

MATCHING
PASTORAL
CANDIDATES
AND
CHURCHES

*A Guide for Search Committees
and Candidates*

Joseph Umidi



KREGEL
MINISTRY

Matching Pastoral Candidates and Churches: A Guide for Search Committees and Candidates

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INTRODUCTION

THE WHIRLWIND ROMANCE

Six months after resigning from his church of sixty-five members, Pastor Steve found himself in a difficult financial bind: emergency funds were dried up and so was his part-time water-filter business. His wife also had just given birth to their sixth child. After months of praying and searching for another pastoral call, he finally saw some light on the horizon. It came in the form of a small country church that almost overnight had grown in attendance from eighty to 320. With little warning, the pastor had resigned to take a megachurch in another city. Now down to 120, and losing members by the week, the little church anxiously asked Steve to come and preach. He was elated. It seemed to be the perfect solution, and just in time.

The next Sunday, Steve preached both morning and evening services under a powerful anointing. Touched by God, several church members came to the altar; others couldn't help remarking on the strong presence of the Lord they felt. The chairman of the elder board said, "I haven't seen God move like this in years." Later that evening, while Steve was preparing his family for the two-hundred-mile drive home, a hastily convened meeting resulted in the board unanimously extending Steve a call, right there on the spot.

The next day, Steve walked into my office energized, his emotions swirling. After gently bringing him back down to earth, I said something that hit him like a bucket of ice water on a hot summer beach: "Steve, long-term relationships aren't built on infatuation. They are built on the bonding of common values. The anointing on your message doesn't

guarantee that you and the church will have the same mission. God's gifts, either yours or the church's, are no guarantee of God's confirmation. It takes patience and character on the part of both the pastoral candidate *and* the search committee to wait for God to confirm a call."

Because of our relationship, Steve knew I was not minimizing the importance of the "connection" between the potential pastor and the congregation by a movement of the Holy Spirit. Church groups that prioritize "anointing" in the preaching and ministry of their pastors look for this "connection" with a candidate. However, our research has revealed that churches that rely heavily on the role of the "anointed message" in the confirmation process do not gain a statistical advantage in the longevity of their new staff over those who emphasize different priorities.¹ In too many cases the process itself is flawed and results in weighing only one or two items too heavily. I proposed to Steve, and now to the readers of this book, "a more excellent way."

For the next two hours, I shared with Steve the same guidelines presented in this book. In all my years of personal ministry experience, I have seen repeatedly how a lack of depth in the "courtship" process leading up to the calling of a pastor to a church results in short-term pastorates that cannot withstand the tests of conflict and stress. Although other authors have touched on some of the elements of a successful pastoral candidate evaluation and preparation method, I have never seen a compilation in one volume of the innovative steps contained in the following chapters.

Part 1 helps churches and pastors prepare for a successful match through relationship renewal. Part 2 is written from the perspective of the church that is looking for a new leader, and part 3 is written for the benefit of the pastoral candidate. Regardless of which side of the procedure you are on, you should read all sections in order to understand your own role and to see the process from the other side's perspective.

Just as marital disillusionment often is connected to poor premarital preparation, disillusionment and burnout among church leaders stems from poor or—worse yet—nonexistent candidating procedures. Perfect marriages don't exist, whether between husband and wife or pastor and church, but a well-considered and carefully followed procedure for selecting new leaders (or for a pastoral candidate choosing a new church) can increase the likelihood of creating lasting, vital covenants between churches and their new pastors and staff.

Some would say that simply promoting from within the organization,

rather than seeking an “unknown quantity” from the outside, will eliminate the need to deal with the issues in this book. Unfortunately, the evidence shows that even someone promoted from within can turn out to be a serious mismatch. An associate pastor, for example, who might be well-liked and respected in his present role, may not make a suitable senior pastor in the same organization. Any time a leader changes roles, his compatibility with the new office should be carefully and thoroughly evaluated. Power and position are known to corrupt. The only safeguard is to confirm the call in a leader’s life and determine how clearly that call matches the needs of the organization and the specific requirements of the position.

From the perspective of the pastoral candidate, an honest look at how your experience, personality, abilities, and expectations fit a particular organization and role is the most fundamental step you can take to protect yourself and your family from being “eaten alive.” Stated in a more positive way, a deliberate and thoughtful consideration of your “fit” within an organization and position increases your chances of finding a church where your gifts and vision can soar.

Even with all the books and articles that have been written about the necessity of a “divine call” to the ministry, far too many candidates still enter the pastoral vocation without it. Some enter presumptuously, others with innocent or noble-sounding motives; but without a call from God, there is no way to withstand the pressures that come with advancing the kingdom. We cannot “call” ourselves, and others cannot call us to the ministry. Only God can issue the authentic call that is confirmed by others and evidenced in the fruit of our own fulfillment and sense of destiny.

This is not a book on knowing God’s will. It is a book on confirming God’s will, especially as it relates to the critical match between churches and their potential leaders.

If you’ve waited until you need to call a new pastor before you’ve picked up this book, or if you are a pastor in search of a new position, here’s a “red flag” warning: You must back away from the immediacy of your need and look objectively at the process. You will be tempted to rush or shortcut the steps, but if you do, the results could be disastrous.

Remember, you're not merely filling a slot on your staff or looking for a job as a pastor, you're trying to confirm the specific direction of God's call. Confirming the call takes time, patience, and care.

Along with God's known ways of revealing His will, this book is a key resource for developing better relationships between churches and their leaders. By the grace of God, we can minimize turnover within the pastorate and maximize joyful "partnerships in the gospel" as we come into the greatest harvest in the history of the church.

PART ✧ ONE

A TIME FOR
RELATIONSHIP
RENEWAL

MATCHES NOT MADE IN HEAVEN

John was one of our best students. He already had a dozen years of pastoral experience before he came to seminary to complete his degree. The other students seemed to gravitate toward him, especially after they heard him preach in homiletics class. After graduation, he accepted a call to a growing church in Georgia. This church was a pastor's dream come true: an influential radio ministry, a thriving Christian day school, large and sophisticated facilities. We were all certain that John was about to step into the fullness of his career. After all, he was one of our best graduates.

One year later, I got the all-too-familiar phone call:

I'm quitting the ministry. This church isn't what I thought it was when I agreed to be its pastor. My wife and I just can't take the pressure anymore—we're tired of serving people who only want to be served. Can you recommend me to a teaching position somewhere?

Twenty years ago, sociologist John Norval of Notre Dame claimed that one in four Catholic priests and one in eight Protestant ministers quit the ministry each year.¹ More recent estimates suggest that the number of Protestant ministers who quit each year has grown to one in six, which

equates to more than fifty thousand of the nation's total of three hundred fifty thousand ministers. If these numbers are accurate, more pastors quit the ministry each year than attended the historic 1996 Promise Keepers pastor's conference in Atlanta. Imagine each of those forty thousand leaders deciding to leave the ministry on the same day and then emptying the Georgia Dome en masse, and you can begin to see the enormity of this critical situation. Sadly, some of our most able pastors, like John, have joined this massive exodus from the clergy.

What about those who stay in the ministry? Research shows that the most effective and enriching church ministries are those that are led by pastors who have invested at least six years in the same church community.

Church researcher George Barna notes an alarming trend over the past twenty years: The average tenure in the same church for senior pastors has decreased from seven years to four years.² Worse yet, Barna reports that six out of every ten senior pastors surveyed say that what they have experienced at their present church has not increased their passion for ministry. When our leaders are not growing in spiritual passion, is it any wonder that the fire of God is lost in the lives of the people?

Clearly, many church leaders, though faithful to their calling, are disillusioned with the ministries they were once certain would bring them many fruitful years of service. A significant part of this crisis stems from an incomplete and often haphazard approach to matching a church's needs with a pastoral candidate's strengths and calling. The resulting disillusionment on both sides, from unfulfilled expectations, has become an unbearable source of stress on pastors and churches in every city and town in America. This book is designed to help churches and potential leaders avoid the painful experience of "mismatching."

Toxic Churches: The Terminators

Many churches today are being inundated by dozens of eager, freshly ordained young men and women applying for limited positions. I interviewed a pastoral candidate in November 1996, who told me that three months prior he had been one of 380 applicants to a particular church in Pennsylvania. While the laborers may be few, the leaders are standing in long lines waiting for doors to open. Unfortunately, what they find once they walk through the open doors may not be what they expected.

It's no secret that far too many churches and Christian ministries have earned horrendous reputations for unfairly terminating staff members or—worse yet—inflicting upon them painful pressure to resign. John C.

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LaRue Jr., former research director for *Christianity Today*, revealed that up to one-third of the churches he studied that were conducting a pastoral search had forced the previous pastor to leave, and up to one-fourth of all current pastors have been forced out at some point in their careers.³ Unfortunately, four out of every ten who were forced out have not yet returned to pastoral ministry.

The shocking part of this phenomenon is that 62 percent of the ousted pastors were forced out by churches that had already done this to one or more pastors in the past. These “repeat offender” churches comprise at least 15 percent of all U.S. churches! They have contributed to the development of a “victim” mentality among a significant number of wounded leaders and their families.

Although a majority of the pastors in the survey were terminated for biblically sound reasons, such as moral or financial compromise, a significant minority (43 percent) were forced out by conflict with a small but influential faction within the congregation, or by one or two members of the church’s governing board. According to LaRue, it typically took only seven to ten people (which equated to a mere three or four percent of the congregation) to push the pastor out the door. A significant number of leaders were fired simply because their style conflicted with some small power clique. The majority of these pastors felt that the church’s leaders had been deliberately dishonest during the interview process about the history of such conflict patterns within the church.

Pastor Bill sat in the back of our church one Sunday. After the service, he shared with us that he had recently been terminated in a coup led by a small group of leaders who were all family related. After he was fired, he discovered that this church had followed the same course with three other pastors over the years. Bill is now in a national restoration ministry called Pastor in Residence, which mentors wounded leaders back to full confidence in their calling.⁴ A good pastor is a terrible thing to waste. We cannot afford to lose even one.

Unlike Pastor Bill, who is on the way toward healing, many terminated pastors carry their pain and disillusionment with them to the next position or to a vocation outside the ordained ministry. Here is what one of them said to us about his termination:

I felt stunned by what they did and how they did it. . . .
[I was] told at the church door after the service that I was through and not to come back. I felt such a sense of

sadness for Christ's church that a congregation would be willing to act in such a heartless way; even secular businesses do not treat their leaders with such contempt. My emotions felt like they had been dumped on a pile of scrap metal called shame. I knew that I would be the subject of discussion down at the local donut shop that week. After I ran out of "what do I do now, Lord?" cries, I found that my ability to trust in others had been shattered. I even had a difficult time entrusting myself to my wife. I felt like a failure as a provider to my family and an embarrassment to my boys. They were forming their ideas of what a "man" is by watching how these people treated their father and how I was responding. . . . And then came the loneliness. Former associates and friends distanced themselves from me because "he's in trouble," "he's involved in something," "where there's smoke there's fire." What I needed was their love, their trust, their support. . . . I have personally witnessed abandonment in combat in Southeast Asia and I clearly recall the aloneness of the troops who had been isolated through no action of their own. The same could be said for pastors who've been squeezed out. Believe me, the abandonment is one and the same.

What about their families? Think of the upheaval at home when a spouse is pressured to leave a ministry. LaRue discovered that three-fourths of these terminated pastoral families had to move out of the area, and two-thirds of the pastor's spouses had to change jobs. One in ten of these pastors experienced a major illness within twelve months of being forced out.

But it is not only the banished pastor and his family who suffer. Toxic churches also pay a price. Almost ten percent of the congregation will leave a church that forces a pastoral departure, many of them following the terminated pastor to his new position.⁵

Toxic Pastors: Conditional Lovers

Because toxic relationships between pastors and churches are often caused by the pastor himself, today's generation of churchgoers have learned to question authority. They ask some tough but legitimate

questions, like whether a pastor's faith and commitment is nurturing his own "wholeness." In other words, does the pastor "walk his talk"? Is the pastor's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual life integrated and healthy, or is he as fragmented as some discredited secular leaders who have crashed and burned in our culture? Leaders who lack balance or wholeness often have a hard time receiving and giving God's unconditional love and grace. The people in the pews begin to wonder whether the gospel being preached will really work for them when it doesn't seem to work for the pastor himself.

"Physician, heal thyself" is the cry of churches whose leaders have self-defeating personality traits; physically destructive lifestyles; addictions to drivenness or other neurotic patterns; or a leadership style rooted in unhealed insecurity, anxiety, or control issues.⁶ Too often, a toxic minister finds faults in his parishioners that he is not owning up to in his own life. In Matthew 7:3, Jesus talked about this "splinter and beam" syndrome: "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?" (NKJV). Of course, this admonition cuts both ways.

What do churches that terminate toxic pastors cite as the reasons for choosing this painful path? Regrettably, one of the top reasons for a congregation firing a minister is the feeling that they are unliked or conditionally loved by him.⁷ The most common expression of conditional love by a minister is his inability to accept parishioners as they are and where they are.

A second reason that churches become disillusioned with their pastors is when they continually hammer home a "pet doctrine," or get stuck on a single emphasis, or preach around their own particular blind spots. This malady has sometimes been called the "hobbyhorse" syndrome, because some pastors get on a particular theme and can't seem to get off. Vocational ministry is a potential breeding ground for a subtle form of idolatry, particularly theological or doctrinal idolatry. Some unbalanced ministers worship their theology of God rather than God Himself.

A third reason for disillusionment is the unexpressed expectations that go with the job. Louis McBurney's list of unrealistic expectations of the average pastor are: He must be sinless, he must be constantly available, he must be capable of meeting any need, he must have no spiritual needs or emotional problems himself, and he must never let on that he has a material need.⁸

Pastors also have unrealistic expectations. One is for them to assume

their parishioners will respect them simply because they have the title or office of pastor. Without earning credibility through the way they exercise their authority, these leaders are relying on the limited authority of position rather than the long-term authority of relationship. Ultimately, this will prove as destructive as the man who continually demands his wife submit to him because he has the position of husband, while ignoring his responsibility to love her as Christ loved the church.

Most people simply want to know that their leaders can be trusted and that they know where they are going. Building trust and sharing the vision must be addressed clearly in the “courtship season” before a leader is called. By following the guidelines in this text, churches and candidates can greatly minimize the chances of relational “divorce.”

LEAVING AND CLEAVING

The first step in a successful leadership transition is the development of an effective strategy for dealing with the past. Saying farewell to the departing leader and his or her family, accomplishing good closure, and praying for the blessing of a commission in a corporate prayer time is important to your church members and the departing leader. Well-managed closure prepares the congregation for beginning the new courtship process and helps them to remain open to receiving and accepting the unique ministry of a new leader.

The need for a church family to leave behind their bond to a former pastor and freely “cleave” to the new pastor is similar to the prerequisite for marriage given in Genesis 2:24. Authors Gary Smalley and John Trent emphasize that it is more difficult in a new marriage to reach out and form bonds of intimacy and partnership when a husband or wife is still reaching back to the family of origin, hoping to receive a withheld blessing from a parent.¹ In the context of a church and its leaders, it is difficult for a congregation to bond with a new pastor if they are still looking back for closure or a blessing from, in this case, a spiritual father.

Twenty percent of the respondents in our research said that the biggest problems they faced in transitioning to their new positions were the unresolved issues some of the congregation had with the former pastor.

What to Do When the Pastor Unexpectedly Resigns

How a departing leader leaves a church sets the stage for how easily a new leader will become established. Roy Oswald of the Alban Institute notes that “usually they slip off into the night without really saying good-bye, and that can undercut everything they’ve done up till then. People may question whether the pastor really cared for them at all.”² As one congregant recalls,

It all seemed to happen so suddenly. Pastor Jack had rallied us to a new awareness of supporting missions, and we collected our first faith-promise missions offering for the coming year. The final service erupted in victory and praise when we realized that we had gone over our goal! It was a time of great celebration—that is, until Pastor Jack stepped to the pulpit for the benediction. In those next few moments, everything came to a screeching halt. Our pastor told us that God had called him elsewhere, and he would be leaving at the end of the month. And then he slipped out the back door.

Church leaders can help themselves and their members move forward in a positive frame of mind by planning and scheduling an “exit interview” with the resigning pastor or staff leader, followed by an opportunity for the congregation to say farewell. The departing leader will be honored when the remaining leaders show a desire to receive his or her accumulated wisdom and insight as a gift to the church family.

Conducting a Successful Exit Interview

The exit interview should include the elders, pastoral staff, and members of the new search committee. Begin with praise and prayer. As the Lord’s presence becomes evident, Scriptures that edify and encourage should be read. Several leaders should then share a few words of sincere appreciation for the departing pastor or staff member and his or her ministry investment in the community. With the elders and new search committee present simply to listen respectfully (without debate, opposing comments, or “why” questions), the departing leader could be asked to respond to the following types of questions:

1. How was our church family different from what you expected when you first came?

2. How are we as leaders different from what you expected when you first came?
3. What do you perceive to be our main strengths?
4. What changes do you believe our church body should make?
5. Were there any goals you had hoped to accomplish but didn't?
6. What would have helped you accomplish those goals?
7. What agenda do you think we should complete before we call a new pastor?
8. How do you perceive your relationship with this church family after you leave?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

This is not a time for recrimination, argument, or hashing out issues. After all, the leader has already decided to leave. Although feathers might be ruffled and some of what the leader says might be hard to swallow, the purpose and benefit of an exit interview is for the remaining leaders to learn from this experience and make necessary course corrections before a new leader is brought into the church. Don't shortcut the exit interview process by skipping the praise, prayer, and encouragement steps. These vital components lay the groundwork for the question and answer phase and set the tone for the entire meeting.

After the exit interview has been completed, the church leaders should schedule a time for the congregation to bid farewell to the departing leader and family, either as part of a regular worship service or in a separate gathering called for this specific purpose. During the open meeting with the congregation, the church leaders should bless the departing leader and the departing leader should bless the church leaders. Even if your church has not used this practice, I strongly encourage that this meeting should end with a ceremony of commissioning prayer and blessing, with the laying on of hands (Acts 13:1–3). If this biblical action is minimized or ignored, a healthy leadership transition will be hampered.

Strategic Prayer During Vulnerable Transitions

Another key to achieving a successful leadership transition is bathing the process in prayer. Eighty percent of the seminary alumni and pastors in our research cited a lack of effective prayer strategies in the transition process, both for the churches and the leaders. In my experience, we have implemented the exhortation of Jesus that “My house shall be a house of prayer . . .” by organizing well-conceived corporate prayer gatherings.

If regular corporate prayer is not already a part of your church's experience, consider scheduling a "concert of prayer" as a rallying point for the congregation. See appendix 1 for a model format that has been used successfully. These prayer gatherings can be continued on a monthly or quarterly basis after the new leader has arrived, but they are especially important and beneficial during the leadership transition process. Prayer will become increasingly significant for your church family as it experiences the healing of God's presence for the grief they feel in losing a beloved staff member or pastor. Corporate prayer also fosters a greater sense of security and trust in the present church leaders, as they demonstrate their concern for the church's protection and welfare by establishing the priority of prayer. The result is that the people of God will sense the church is on a good track as it searches for a new leader.

For those ministries that have experienced an unhealthy transition, or where past issues might contaminate the opportunity for a new beginning, a more intense corporate prayer strategy may be required. Following the guidelines given by Neil Anderson and Miles Mylander in their book *Setting Your Church Free*, the leaders should set apart a retreat time for reflection and prayer.³ According to the model of Jesus' address to the churches in Revelation 2–3, this prayer retreat would seek to discern the Lord's present view of their church by prayerfully asking:

What if the Lord were to write a letter to our church?
 What would He commend? What would He rebuke?
 What painful memories or corporate sins have become
 part of our history that we need to corporately repent of
 and receive healing to begin anew?

After one such weekend of reflective prayer, the remaining staff and leaders of a large congregation seeking a new pastor asked me to lead a concert of prayer in their church on a Sunday morning. During a time of corporate repentance and renunciation, several leaders came to the microphone to express what God had shown them the day before. "It was as if the ceiling was removed and the sun broke through to shine all over us," said several people afterward. "Looking back on it now, we realize it was a turning point for us in letting go of our painful past. Now we are ready to face our future." Eight months later, this church was thriving with a new unity, a new pastor, and a new momentum.

Ted Engstrom, speaking at a convention of the National Association

of Evangelicals, told pastors and church leaders: “One of the most important legacies a leader can give or leave the institution is a smooth transition in leadership, where the organizational alliance can be quickly and readily given to the new leader.”⁴ This can be done more effectively when churches communicate regularly with trusted intercessors during this critical transition time. Men and women called to the ministry of prayer and the office of intercessor should be recruited both within the church and in regional, national, or denominational intercession networks.

One pastor confessed his relief when he said, “I never asked for intercessors for myself, because I felt that it was too self-seeking. Somehow, I thought that everyone would want someone to pray for them, so why should I take advantage of my position by asking for myself? Now I realize how I had denied my potential intercessors and myself. I’m so glad that I have been delivered from such shortsightedness!”⁵

In addition to your in-house efforts, do not hesitate to ask for prayer from sister churches in your city or area. It is in the interest of every other evangelical church in your community that your church should prosper by choosing the right leadership.⁶ Of course, if you expect them to pray, you must communicate updates on a regular basis. Remember, prayer is the real work; ministry is the reward or privilege that results.

One church that I assisted was without a pastor for almost two years, yet it remained strong and healthy. Several of the elders and ministry directors initiated and led prayer strategies that impacted both their church and the surrounding church community. In fact, several area churches developed long-term relationships with the new pastor and staff as a result of taking “ownership” by helping to pray in the new leader during the long period of transition.

The most critical time in a relay race is when the baton is passed from one runner to another. Our research has shown that certain issues commonly affect the volatility of leadership transitions:

- *Church Polity* issues: Independent churches with authoritarian leadership run the greatest risk of friction as they seek to integrate new leaders into the staff or replace a prominent pastor.
- *Church Age* issues: Older, established churches present a complicated mix of expectations for new leaders, and comparisons with former long-term leaders are inevitable.
- *Founding Pastor Dynamics* issues: Unless careful steps are taken

in the transition process, most new pastors who follow a founding pastor serve only as temporary transition leaders.

- *Spiritual Condition* issues: When a pastor resigns due to breakdown or personal discouragement, or retires, he often leaves behind a church that has become weak, defeated, and introspective.
- *Building Program and Debt* issues: Debt may seriously complicate the transition process by undermining the congregation's confidence and trust in leadership, especially when the one who led them into debt left soon after the building program was completed.
- *Proximity of the Predecessor* issues: If the departing leader stays in the area (especially if he has retired), loyal parishioners may have difficulty "leaving" the old leader's style and "cleaving" to the new leader's style and personality.

I have heard countless stories about how each of these issues knocked the wind out of incoming leaders whose ministry experience was running rather smoothly up until the difficult transition. Some dropped the baton and took years to recover. Others dropped out of the race completely, never to return to ministry again.

During the first three months of one new pastor's leadership, some of the charter members of the church began to complain to the former pastor, who still lived nearby. Feeling compassion for the disappointments of his close friends, he mistakenly intervened. He regrettably became involved in pressuring the elder board to remove the new pastor. If this former pastor had not been so accessible and visible to this church in transition, the congregation might have found a solution with much less dissension and pain.

Keep Your Group in the Loop

Another way that churches drop the baton is by not keeping the congregation informed about the progress of the search for a new pastor or leader. Too many churches compound the sin of prayerlessness with the sin of under-communication. Remember, when the church is in transition, everyone who attends the church is also in transition. Making your congregation feel a part of the search process is every bit as important as adequate closure and a proper send-off for the departing pastor. In the coming chapters, you will receive information about critical components of the search process. I urge you to distribute prayer requests and other information to your congregation—with regular updates—on each of these areas. Leadership transition is no time to drop the baton.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the impact on the future of your church if you make sure that a departing leader is allowed and encouraged to leave honorably? How can the remaining leaders provide adequate opportunity for the congregation to express their love and appreciation? Have you seen examples of other churches that have handled these two steps well?
2. How can the remaining church leaders promote healing within the body after a difficult relationship with a former pastor? What is the proper role of the new leader in helping the church come to grips with its past?
3. How can your congregation develop or enhance its own ministry of prayer? Are other churches in your area known for prayer? How can their experience help you during this key transition time?
4. How can your congregation tie into the current prayer movement that is impacting other American churches? In addition to the books mentioned in this chapter, how can your church develop resources for implementing strategic prayer?
5. Research: Do any churches in your area have a history of good leadership succession? What have they done well? What have they learned from their mistakes? Reflection: How can their experience be applied in your situation?