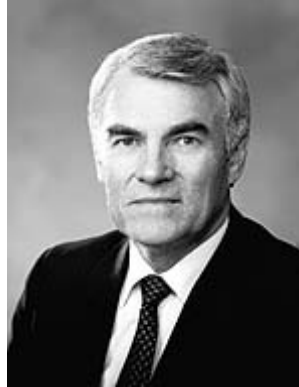

The Principle of Presidency

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When presidencies in the Church function effectively, we see the fruition of the Lord's counsel to "organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing" (D&C 88:119).

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In the scriptures we read the counsel to "organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish ... a house of order, a house of God" (D&C 88:119).

One thing is sure: this is a Church organized with every needful thing. In fact, I know of no more effective organization. Under the direction of the First Presidency and all other presidencies, we really are organized, and a house of order has been established. As members, we know where we fit into the organization, and as a result of our testimonies and commitment to the gospel, we are responsive when calls come to serve in a multitude of ways.

I smiled when I heard that some grateful woman who was involved with the cleanup efforts after a devastating tornado in Oklahoma had said, "We appreciate the help we received from so many, especially from two churches: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Mormon Church."

Also, when flooding occurred a few years ago in the environs of Atlanta, Georgia, the Area President called a stake president and asked if he could please arrange to have 100 men available for one of the cleanup projects. The stake president responded, "No, I don't think we could arrange for 100, but we can arrange to have 200 there!"—and 200 did respond.

It is a blessing to belong to a church that provides us as lay members the opportunity of service, and generally our members are responsive. Recently, there was a need for canvassing a neighborhood in connection with a political issue with moral overtones in which several churches and civic organizations were cooperating. A leader of one of the

groups said, “I wish there were some way we could get our members to respond like your church is able to do.”

We are blessed with a remarkable organization within the Church. The concept of lay leadership, which involves all of us as active members, provides us with many opportunities to serve and develop. Generally we serve in or under the direction of a presidency of a quorum or auxiliary organization.

Not long ago, in a chapel filled with adult members of the Church, I asked, “How many of you are now serving, or ever have served, in the leadership of an organization where there was an executive along with counselors—in other words, in a presidency?” Almost every hand in the audience went up. Serving in a leadership position in a presidency at one time or another is an experience that many share as active members of the Church.

There must be a special significance about the concept of presidency, the idea of an administrator with two counselors and the number three. In the Godhead there are three personages. There are three in the First Presidency, the Area Presidency, the stake presidency, the bishopric, the leadership of the priesthood quorums, and the presidencies of the auxiliaries. There is something consistent and compelling about the idea that an executive in whatever organization in the Church has two counselors. There seems to be an underlying principle of presidency.

When we are called to serve in the presidency of any organization as the president or as a counselor, we all would like to be successful. In reality, some presidencies are much more effective than others. What does it take to ensure that things go well in a presidency?

Here are a few practical suggestions that can help achieve success:

Take advantage of the principle of presidency by counseling with your counselors.

When presidents or administrators feel they are the ones to make the decisions unilaterally without discussing matters with their counselors, they are on shaky ground and also miss the strength and stability inherent in the principle of presidency.

If we are not careful, we can fall into the difficulty described in this scripture: “We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men [and I would add, at least a few women], as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous [or unwise or heavy-handed] dominion” (D&C 121:39).

One counselor who was serving with a president who operated in a unilateral and domineering way said: “If this were not the Church, I would resign. We do not function as a presidency. The president makes all of the decisions. We don’t meet and counsel together regularly. As counselors, we are more like errand boys and are just expected to do as we are told. It is sort of like he feels his directions come from on high. He makes all the decisions that are of any consequence and sometimes rolls over the people in the

organization. He doesn't delegate well and really doesn't need us as counselors. As I said, if this were not the Church, I would have resigned a long time ago."

In a training session, to demonstrate the instability of such a presidency, I have invited someone to come to the stand and construct a one-legged stool. I have a little round wooden top with a hole partially bored in the center into which a little leg can be inserted. The individual easily inserts the leg into the central hole, and in seconds a one-legged stool is ready to demonstrate. As I balance it on the side of the pulpit where it can be seen, I ask the audience to comment about the nature of the design. Immediately they mention that the structure is unstable. The slightest touch makes it unbalanced, and it falls over.

Then I ask the individual to remove the one leg and with the two others make a three-legged stool by inserting the legs in three holes located around the outside edge of the top. Quickly a three-legged stool is ready for demonstration. Its structure is solid. It can bear weight and does not readily topple to one side. With three legs there is steadiness, while with just one there is great instability.

We should remember that there is safety and stability in capitalizing on the positive principles of presidency. Fewer mistakes are made when a leader counsels effectively with his or her counselors. Most problems can be solved through thoughtful counsel in a presidency.

Some time ago a stake president called the member of the Seventy in Church headquarters who was serving as the Area President and asked him for help in solving an unusual problem.

After hearing the question, the Area President asked: "President, that is a difficult question. Have you discussed it with your counselors?"

"No, not yet. The problem just came up, and I thought I would call you and get some counsel," the stake president explained.

The Area President responded: "President, I have a suggestion. Talk this over with your counselors, and if you don't come to a solution you can all feel good about, give me a call and we will try to be as helpful as we can."

The stake president didn't call back, because as a presidency in counsel they had undoubtedly found a solution they could feel good about. There are few problems that cannot be solved by three faithful individuals in open and thoughtful counsel. When members utilize the principle of presidency, counsel together, and seek the Spirit, few mistakes are made. The same Spirit that guides to all truth (see **John 16:13**) will confirm the correctness of decisions made in the safety of counsel, whether at the local or general levels of the Church. Remember, the scriptures indicate that in counsel there is safety (see **Prov. 11:14**).

The decisions made in a presidency should be made in counsel and, with very few exceptions, have the blessing of being unanimous. We would do well to follow the principle taught in scripture regarding the importance of unanimity as it relates to some of the presiding quorums of the Church:

“Every decision made ... must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member ... must [agree] to its decisions, in order to make their decisions of the same power or validity one with the other” (D&C 107:27).

We could paraphrase this counsel by saying that decisions made by a presidency should ideally be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member of the presidency should agree to its decisions, in order to make their decisions of the same power or validity one with the other. Unanimous decisions made in counsel as a presidency have much more strength than those made by the president acting alone.

Never should the president and one of the counselors become the “presidency” to the exclusion of the other counselor. In one Relief Society presidency, the president recommended that one of her closest friends serve as her first counselor. They had associated together for years, and when they began to serve in the presidency it soon became apparent to the second counselor that the president and her friend had discussed most of the issues and agreed on the decision before they met as a presidency. She said, “I felt like an outsider, the odd one out,” when it came to that assignment.

In this case, the president and the first counselor missed the input the second counselor could have added, which would have contributed much strength to the decisions made. It is important to remember that only two do not constitute the intention of a functioning and successful presidency. Imagine a two-legged stool.

A presidency should be decisive. Some presidencies make the mistake of procrastinating decision making. With such situations, matters are put off rather than “wrestling them to the ground” and getting decisions made. Presidencies can be greatly helped by having an effective secretary who, in counsel with the presidency, forms an agenda with the items listed concisely. Then in the meeting the secretary records the decisions made, the assignments given, and who is assigned to provide effective follow-up. This approach can make for a smooth and efficient operation.

Avoid “interminable” meetings through better time management. Everyone’s time is valuable. In one stake, complaints arose that presidency meetings were held too often and too long, so the newly called stake presidency decided they would do all they could to use their meeting time more efficiently. First, they determined they should set a definite and reasonable outside time limit on their weekly presidency meetings. They decided meetings should not be longer than one and a half or, at most, two hours. They determined each meeting would have an agenda that would contain only the items that all of the presidency needed to discuss. Whenever possible, issues raised by a member of the presidency would be accompanied by a recommended solution for consideration and thus help focus the discussion more efficiently.

They eliminated the practice of taking time to read the minutes of the previous meeting. The president said, “Minutes are not minutes; they are hours!” The executive secretary saw to it that a copy of the minutes of the previous meeting were distributed in advance. As a result, in meetings, the presidency dealt only with the most pressing matters and with follow-up on assignments previously made. Any items not considered in the set time frame were postponed until the next meeting. Longer meetings became rare exceptions and were much more appreciated by all. Also, no one complained when a meeting ended earlier than the established time limit.

Such an approach helped ensure that more of the valuable resource of time was available for family and other work or Church responsibilities.

Develop a feeling of fellowship within the presidency. Presidencies work better if they can develop some friendship and sociality among themselves. Occasional informal gatherings that include all members of the presidency along with their spouses can contribute much to building a unity and team spirit. The antithesis of this is when the president chooses to associate socially with one of the counselors and excludes the other. Remember, the Lord said, “Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (**D&C 38:27**).

It could be a potluck dinner at one of the homes or a temple session followed by a visit to an ice cream parlor or whatever. Such gatherings as a group can be especially helpful in letting the spouses become personally acquainted with those with whom one serves and meets so regularly. Many find that some of their lifelong friends are among those with whom they have served in a presidency.

Divide the work into shared areas of responsibility. As you delegate, remember one caution: Although “first contact” assignments can logically be made within a presidency, division or delegation of responsibilities should not be independently handled by each individual so the rest of the presidency does not feel informed about what is going on. Each member of the presidency needs to sense a responsibility for the whole.

Don’t be sad when the time comes for your release from the presidency. We should all remember the sound counsel I heard years ago from President Ezra Taft Benson. He mentioned that when it comes to callings in this Church, we should be aware of three things: First, we do not seek for a position. Second, we do not ask for a release. And, third, we are not sad when we are released.

Although most adjust well to being released, some find the adjustment difficult. It is well to remember from the beginning of our service that with each calling there is a built-in release date at some time in the future. One who has served as a president or counselor may be called to serve in a nonexecutive position in the same organization or just continue as a regular supportive member. Unfortunately, some do not make the adjustment when they are released, and whenever this happens it becomes a challenge to the individual as well as to the organization as a whole.

One of the impressive examples to me of how a real leader can be a good follower was shown to me by Brother William E. Berrett almost 30 years ago.

President Harold B. Lee of the First Presidency had called and asked that I return from a mission president assignment in Mexico City to serve as associate commissioner of education to Brother Neal A. Maxwell, who had been recently called as the commissioner of the Church Educational System. Included in my specific assignments was that of serving as the administrator of the Church's seminaries and institutes of religion. I felt humbled and overwhelmed with the assignment. Brother Berrett had served with distinction as the administrator of seminaries and institutes for many years. He was then at retirement age.

I had been in the office of this venerable and highly respected leader many times to receive counsel and assignments when I served as the director of various institutes.

Whenever I had need to meet with Brother Berrett, he would always graciously welcome me into his office. I would sit in a chair across from his large desk, and he would sit in his high-backed leather chair.

The announcement of my appointment to succeed him as the administrator of the seminaries and institutes had been made public. I drove to Provo, and as I had done so many times before, I climbed the steps to the third floor of the Smoot Administration Building on the BYU campus, where the administrative offices of the Church Educational System were located. The secretary arranged for me to meet with Brother Berrett. But this time, the situation was very different.

I will long remember entering the office. I went to sit where I had always sat across the desk from Brother Berrett. This great leader would have nothing to do with that arrangement. He rose from his seat and motioned for me to sit in his chair. I resisted. I wanted and intended to sit where I had always sat when meeting with him. After much insistence, I moved around the desk and sat uncomfortably in his chair. He sat across the desk where I had usually sat. His long-remembered words were: "Joe, long before I was asked to be a leader, I learned to follow. Now what can I do to be of help to you in any way?"

I decided then that whenever I was to be released from any calling, I would want to be as gracious and supportive of my successor as he was to me on that occasion.

Obviously, more could be written. However, in summary, if we really want to succeed while serving in a presidency, we should remember at least these suggestions:

- Take advantage of the principle of presidency by counseling with your counselors.
- Never should the president and one of the counselors become the "presidency" to the exclusion of the other counselor.

- A presidency should be decisive.
- Avoid “interminable” meetings through better time management.
- Develop a feeling of fellowship within the presidency.
- Divide the work into shared areas of responsibility, remembering the caution that each member of the presidency needs to sense a responsibility for the whole.
- Don’t be sad when the time comes for release from the presidency.

When presidencies in the Church function effectively, we see the fruition of the Lord’s counsel to “organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish ... a house of order, a house of God” (**D&C 88:119**).

Gospel topics: Church callings, leadership, unity