

Steps for a Successful Beginning in Youth Ministry

By [Ann Pursche](#)

One of the concepts I've heard about church ministry is the idea that each new staff member brings to their new assignment, a certain number of "credits" for use within the congregation. These credits are sort of like the number of "lives" you get in a video game. The credits enable the pastor to start or change ministries; they can be spent resolving conflicts or healing relationships. He or she can use them wisely or foolishly, yet at the point that they have all been spent, the person's effectiveness as a minister to that congregation is over, just as would using up all the lives in Pacman would mean "Game Over". It is difficult to try to replenish the account once the credits are gone. Because I would like to see our staff to succeed for as long as possible, I have listed some areas that I've observed over the years at my church that have caused pre-mature ministry "death".

1. **Remember Whom you serve.** Although you may have to answer in various ways to your boss, the Deacons, the CE committee, your youth staff and the congregation, you are ultimately responsible to God. It's not about serving yourself or even the students either. You always need to check the demands of others, your own desires and expectations against what Christ would have you do. It is really quite freeing to realize that we serve a God that loves us unconditionally. Don't waste time trying to please everybody (you won't anyway). However, a common temptation for people in ministry is to try to "sanctify" their own desires (and those of others) by claiming that these ideas are "God-directed". Unless you know that for a fact, the Bible, for example, clearly teaches that value you are holding dear, do not go around telling people, "God told me to do such and such."
2. **Do not focus on physical changes to the facility or superficial group changes during your first year.** Instead if you want to build something, build relationships with students and staff. Every new pastoral staff member over the past 10 years has come in and focused on moving furniture around, painting walls, adding electronics, changing names or redesigning logos (all good things). While these can give the staff member an immediate sense of accomplishment, the effort to effect these changes is energy (and credits) that might've been better spent on people and relationships. If you have developed others' walks with God and have good friendships with them, you can then, with greater credibility, work on those more superficial issues. Don't let the pursuit of the good distract you from obtaining the great or the greatest.
3. **With every new staff member, there are those folks in the congregation who will approach you with the expressed intention of getting you "on their side."** They may have been hurt by the actions of a previous staff person or the actions of someone still presently at the church. Do not be drawn into any battle, either one waged long ago or one with fresh wounds. Even if you agree that their hurt was real, their actual goal is to get you to denounce their enemy. Don't do it; it emboldens them in their bad behavior. Another case is the one who has been previously asked to leave youth ministry for reasons unknown to you. Be very wary of these individuals. Do not invite them back into the ministry or make promises to them of a similar nature without consulting the Pastor and rest of the youth staff first.
4. **Always try to make your supervisor and co-workers look good.** Give credit where credit is due. This is one that will help to add to your "credit account". Work in such a way that your boss is glad he hired you. As a corollary, don't do anything that will cause your boss or co-workers to be embarrassed, to have to explain about or apologize for you. These folks all have to answer to someone else too. The most embarrassing would be for our Senior Pastor to explain why he had to fire a staff member to the congregation. It makes his own credibility diminish. It also damages the reputations of the rest of the paid and volunteer staff. Confront the wayward youth worker as quickly as possible; their bad reputation, if unchecked, can inadvertently tar you as well.
5. **Treat the facility and vehicles with respect and encourage those in your ministry to do likewise.** Nothing has ruined the reputation of the youth ministry more quickly than failure to adhere to this practice. Adults still talk about how youth leaders from twenty years ago did things to abuse the

bus or the church building. It's important to understand that many outside the youth ministry have sacrificed both time and money to make it possible for us to minister in good facilities and with nice things. They feel it's like a kick in the stomach when they see careless/ thoughtless behavior doing damage. While accidents do happen, it is NOT easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to ask for permission around here. Related to this is...

6. **Follow proper rules and procedures.** Don't put 35 people in the 30 passenger bus. Don't bring unapproved (by CE) staff to work in the youth ministry. Use the church calendar wisely and don't forget to use the calendar reservation form to reserve the facility or vehicles. Try not to deliberately schedule time conflicts without talking to those other ministry heads first. For Request For Disbursements (RFDs), make sure you've filled out the form ahead of time if you need a check cut prior to an event. Have receipts to attach if you want to get reimbursed for monies paid out in advance. Use your credit card responsibly, don't max it out every month or neglect to pay the bill. Charge items to the proper budget line items –don't fool yourself into thinking that you don't need to keep Jr. High and High School expenditures separate because "it all comes from the same source." Taking shortcuts or assuming the ends justify the means is the quickest way to turn entire committees from being your allies to your adversaries. "No," becomes a very easy answer for others to give you if there's use and abuse.
7. **Avoid handling currency –money, checks.** Leave that to *trustworthy* volunteers. You are responsible for your ministry budget, but take yourself, if at all possible, out of the loop of collecting cash or checks. This is a gigantic minefield for pastoral staff because of possible abuses. Our pastoral staff does not have check signing authority, access to offerings collected or tithing records for this very reason. If a parent hands you, say a deposit check for a camp registration, give it immediately to the designated volunteer for deposit. If you receive a donation, *while they are still in your presence*, get a blank offering or deposit envelope, fill out the special designation information, and drop it either in the office door or the supply closet safe slot.
8. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** When you leave the office to meet with a student, tell the office staff. If you are planning an event and you want your volunteers to be there, call or e-mail. If you want us to be a meaningful part of the youth meeting, give us the agenda and or teaching topic ahead of time. Do not spring big changes on the group without dialoging with the Senior Pastor and the youth staff about it first; we often know where the hidden mine fields are located and surprising us is not the least bit helpful. Have regular staff and parent meetings. Share your heart and we'll share ours too. Communication is not just speaking, it involves listening too.
9. **Guard your reputation.** Most pastors experience moral failure because of three issues –sex, money and power. In relation to the students in youth ministry, there is safety in numbers. No one-on-one without at least another adult, preferably the same gender as the counselee within visual and hearing range. In this day and age, this applies to counseling guys as well. At camp, we do one-on-ones out in the center of camp for all to see. Don't let the female students comb your hair or hang on you. If you are meeting a female youth worker for lunch (dinner is not well advised unless in groups), meet in a well lighted, public place. But, be very careful that you don't communicate sexism to the women and girls by your circumspect behavior. One former youth pastor in our ministry was so afraid of getting into trouble with women, that he ignored them. He spent tons of quality time with the boys and male leaders, but invested nothing in the lives of the young women as though they didn't matter or weren't as important as guys. Some girls will begin to act out to get your attention while others will write you (and perhaps God) off as irrelevant to their lives. Don't assume that the girls will see ministry by a female volunteer as the same "investment" in their lives as boys receive from a paid youth pastor. As for money, in addition to the previously mentioned caveats, handle your own finances well. Pay your bills on time and don't live beyond your means. The temptation for power and control can only be fought with a humble spirit. Even if you really do know best, don't act like you feel that way. Collectively, your present youth staff has over 50 years of experience and training. Yet, no one is "all that and a bag of chips." It's not your youth ministry anyway, it belongs to God.

10. **Be faithful with your time commitments.** Every person in ministry must juggle ministry, family, relationship with God and outside commitments; do not steal from one area to pay another. Attend to those things that are important -prayer, worship, Bible Study, downtime as well as to those that are urgent. Make sure you work the hours that are assigned to you and don't abuse your schedule. Let people know if you're deviating off your standard schedule. You may think that no one is watching your comings and goings, but you'd be wrong. Even if those in the office aren't aware, your youth staff will catch on very quickly when you've been cheating on your prep, study or devotional time. (Usually, the burden falls on us to pick up the slack). It's easy to begin resenting a youth pastor who puts in 30 hours a week while we add 10 hours of volunteer time on top of our 40-50 workweeks. If you make a promise to meet someone at a set time and place, do it. To be late or to not show at all destroys your credibility immediately and often permanently. We have had many a committed student leave our church because of a few missed commitments by the youth pastor.
11. **Respect and discipline –two biggies but inter-related.** Never decide to put your volunteer staff in the position of “bad cop” to your “good cop”. The Youth Pastor needs to be the one that sets and enforces the standards the students will follow in youth group. Our biggest problem has been the youth pastor undermining the volunteers' authority by not intervening when students break the rules because the infractions “don't bother him all that much.” Make sure the volunteer staff backs you up when you make tough disciplinary choices. The students receive mixed messages from us and follow the voice that is easiest to follow. This causes them to disrespect all the adults, including their parents. Another lack of discipline and respect has been when the youth pastor (or worker) disagreed with a church policy or rule; he blatantly disregarded it in full view of the students. It taught them rules were made to be broken and if the rules got in the way of their fun, oh well. Why should we care about putting a hole in the wall if the youth pastor thinks it's funny? Practice self-respect and self-discipline; be an example to all.
12. **Whether you have a wife, girlfriend or fiancé sometime in the future, do not assume that they are as equally (SHAPED) - gifted, passionate about, trained, or qualified for youth ministry as you are.** The woman in your life may be a treasure to you, but that doesn't mean that your love somehow transforms her into Super-Counselor. This has been a HUGE landmine at my church. We've had youth pastors bring their young pre-wives (or in some other cases their wives of a few years) in as lead girl counselors over the more experienced veterans. The YPs were so blinded by love that they had no clue that their beloveds were in way over their heads –they had no gift for teaching, encouraging or helping the ministry. The couples only saw the fantasy of being able to talk about their work in bed when they got home. The other extreme was the YP wife that made unreasonable demands on his time, “Don't go out tonight, I want you home with me” (even though it's youth group night) and was not involved in church at all. Both kinds of women were highly detrimental to the group. Make sure, when the time comes, that the woman of your life is actually called, equipped and spiritually mature enough to serve alongside you. You wouldn't bring any other new worker in with that kind of responsibility at first, so why would you do it to your wife? Allow them to seek another ministry within the church if that would be a better fit.

While this list is not exhaustive, it does bring to the forefront those issues that have made youth pastors unsuccessful. Part of this is attitude, if you think you don't need to watch out for these things, you are probably well on your way to stepping on landmine and using up your credits real soon. If you are willing to learn from the dead bodies and avoid the missteps, you can have a very long and successful ministry.