

What Church Leaders Can Learn from Chris Christie's 'Bridgegate'

Chris Christie may be finished as a presidential candidate, and maybe not. But either way, he experienced a potentially catastrophic event this past week with his now famous "Bridgegate" problems.

While the vast majority of media critics and consultants agree that he's handling the crisis very well so far (taking full responsibility, firing people at fault, staging a two-hour press conference to deal with questions), it certainly left him in a difficult position. It's an instructional moment for leaders of all types for two reasons:

1. Email will be your downfall. For whatever reason, we generally take a very casual approach to email—which is a huge mistake. We say private things, criticize people, and otherwise write emails thinking they will never be seen publicly. Nothing could be further from the truth. More leaders are brought down by careless emails than almost any other issue today. Google has already said that it doesn't actually delete emails (even when you do). Police, government, the courts, (and we all know about the NSA) has potential access to your email. But worse, the minute you hit "send" you've lost control of that message. Now, someone else has it, and while they may be your friend today, they may not be six months or a year from now and can use that email against you. Never put anything in an email that you wouldn't want the general public to read.

2. Be careful of direct reports. With most of my clients, the leader's direct reports are a joy to work with. But more than a few times in my career, I encountered direct reports who

withheld information from the leader, instigated actions without the leader's knowledge, drove excellent employees away, and were simply power hungry. And it's important to note that in every case, these were highly trusted, long-time direct reports. I know the CEO of a major nonprofit right now who has a No. 2 person that's undermining everything he does. She's controlling, likes to take credit herself, and is disliked (a lot) by other employees. But because she "leads up," the boss thinks she's a genius.

Leaders, you can never be too careful about direct reports. You don't have to live in suspicion, but you do have to occasionally question their judgment, ask other team members about them, use the same performance standards with everyone (including them), and be as objective as possible. Most of all, just read the signs.

What's working and not working in the company? Are your direct reports taking responsibility or always deflecting? Do they inspire and motivate other employees?

Careless email and ego-driven direct reports. They can either drive your success or your failure. The direction is up to you.

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