fear based behaviors
* A Spiritual Director or Mentor to provide insights into faith walk, identity and behavior
* An Executive or Personal Coach to learn practical healthy leader practices
* A peer ally to provide third party perspective
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** How do I/We exhibit an absence of fear in our relationship?
* What fear based behaviors do I/We exhibit?
* What role does fear play in our relationship?
* What do I/We believe is the source of our fear based behaviors? What are you afraid of?
* Who do I/We know who could provide us help and support?
* What one area of character could you address to become more like Christ?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to overcome our fear based behaviors?
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**Dysfunction 3: Conflicting Ideologies**

**Conflicting Ideologies** most commonly include differences and disagreements in theology, philosophy, methodology, governance, staffing, resource allocation, values and vision. This dysfunction is fueled by the perception one’s core value set is being threatened or questioned. Left unchecked it leads to confusion and lack of clarity for church staff and lay leadership.

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| **Partnerships with unresolved conflicting ideologies:*** Fail to agree and align on church direction, polity, strategy and resource allocation
* Have a win-lose mentality
* Are dogmatic, close minded and black-white thinkers; demand uniformity and conformity
* Are characterized by emotionally charged, mean spirited, and personality focused attacks
* Display high levels of defensiveness
* Have ideologies that are strongly tied to one’s sense of self
* Create organizational confusion and misalignment
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| **Partnerships with aligned ideologies:*** For the sake of the church and the Kingdom align themselves around the church’s mission, vision, values, objectives, goals, systems, people, policies and procedures
* Are willing to engage in passionate debate yet practice win-win third alternative thinking
* Limit disagreement to concepts and ideas rather than personal attacks
* Yield to each other’s areas of strengths, experience and authority
* Are open-minded, non-judgmental and big-picture thinkers
* Embrace that most ideologies must adapt to changing circumstances
* Realize values are often and necessarily in tension and work to discover ways to co-exist
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| **Strategies for overcoming conflicting ideologies:*** Seek first clarity and understanding on areas of agreement and disagreement
* Question each other to understand how they arrived at conclusions
* Offer feedback as opinion rather than fact
* Involve an authoritative third party perspective
* Attend conferences, conventions and workshops together and discuss content
* Acknowledge the validity of each other’s positions; agree to disagree
* Resolve disagreements in a timely fashion rather than revisiting them continually
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** Where are we ideologically aligned?
* Where are we ideologically misaligned?
* What behaviors do I/We exhibit that works against resolving our ideological alignment?
* What are possible causes of our conflicting ideologies?
* What are the obstacles to resolving our conflicting ideologies?
* What are your non-negotiables?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to become ideologically aligned?
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**Dysfunction 4: Superficial Interpersonal Harmony**

**Superficial Interpersonal Harmony** appears on the surface as harmonious but avoids productive conflict and healthy debate, buries disagreement, and encourages isolation. This dysfunction often results from a lack of understanding and appreciation for the others’ unique history, personality and preferences.

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| **Partnerships with artificial interpersonal harmony:*** Waste time and energy managing their disingenuous behaviors for effect and perception
* Conceal their mistakes, weaknesses, deficiencies and short comings from each other
* Fail to recognize and maximize each other’s gifts and strengths
* Share little personal or family information
* Fail to understand why the other acts and thinks the way they do
* Avoid difficult conversations
* Try to change each other
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| **Partnerships with interpersonal harmony:*** Admit weaknesses and own mistakes
* Are vulnerable, unguarded and genuine with each other
* Tap into each other’s God-given gifts, strengths, passions, experiences and calling
* Comfortably discuss their personal lives with each other
* Value their differences and put each other in positions to succeed at being their best selves
* Have hard conversations; receive feedback with humility, grace and dignity
* Focus on understanding work styles and preferences rather than trying to change each other
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| **Strategies for overcoming artificial interpersonal harmony:*** Acknowledge each other’s strengths and weaknesses
* Acknowledge how each other contribute to as well as deter success
* Share personal histories, aspirations and dreams
* Jointly take and share a Personality and Preference Assessment
* Take the log out of your eye before looking at the other person
* Know what matters to each other
* Share what is going on personally at the top of every meeting
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** In what ways do I/We demonstrate we have interpersonal harmony?
* In what ways do I/We demonstrate we have artificial interpersonal harmony?
* What behaviors do I/We practice that works against our interpersonal harmony?
* What are possible causes of artificial interpersonal harmony?
* What words and phrases describe your strengths and you at your best?
* How can we best encourage each other?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to build interpersonal harmony?
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**Dysfunction 5: Breakdowns in Communication**

**Breakdowns in Communication** result from a failure to share strategic information in a timely manner, develop a common language, or learn each other’s way of thinking. This dysfunction can often be traced to a lack of discipline in scheduling and planning mutually meaningful and productive meetings.

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| **Partnerships with breakdowns in communication:*** Dread meetings and find reasons to avoid them
* Have meetings that lack clear purpose, agendas and outcomes
* Fail to listen to each other and learn from each other
* Neglect to ask each other’s opinion
* Withhold critical information
* Apply different meanings to different words
* Create ambiguity for the organization
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| **Partnerships without breakdowns in communication:*** When in doubt about the relevancy of information, they share anyway
* Interpret each other’s wants and wishes accurately to others
* Have regular, disciplined and focused meetings
* Practice collaborative decision making
* Learn to speak and use each other’s languages
* Understand and respect each other’s thought patterns
* Create clarity for the organization
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| **Strategies for overcoming breakdowns in communication:*** Calendar annual, quarterly and weekly meetings with different agendas, locations and focuses
* End meetings with a clear understanding of responsibilities, commitments and calls to action
* Document and share the output of all meetings
* Practice daily spontaneous “stand-up” meetings
* Establish a common understanding of language and terms……”when I say this I mean this”
* Share with full disclosure the output of relevant meetings you have had with others
* Listen and ask questions to learn and clarify
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** In what ways do I/We communicate effectively?
* In what ways do I/We have breakdowns in communication?
* What factors contribute to our breakdowns in communication?
* What could we do to make our meetings more meaningful to you?
* What types of information do you want from me? Not want from me?
* How do you like to receive information from me?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to increase our communication effectiveness?
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**Dysfunction 6: Lack of Role Clarity**

**Lack of Role Clarity** is best illustrated through the three lane highway metaphor where there is ambiguity, confusion or disagreement on the responsibilities and authority that falls in the Senior Pastor’s lane, the Executive Pastor’s lane and that which falls in the shared lane. Crashes occur when they meddle in each other’s lanes and have a lack of clarity on the shared responsibility lane.

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| **Partnerships with a lack of role clarity:*** Fail to have a shared view of their roles
* Fail to clarify individual and mutual expectations
* Fail to take full responsibility for their roles
* Confuse their identity with their role
* Undermine each other’s authority
* Send conflicting messages and confuse staff and lay leaders
* Consistently tread in each other’s lanes of responsibility and authority
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| **Partnerships with role clarity:*** Clearly outline roles in job descriptions
* Continually seek role clarity in a changing context
* Understand what is expected of each other
* Honor and respect each other’s responsibilities and authority
* Communicate responsibilities and lines of authority to staff and lay leaders
* Routinely discuss which lane an issue or decision falls into
* Are willing to lead or follow depending upon the situation
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| **Strategies for overcoming a lack of role clarity:*** With each decision, issue or opportunity clarify if it is an individual or shared responsibility
* Pre-determine each other’s talking points before any public meeting or presentation
* Immediately debrief role dissonant related crashes and traffic jams to determine causes
* Make sure role expectations and performance measures are documented
* Clarify authority before taking action
* Conduct an annual start doing, stop doing and continue doing exercise with each other
* Set individual and shared SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** How would I describe My/Your role and responsibilities?
* How would I describe our shared roles and responsibilities?
* Where do we have agreement/disagreement on our roles and responsibilities?
* What do I do better than you? What do you do better than me?
* What is the highest and best use of your time? What is the most important focus for you?
* How are we going to communicate our roles and responsibilities to others?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to achieve ongoing role and responsibility clarity?
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**Dysfunction 7: Improper Engagement**

**Improper Engagement** is reflected in the pursuit of personal agendas over organizational priorities and characterized by an unavailability or unwillingness to participate in strategic discussions or decisions in a timely manner. This dysfunction sub-optimizes the entire church organization.

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| **Partnerships with improper engagement:*** Care about personal interests and status over the shared goals of the church
* Have competing priorities
* Watch windows of opportunity close due to procrastination and unnecessary delay
* Miss meetings, deadlines and deliverables
* Fail to practice agreed upon rules of engagement around timelines, meeting attendance, responsiveness, communication and interpersonal behavior
* Choose task driven behaviors over transformational behaviors
* Create resentment for failure to properly engage
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| **Partnerships with proper engagement:*** Subjugate their own goals and interests for the good of the church
* Help each other achieve their goals and fulfill their responsibilities
* Are results focused and take advantage of strategic opportunities in a timely fashion
* Focus conversations on the important issues and opportunities facing the church
* Agree on priorities
* Honor meetings, timelines and deliverables
* Minimize individualistic and sub-optimizing personal behaviors
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| **Strategies for overcoming improper engagement:*** Establish clear and agreed upon milestones and deadlines for making decisions
* Document commitments
* Tie rewards and compensation to achievement of collective goals and outcomes
* Share ideas with each other before taking action
* Be about the right action, not the action that is right for you
* Be accessible to each other
* Establish agreed upon engagement protocols and checks and balances
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** In what ways do I/We demonstrate proper engagement?
* In what ways do I/We demonstrate improper engagement?
* What are the sources and causes of My/Our improper engagement?
* What one thing could you change in your routine that would encourage engagement?
* Where are we trying to force our ways rather than trusting God’s way?
* What are your personal priorities, your big rocks? How can I help you accomplish them?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to improve our engagement?
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**Dysfunction 8: Avoidance of Accountability**

**Avoidance of Accountability** is characterized by an unwillingness to accept critique or evaluation of personal behaviors, decisions, performance or ideas. The essence of this dysfunction is an unwillingness to tolerate the discomfort that accompanies being confronted on counter-productive behaviors.

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| **Partnerships with an avoidance of accountability:*** Disdain being confronted
* Become defensive when challenged
* Ignore constructive feedback when given
* Feel they are “above reproach”
* Make decisions without input
* Hold others to a higher standard than themselves
* Have feelings of entitlement
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| **Partnerships with accountability:*** Demonstrate a willingness to call each other out over unproductive behaviors
* Hold each other accountable for agreed upon deliverables
* Request honest feedback on performance
* Seek input before making a decision; incorporate input into decisions
* Allow questions without defensiveness
* Humbly yield to authority and oversight
* Engender respect by holding each other to the same standards
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| **Strategies for overcoming an avoidance of accountability:*** Establish individual and mutual objectives, goals, measures and standards
* Track and share individual and mutual performance results with each other
* Submit to a 360 degree feedback program
* Establish a process of regular progress and annual performance reviews
* Report on results to the church governance body and/or the congregation
* Create written and verbal feedback systems from a variety of constituencies
* Establish three person accountability teams consisting of church governance representatives
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** In what ways do I/We demonstrate a lack of accountability?
* In what ways do I/We demonstrate a willingness to be held accountable?
* What are the reasons for My/Our lack of accountability?
* In what areas do I/We need more accountability? Why?
* How can we encourage more feedback?
* How do you best receive feedback and critique?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to increase our accountability?
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**Dysfunction 9: Failure of Buy-In**

**Failure of Buy-In** is evidenced by a failure to commit to a decision or plan, or agreeing with but not supporting, aligning or following through with the decision or plan. This dysfunction can deter and delay critical decisions and undermine even well planned initiatives.

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| **Partnerships with a failure of buy-in:*** Exhibit a perfectionist pattern and an excessive fear of failure that delays decisions and plans
* Have a lack of honest emotional support for a decision
* Breed lack of confidence
* Create ambiguity and confusion about decisions for down line staff and leadership
* Encourage second-guessing among staff and leadership
* Fail to align their actions and attitudes with a decision
* Are characterized by passive aggressive behaviors
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| **Partnerships with buy-in:*** Make timely decisions without harboring doubts
* Align their activities, attitudes and behaviors with the decision
* Create and communicate clarity around decisions, direction and priorities
* Stick with decisions
* Support a decision even if they don’t fully agree
* Identify potential problems before they take root
* Move forward in agreement with decisions and implementing plans even when information is incomplete and plans are not fully developed
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| **Strategies for overcoming a failure of buy-in:*** Review key decisions made during a meeting and agree on action steps and communication
* Determine the trade-offs for making and not making the decision
* Conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the decision or plan
* Address the who, what, when, where, how and why questions of the decision or plan
* Incrementalize decisions with short term low risk steps, followed by evaluation of each step
* Design a vetting system and objective criteria for considering new ideas
* Agree to launch plans and make decisions at 80% of perfection
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** In what ways do I/We demonstrate buy-in?
* In what ways do I/We demonstrate a lack of buy-in?
* What are the typical causes of My/Our failure to buy-in?
* What types of decisions do you find difficult to make?
* What kind of information do you need to make informed decisions?
* What does it take for you to feel you have been heard?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to increase our buy-in?
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**Dysfunction 10: Inattention to Personal Growth**

**Inattention to Personal Growth** results in burn out, character failures, fractured relationships, and plateaued and declining churches. This dysfunction manifests itself incrementally over time as other priorities crowd out holistic development in spirit, soul, mind and body.

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| **Partnerships with an inattention to personal growth:*** Stagnate and suffer a slow decline
* Become ineffective, then irrelevant and ultimately obsolete
* Resist expanding their job descriptions
* Fail to build a leadership gap between themselves and followers
* Resist using outside consulting resources
* “Don't have time” for self-development
* Suffer from a lack of passion and enthusiasm
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| **Partnerships with attention to personal growth:*** Burst through church growth barriers
* Change before they have to
* Grow holistically in spirit, soul, mind and body
* Prioritize time for self-development
* Establish intentional and strategic self-development plans
* Share what they are learning
* Have a diversity of consulting resources
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| **Strategies for overcoming inattention to personal growth:*** Establish a variety of consulting resources including subject matter experts, outside organizations, web sites, other churches, books, conferences and workshops
* Establish annual strategic self-development plans that support the mission, vision, goals and objectives of the church
* Block out regular times for self-development initiatives
* Report to each other on annual personal self-development goals and plans
* Set asides times to teach staff and church leaders what is being learned
* Think in terms of how to increase personal competence, contribution, impact and influence
* Prioritize funding for self-development
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| **Questions to jointly consider:*** In what ways do I/We demonstrate a commitment to personal growth?
* In what ways do I/We demonstrate an inattention to personal growth?
* What are the causes of My/Our inattention to personal growth?
* If I had a dashboard for each area of my life what would each gauge read?
* What areas of My/Our personal growth would be most beneficial?
* What rhythms do you have for rest and renewal?
* What strategies are I/We going to pursue to increase our attention to personal growth?
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The advantages of a highly functioning Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnership are enormous. But the reality is a healthy partnership is difficult and painful work and comes down to practicing healthy behaviors over an extended period of time.

Success requires an uncommon discipline, persistence and emotional energy to overcome our naturally destructive behavioral tendencies. No partnership is ever completely finished developing itself and requires constant acknowledging, monitoring and assessing areas of deficiency.

The Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor partnerships willing to do what it requires will find the rewards are great. Good luck!

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