

YOUTH DIRECTORS GUIDE

Building a Great Relationship
with Your Conference President

BE SPIRITUAL
A BRIDGE
PROFESSIONAL
AWARE OF OBJECTIVES

Youth Directors Guide
Building a Great Relationship with Your Conference President

This Youth Directors Guide is a resource created by the
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Introduction

One of the most important relationships in the conference is between the conference president and the conference youth director. The youth director has perhaps the largest single constituency (other than the president and the women's ministry leader — and the women's ministry leader is often part-time and not nearly as visible) in the conference. The youth director can shape how the next generation of church members view the church. The youth director helps form the perception that the young people in the conference have of their leadership; whether that perception is one of leaders that care about them or a bunch of old people who really don't care and are therefore irrelevant to them.

So, the president/youth director relationship is an important one.

The reason **why** you are reading this is to answer a question: How can I have the kind of relationship with my president that will mutually benefit us in our term to achieve the mission of God's church, the conference, and the young people that I serve?

I do not want to claim that what you are about to read is the answer. But it is an answer based on what I have seen and observed in the nearly 30 years that I was either a conference youth director or a conference administrator.

I call it **"To Be Or Not To Be"** — four things you **want** to be as a conference youth director in your relationship with your conference president and four things you **don't** want to be.

Here we go.

Four Things to Be

Be aware of the objectives of your president.

If you have not had this conversation already, I would recommend that you set up an appointment with your conference president (either in person via Zoom) and ask him/her: **What can I do and what can the youth department do to help reach your objectives for our conference?**

This will help in several ways. First, it lets the president know that as a member of his/her team, you are not just interested in reaching your objectives, but you also are committed to helping him/her reach theirs.

The president is the one who is elected to set the direction for the conference. He/she should consult with others in doing that but at the end of the day, he/she is the person responsible for setting the direction. It is a good idea to let the president know that you want to work together in moving his/her agenda forward.

Second—and probably most important—the aforementioned conversation between you and the president should help ensure that you know what he/she expects of you. **In order for you to be able to do your job well and to the level of the president's expectations, you need to be clear on what he/she expects.** If the president expects one thing and you give him/her another—thinking that you are meeting their expectations—there is guaranteed to be frustration.

If you do not remember anything else in this booklet, remember this: Make sure you are clear on what the president expects from you and your office. Don't assume. Set up an appointment with him/her. Ask him/her what he/she needs from your office to help him/her accomplish their objectives.

Then, within 24-48 hours of your meeting with the president, send them a follow-up that thanks them for meeting with you and outlines your understanding of what he/she needs from you and expects from you as a result of the meeting. That way, everyone is clear on what was agreed upon. **Do not depend on both of your memories recalling your conversation the same way months down the road.** Write down what you recall and send it to the president with words to this effect: Thank you for meeting with me yesterday. To the best of my recollection, these are the objectives that we agreed upon. Is this your recollection as well?

Be succinct.

One of the biggest challenges presidents tend to have is a lack of time. So don't write a book. Keep it to a page and "keep it moving" as Dr. Griffin, my young colleague, is fond of saying.

You will need to have a second meeting with the president about midway through the year where you give them a progress report that measures your results in meeting their objectives. If one of the president's goals is something intangible like "I want the young people in our conference to be closer to God this year," it will not be possible to accurately

My President's Objectives

[illegible]

Thoughts on Professionalism

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I was much less amused when I saw the same casual commitment that a few departmental leaders had in coming to work when I became a conference president.

In all candor, if I could live that time again, I would have solved that problem by replacing the people who didn't come to the office with people who did. It will probably not help your relationship with your president if you put him/her in the same position that a few of the departmental leaders in my conference put me.

Be spiritual.

I will never forget a conversation that I had with an administrative assistant in another denominational entity in our church over 30 years ago.

She was leaving this particular entity to pursue another employment opportunity. She used to be my point of contact when I would call her entity's office to speak to her supervisor and over time, we developed something of a friendship. I still remember our final conversation prior to her leaving her place of denominational employment.

She spoke of her disappointment with the overall spiritual environment in her office and how her office was much less spiritual than she expected it to be.

I have thought of that often over the years and how easy it is to assume that just because we work for spiritual entities that automatically makes us spiritual individuals.

My experience over these past 43 years has been, ironically, that unless I intentionally work against it happening, ministry in general—and most particularly, church administration—can jeopardize the health of three very important things:

- A. Your spiritual health
- B. Your marital and family health
- C. Your physical and mental health

In all of the time that we ministers spend tending to the spiritual needs of others, it can be too easy to neglect our own spiritual needs, OR to tell ourselves that tending to the spiritual needs of others is tantamount to or a substitute for addressing our own spiritual needs.

That can be exacerbated by the amount of travel (pre-COVID) that is involved in conference office work. When I was a conference youth director, my Sabbath schedule was booked 50 Sabbaths a year, 18 months in advance. When I was a conference president, on average, every 3½ days I was either attending some kind of meeting, going to some kind of meeting, or coming home from some kind of meeting of the 35 or so committees I was on. That kind of schedule can compromise one's devotional time.

To get around that, I would wake up at 5:00 a.m. Monday-Thursday to ensure I had devotion time. But unless the people in the conference office are intentional about their spirituality, then there could be a corporate spiritual neglect issue.

In the conference office, each person is contributing—either positively or negatively—to the overall spiritual environment. As youth

How Am I Engaging Spiritually?

Remember, you are contributing—either positively or negatively—to the spiritual environment in the conference office. Your president needs your contribution to be a positive one.

C. Keep asking

[illegible]

Don't be irresponsible on social media.

Social media has a lot of potential for good; in fact, it has already done a lot of good in connecting us as a worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church family.

And please do not go down the “freedom of speech” road. That is what an employee told me when they posted something negative on social media about a leader in our church. I told them that this is not how the Bible said we are to deal with differences, nor was that the way we were going to deal with differences in our organization. I told that employee—in effect—that they had two choices: Take the post down or take a hike. They immediately responded that they had freedom of speech.

There is no secular organization that is going to allow you to be disrespectful of your supervisors or undermine their objectives and still maintain your employment. You should not expect that in the Adventist Church, either.

Please understand that there are certain posts that when you hit "Send" could cause you to be sent out of the door.

Don't be a part of something that will embarrass your administration.

There are all kinds of people in your conference. An idea that may seem cutting edge to you (and one that actually may be cutting edge) may seem wildly radical and worldly to the constituents of your conference. A good rule to follow is: **Don't set fires that someone else will have to put out.**

Social Media Goals

The president of your conference is the president of the non-forward-looking people, too. He/she has to minister to them and lead them, too — so do you.

So, before you do anything that is substantially different than the norm, you owe him/her a conversation. When you go out on a limb, you are taking the president with you. You owe it to him/her to see if they really want to go.

Besides, if what you are doing will cause controversy with the “We expect things to be done exactly the same way until the Lord comes, and then, we expect them to be done the same way through the ceaseless ages of eternity” crowd (and there are people like that in your conference) and if you want the president to have your back when people complain about you doing something cutting edge, then you need to tell him/her upfront before you do it.

Don't be fiscally irresponsible with the conference's funds.

Youth directors operate some “big ticket” items such as youth camps, youth congress, Pathfinder camporees, etc. Those events cost a lot of money and are done in the name of the conference, which means the conference is liable for any cost overruns.

I was blessed to have a fairly financially healthy conference when I had the privilege of being an administrator. But even healthy conferences tend to operate on a fairly narrow margin, i.e., there is not a whole lot of margin between what the conference is anticipating spending and what the conference is anticipating receiving.

So, when you operate a youth event and that event goes into the red, that is money that the conference was not planning to spend and which it may well have to take from some other place or ministry. If that happens too many times, the conference starts getting into financial trouble.

Here is another way to look at it: In your personal budget, you have the funds to pay your rent, mortgage, etc. But suppose that all of a sudden you had to make room in your budget for your mortgage and my mortgage—without an increase in pay. That would be a problem. That is what happens to the conference budget when you have an event that goes over budget—they have to pay a bill that they were not expecting to have to pay.

I remember a conference departmental director who had some very good ideas for their department and some innovative things for their department to do. The problem was that they were not very innovative when it came to keeping their department out of the red. Well, actually they were very innovative along those lines; they kept finding new ways to operate in the red.

To make matters worse, they were rather combative when they were asked why they kept operating in the red. That is not a very good combination in terms of having a good relationship with your president. The inability to control neither your attitude nor your spending is not good for your career. That particular conference office finally had to make a personnel change.

Ideas on Innovating With Your President

Ideas on a Budget

Don't be disrespectful to the president.

When I was a conference administrator, I used to tell people if they had an issue that they wanted me to address, but they were disrespectful in how they addressed me, they would then force me to have to address their disrespect, rather than addressing their issue. That would not seem to be what the person raising the issue would want.

When I was president, one of my college classmates was on the conference executive committee. We got hired around the same time, we were young pastoral interns together, our children were the same age, etc. We were colleagues and friends. Then I became conference president.

But as weird as it sounded for my friend to refuse to call me anything other than “Mr. President,” I understood it. I was raised the same way he was and if our situations were reversed, I would have done the same thing. In fact, I had done the same thing for friends that became conference presidents before I got elected as one.

Suggestions on how to avoid appearing to disrespect your president:

Ideas on Showing Respect

seems to be more true of Caucasian culture than Black and Latino cultures (the only three cultures with which I have any real experience).

A rule of thumb for me is: I refer to older individuals and individuals in positions of authority by their title until they tell me to do otherwise. For me, it is better to be considered overly formal than to be considered disrespectful.

Second, your tone is important. In speaking with the president, a sarcastic or mocking voice is usually going to be considered disrespectful.

Third, if you think the president is wrong about a decision or how he/she is relating to you, ask questions before making accusations. There is a difference between saying to the president, “You just don’t like me” and asking the president, “Have I done something that you find offensive?” Don’t make accusations that you can’t prove—the focus will tend to shift away from the issue that you want to address to the accusation that you made.

Once I was having a dialog with someone who wanted a decision from me. They said, “You can take Option X [which is what they wanted] or you can take Option Y if you just want to prove that you have the power.” That was offensive. I have never understood why people think insulting others is a way to get them to move in the direction you want them to go. Ask before accusing.

Fourth, where you say something is important. Try to share your disagreements with the president in front of the smallest circle possible—ideally, when it is just the two of you. No one likes to be called out publicly.

Fifth, many times, the problem is not what you say; it's how you say it. When I was an administrator, I was having a conversation with a conference employee in which I told them something that they were going to need to do. It was conference policy. But the first thing out of their mouth was, "That's not going to happen."

I said, “Whoa, wait a minute. We need to end this conversation right now because you are about to dig yourself into a hole that you will not be able to get out of.”

Now, the person could have said, “Elder, respectfully, what you are asking is going to be very difficult for me to do.” That wouldn’t have changed the requirement—they were still going to have to do what I was saying would have to be done—and they knew that. They had to have known they were wrong for not doing it. **(Hint: You do not want to be both rude and wrong.)**

But the conversation took a wrong turn by **how** they said what they said. Sometimes, it's not what you say that is disrespectful—it's how you say it.

Sixth, if you have an issue with the president, talk to them and not about them. If you say something negative about the president, generally speaking, you should assume:

What you said will get back to them, and,

It will sound differently than you intended.

So, you are better off talking to the president yourself.

My Next Steps With My President

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The exception to that is if the person you are talking to about the president is close to them and can be trusted to advise you how best to approach the president in order to help you solve the problem, instead of making the problem worse by running to the president ahead of you and talking about you. For example, the conference secretary, ministerial director, or assistant to the president may be able to advise you on the best way to approach the president.

Seventh, be forgiving. The president is not perfect. Neither are you. You don't want your president judging you solely on the basis of your worst moments. Don't judge your president on theirs.

Eighth, words matter. Careless, insensitive, disrespectful words can destroy relationships—even relationships that are close.

Lastly, if there is a breakdown in the relationship, the truth is most relationships are lost because one (or both) of the parties involved refused to swallow their pride. A simple and sincere "I'm sorry" would end most of the interpersonal problems in life.

Saying "I'm sorry" does not mean that you are accepting total responsibility for the breach in the relationship. Except for our relationship with God, virtually every other relationship where there is some kind of problem involves at least some responsibility on both parties. The responsibility is usually not exactly the same but virtually every time, both parties contributed something to the problem.

By saying "I'm sorry" you are taking responsibility for your part in the problem—even if your part is small. You still are a part of whatever the problem is.

You can't confess someone else's sins, but you can confess yours. And maybe your confession of your part will help the other person (in this case, the president) look at themselves and see the part they played as well.

Think about it for a minute. If something that you did causes some pain, hurt, embarrassment, etc., to someone else, shouldn't you be sorry for that—even if you didn't intend to cause any harm and even if the pain, hurt, or embarrassment is caused by the other person's over-sensitivity? Still, wouldn't you rather not have anything to do with anything that caused someone pain? It's not about your intentions—it's about their feelings.

Think about this as well: If someone does something that causes offense to you, do you really want to hear a defense from them? No, you don't. They don't want one from you, either. In fact, defending an action that offended someone else usually makes the offense worse. It is saying, in effect, "You're saying what I did hurt you? Here is why I think what I did [hurting you] was ok." Does that sound like a good idea?

Yet, that is something that most of us do.

If your actions have—however unintentionally—caused pain or offense, own that. Say, "I am sorry that what I did hurt you, offended you, caused you pain," etc.

Do not make what you did worse with a non-apology. Here are some examples:

“I’m sorry if you are offended.” Of course, I am offended. That is what I am trying to tell you.

Or, this one, which is even worse:

“I’m sorry if you took it that way.” This “apology” really says that the problem is not what I did to you, it’s how you took it. That one is not going to work, either.

What it comes down to is this: Are you more interested in winning back a relationship or winning an argument?

Conclusion

May I close where I began, youth directors? Your relationship with your conference president is one of the most important relationships in the conference. Your relationship with your president can positively affect their relationship with their conference—and maybe even their relationship with God.

I know that a good relationship is what both of you want. May God bless you both as you pursue it.

About the Author

Elder Dana C. Edmond has had the wonderful and enjoyable privilege of serving as a conference youth director for 11 years, under two conference presidents. Then for seven years, he had the privilege of serving as a conference president. In 15 total years of conference administration, Edmond worked with two youth directors and two associate youth directors. So, he has been on both ends of this spectrum. Elder Edmond is currently the executive director for the Office for Regional Conference Ministries.

Elder Edmond says, “In my nearly 43 years of ministry, there is nothing that I have done so long or enjoyed so much as being a conference youth director. There is no camaraderie like there is in youth ministry — camaraderie among fellow youth directors, camaraderie with Adventist youth ministries and Pathfinder leaders, camaraderie with camp staff and campers, and camaraderie with young people and their parents. It is these relationships that even 21 years after I cleaned out my office and left conference youth ministries that I look back upon with pleasure and for which I thank the Lord on almost a daily basis.”

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If you want to have the best possible relationship with your conference president, this guide is for you.



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