



Empower Your Ward Council

By Jeff Lindsay · March 13, 2018

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The Problem with “Old School” Councils

Deeply entrenched in LDS culture, teachings, and scripture is the concept of councils as a primary tool for accomplishing the work of the Church. Councils are increasingly being emphasized by Church leaders in their teaching and training. Unfortunately, the training that many people acquire in the business world or other settings threatens to turn councils into merely a target for delegating tasks as directed by the lone leader in charge.

Indeed, many accomplished leaders with business acumen may be tempted into using councils simply as inefficient tools for getting their will done. For some, the problem with councils is that they waste too much time in fruitless conversation about peripheral issues and are too prone to push back against or even change the direction desired by the leader. This is particularly severe when the leader is experienced, skilled, and confident about what needs to be done and how.

An example of a mistake made through over-confidence in one’s judgment, was humbly illustrated by Elder W. Craig Zwick in his October 2017 General Conference address, “[Lord, Wilt Thou Cause That My Eyes May Be Opened.](#)” During Zwick’s

service as a mission president, a new elder wanted to quit. Elder Zwick quickly and confidently determined that he knew what was wrong and that he had the cure:

I had my eyes opened to “looking beyond what I could see” while serving as a mission president. A young elder arrived with apprehension in his eyes. As we met in an interview, he said dejectedly, “I want to go home.” I thought to myself, “Well, we can fix this.” I counseled him to work hard and to pray about it for a week and then call me. A week later, almost to the minute, he called. He still wanted to go home. I again counseled him to pray, to work hard, and to call me in a week. In our next interview, things had not changed. He insisted on going home.

I just wasn’t going to let that happen. I began teaching him about the sacred nature of his call. I encouraged him to “forget [himself] and go to work.” But no matter what formula I offered, his mind did not change. It finally occurred to me that I might not have the whole picture. It was then that I felt a prompting to ask him the question: “Elder, what is hard for you?” What he said pierced my heart: “President, I can’t read.”

If a faithful mission president can fall into the trap of making confident but incorrect conclusions based on woefully incomplete information, it can happen to all of us every day. It was only after all his attempts to fix the problem had failed that he realized maybe he “might not have the whole picture.” Only with an entirely new perspective based on new information could the mission president develop a better approach to meet the real needs of the elder.

Our ministry can be much more productive if we begin with a recognition of our limited perspective and turn to others to get the missing picture. That involves listening carefully, as Elder Zwick finally did with the missionary. It involves asking questions carefully to gain and listen to missing perspectives. It is a crucial task of ward and branch councils to provide such perspectives and allow them to be deliberated on issues that matter. If we are confident that we know the whole story and have the easy fix, we may fail. Worse, we may allow others to fail or suffer who might have been helped.

When councils are run the “old-school” way, meaning the way the world tends to view the role of a dynamic, confident leader relative to his or her underlings, the real problem is not that councils are slow, but that leaders are overly confident. Human confidence, so natural for leaders with experience and advanced skills, has

historically been a hidden barrier that has hindered economic and social progress in the secular world. As we'll see below, confidence in our wisdom and skill is not only a barrier to doing the things the Lord's way, it's a barrier to wise decision making in countless settings. But the Lord's teachings regarding councils offer a remarkable cure for the weaknesses that wise secular scholars have now pointed out to the "old school" way of getting things done.

Overturning the World's Wisdom: The Example of Top Councils in the Church

Recently in Hong Kong, I was fortunate to be part of a meeting where Elder Randy D. Funk of the Seventy and Benjamin Tai, an Area Seventy from Hong Kong, provided valuable training to few of us LDS foreigners living in China. One of many inspiring moments came when Elder Tai played [a video of Elder Henry B. Eyring](#) describing his experience when he first saw how decision making took place in the top councils of the Church. Elder Tai used this to teach us how to better use the power of councils in our local units of the Church.

The video clip comes from a press conference immediately after Elder Eyring was called into the First Presidency in October 2007, serving under Gordon B. Hinckley. He fielded a question about how his professional background prepared him for what he is doing now. His answer touches upon a surprising experience when he first saw how the top leaders of the Church work in council to make decisions. The story illustrates the beauty and power of councils in the Church and their potential to be places where miracles can take place and where inspiration and wisdom can flow, if we seek to listen and act the way the Lord teaches us. The example of President Harold B. Lee in this story provides an example many leaders should strive to emulate.

A transcript has been kindly provided by Richard Alger in his Oct. 10, 2007 post, "Here are the Prophets of God and They're Disagreeing," here edited slightly:

The way to look at Harvard and its effect, at least personally, is with this story:

When I first came as the president of Ricks college, I attended my first meeting that I'd ever been in watching the General Authorities of the church, the First Presidency and others, running a meeting. I had been studying for the ten years I was a professor at Stanford how you make decisions in meetings in groups so [I thought] here's my chance to see the way the Lord's servants do it....

I looked at it with my Harvard and Stanford eyes and I thought, “This is the strangest conversation.... Here are the prophets of God and they’re disagreeing in an openness that I had never seen in business. In business you’re careful when you’re with the bosses....

I watched this process of them disagreeing and I thought, “Good Heavens, I thought revelation would come to them all and they’d all see things the same way, in some sort of [miracle].” It was more open than anything I had ever seen in all the groups I had ever studied in business. I was just dumbfounded.

But then after a while the conversation cycled around. And they began to agree and I saw the most incredible thing. Here are these very strong, very bright people all with different opinions. Suddenly the opinions began to just line up and I thought, “I’ve seen a miracle, I’ve seen unity come out of this wonderful open kind of exchange that I’d never seen in all my studies of government or business or anywhere else.” And so I thought, “Oh, what a miracle!”

It was President Harold B. Lee who was chairing the meeting. It was a board of education meeting. I thought, now he’s going to announce the decision, because I’ve seen this miracle, and he said, “Wait a minute, I think we’ll bring this matter up again some other time. I sense there is someone in the room who is not yet settled.” And they went on to the next item. And I thought that was strange. And then I watched somebody, one of the brethren, I think one of the Twelve, walk past President Lee and say, “Thank you, there’s something I didn’t have a chance to say.”

So I want you to know.... This is what it claims to be. This is the true Church of Jesus Christ. Revelation is real, even in what you call the business kinds of settings.

A great man whom I love and will always love, President Harold B. Lee, taught me a great lesson that says. Now, we can be open. We can be direct. We can talk about differences in a way that you can’t anywhere else because we’re all just looking for the truth. We’re not trying to win. We’re not trying to make our argument dominate. We just want to find what’s right.

And then a man sensitive enough to sense without anybody saying anything, that somebody in the room was not settled. Again, there’s a kind of process of openness and yet coming together and having confidence that you know what the Lord wants, not what we want....

I loved Harvard. I loved Stanford. I had a great time there.... We spent the first ten years of our married life [there where] I was a professor at Stanford. Thought I'd stay there forever; I had tenure. How happy we were. Then [we] went to Rexburg, Idaho from there.

And then [I] came down here and found out that there was a kind of making decisions and working together in groups that I had never seen anywhere else in the world except here.

Elder M. Russell Ballard reminds us that such councils are not just for the highest levels of the Church, but are important at all levels, including ward and branch councils and even councils at the level of individual families. Their basic principles for successful operation are the same:

In many respects, general Church councils function much the same as stake and ward councils. All councils in the Church should encourage free and open discussion by conferring with one another and striving to have clear, concise communication. Councils should discuss objectives and concerns, with mutual understanding being the ultimate goal. Stake and ward councils are ideal settings for leaders of all organizations to converse together and strengthen one another. The primary focus of stake and ward council meetings should be coordinating activities and stewardship, not calendaring. In these meetings, priesthood and auxiliary leaders should review together their responsibilities and find ways for Church programs to help members live the gospel in the home. Today, individuals and families need wise and inspired help from the Church to combat the evils of the world. (M. Russell Ballard, “**Strength in Counsel**,” Oct. 1993 General Conference.)

Elder Ballard touches upon a basic aspect of human psychology that affects the success of councils:

When council members feel they are part of a decision, they become supporters and specific positive results can be accomplished. (“**Family Counsels**,” April 2016 General Conference.)

When stake presidents and bishops allow the priesthood and auxiliary leaders whom the Lord has called to serve with them to become part of a problem-solving team, wonderful things begin to happen. Their participation broadens the base of experience and understanding, leading to better solutions. You bishops energize your ward leaders by giving them a chance to offer suggestions

and to be heard. You prepare future leaders by allowing them to participate and learn. You can lift much of the load from your shoulders through this kind of involvement. *People who feel ownership of a problem are more willing to help find a solution, greatly improving the possibility of success.* (“**Counseling with Our Councils**,” April 1994 General Conference, emphasis added.)

Sadly, I have personally run meetings where my actions were far from the Lord’s teachings about how councils should operate, and this may be true for too many of my fellow Latter-day Saints. Sure, anybody can get things done and make things happen in a council. Driving a decision and giving out assignments is easy. But the teachings about councils we have from the Lord through living prophets and apostles in the *LDS Handbook*, in the scriptures and in other teachings of living Church is something else entirely.

Contrast the confident “natural man’s” way of decision making and managing councils with the wiser counsel from the *LDS Handbook 2: Administering the Church*, section 4.6.1, “**Guiding Principles [for Ward Councils]**“:

Ward council meetings should focus on matters that will strengthen individuals and families. The council spends minimal time on calendaring, activity planning, and other administrative business.

During the meeting, the bishop explains each matter being considered, but he does not normally decide how to resolve the matter until he has heard the discussion. He encourages discussion without dominating it. He asks questions and may ask particular council members for their suggestions. He listens carefully before making a decision. These discussions should foster a spirit of inspiration.

Council members are encouraged to speak honestly, both from their personal experience and from their positions as organization leaders. Both men and women should feel that their comments are valued as full participants. The bishop seeks input from Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary leaders in all matters considered by the ward council. The viewpoint of women is sometimes different from that of men, and it adds essential perspective to understanding and responding to members’ needs.

After open discussion, the bishop may make a decision, or he may wait to discuss the matter further with his counselors. After he makes a decision, council members should support it in a spirit of unity and harmony.

If council members have strongly unsettled feelings about an important decision, the bishop may wait for another council meeting to consider the matter further and seek spiritual confirmation and unity.

Through such principles, councils are designed to open the windows of revelation as we share freely our perspectives and bring new information to the table, helping to make it clear what real problems need to be solved and what can be done. When Saints in unity seek the Lord's help to find solutions and make plans, they can then reach unity and seek revelation that begins with asking the right questions.

This article will be continued in a second installment.