

Hallmarks of an Effective Deacon *by Aubrey Johnson*

Effective deacons are the key to effective churches. A “deacon” is a trusted assistant to the shepherds in a local church. When a deacon is effective, his shepherds are more effective. When he is irresponsible, he becomes a burden rather than a burden bearer.

The word “effective” means successful in producing a desired result. In this case, the desired result is to ease the burden of the church’s leaders. He lightens their load and puts a smile on their faces by the way he manages himself and fulfills his duties. He brings them joy and relieves them of stress. Consequently, the elders are better able to fulfill their shepherding duties. When deacons serve well and elders shepherd well, the church is positioned for growth.

A “hallmark” is a telltale sign of excellence. This article will highlight twelve distinctive features of an effective deacon. The number twelve was chosen to provide deacons with a one year plan for renewing their ministries. Read the list below at the beginning of each month and choose the strategy you believe will make the most difference in your effectiveness. Give that strategy thirty days of focused attention. Post it, pray about it, and make plans for improvement. By the end of the year, you will have made progress in twelve key areas of success.

Elders can use this list to interview deacon candidates (in addition to a doctrinal questionnaire) or to train new deacons and help them sprint out of the starting gate. It can also be used during annual reviews to reinforce a high performance culture. When expectations are clear, deacons are happier and more productive. When goals are not clearly communicated, everyone is frustrated and disappointed. By reviewing this simple list with deacons, you get clarity and commitment. It is definitely worth the time and effort.

Effective Deacons...

- 1. Build Teams (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).** Deacons are servant leaders. That means they do more than accomplish tasks. Leaders work with and through people. By involving others, you bless them, yourself, and your elders at the same time. The volunteer gets a sense of belonging and contribution. You get ideas, energy, and accountability. The elders get better results, backup systems, and one less disconnected member. Everyone wins with teams, so stop doing what is comfortable for you and start doing what is best for the church.
- 2. Do What They Say They Will Do (Matthew 5.37).** Credibility and respect come from follow through, so make it a habit to do what you say you will do. When a man has a pattern of making excuses, blaming others, and explaining why he did not deliver on his pledge, no one is listening. They are only being polite while he tries to convince himself of something he knows is not true. Stop overcommitting. Quit making casual agreements. Put an end to rash promises. Keep your word every time.

- 3. Find a Way Forward (Matthew 7.7).** Wise men do not have all the answers but they are superb at asking questions (who, what, when, where, how). Foolish men do not ask for advice because of insecurity. They are more concerned with protecting their egos than promoting their ministries. Effective deacons ask lots of questions (“How am I doing?” “What am I missing?”) Once they get clear, they get going. They have drive and grit. They do not wait to be prodded or petted. Instead, they take the bull by the horns. Effective deacons get going, monitor, and adjust. They know how to “Git’r done.”
- 4. Look Out for Their Elders’ Interests (Hebrews 13.17).** A servant carries out the instructions of others. A deacon’s job is to carry out the instructions of his elders. Elders should not feel uneasy about those whose role is to serve them. Effective deacons have their elders’ backs. They support them in matters of judgment. They give feedback without pushback. If your job is to bring your elders joy, you cannot succeed in that role while acting as an adversary. Do not circumvent their authority or undermine their influence. The best advice for deacons comes from Matthew 7.12 (The Golden Rule): Do unto your elders as you would have them do unto you (if you were an elder).
- 5. Go the Second Mile (Matthew 5.41).** Effective deacons do not hide from hard work. They constantly search for ways to do good. At service times they look for someone to greet. At fellowship activities, they look for someone to help. They routinely ask their elders, “How can I lighten your load?” Effective deacons have a second-mile mindset because they have first-rate hearts. Doing good is a habit and a joy, not an imposition.
- 6. Are Great Examples (1 Timothy 4.12).** Deacons are more than diligent workers. They are also exceptional role models. They do not pretend to be perfect, but they strive to live honorable, exemplary lives. Church members look to their leaders to understand Christian living. Effective deacons are faithful in attendance, generous in giving, and dedicated to supporting the church’s core ministries (the ones all members are expected to support). They are also prudent in what they post on the Internet. Crude, suggestive, or juvenile humor is avoided. They refrain from publishing inappropriate photos or material online. If it will not reflect well on the church, steer clear. Let every posting be wholesome, in good taste, and pleasing to your shepherds.
- 7. Put Their Families First (Ephesians 5.25).** Being a deacon is a stretch assignment. If your personal life lacks structure and stability, you need to focus your attention there first. Your family comes before your ministry, so if you have to choose, put your wife and kids ahead of “church work.” Ideally, however, being a deacon should make you a better husband and father. Effective deacons make their wives feel cherished and treasured rather than neglected and deprived. Let your Christian service begin at home.
- 8. Are Always Improving (1 Corinthians 15.58).** Coasting is not for Christians and much less for deacons. A deacon is a model of lifelong learning and growth. He constantly seeks to improve himself and his ministry. Paul said transformation comes from renewing the mind. Reading is an excellent way for deacons to elevate their minds and raise the level of their performance. *Dynamic Deacons: Champions of Christ’s Church* is a good book for understanding your role and renewing your zeal (available from Gospel Advocate).

- 9. Have Great Attitudes (Philippians 4.4).** Effective deacons smile a lot. They are not complainers who drag down people's spirits. They do not focus on past failings or obsess over obstacles. Instead, they engage in positive and productive thinking. They focus on the future and solutions. They are thankful and joyful. Remember, you are in charge of congregational morale. Esprit de corps is every deacon's business. Be contagiously enthusiastic and optimistic. Be an inspiring example of faith, hope, and love.
- 10. Pray Frequently and Fervently (Luke 18.1).** Satan loves to foster discontent and division in the church. He does this by getting people to think negatively. Prayer, on the other hand, puts you in the right frame of mind for doing the Lord's work. Begin each day by praying for your family. Ask God to help you meet their needs and make them feel loved and appreciated. Next, pray for your elders. Ask the Lord to open your eyes to opportunities to bless and unburden them. Then, thank God for the team and ministry you lead. Finally, pray for yourself and your growth. Ask the Lord to help you encourage someone today.
- 11. Take Ownership of Results (Galatians 6.7-9).** Effective deacons take full responsibility for results. If things do not go well, they get determined rather than discouraged. They do not blame, complain, or explain. Instead, they choose to be more creative, prepared, and thorough. Effective deacons ask, "What can I do different to produce a better outcome?" For example, take responsibility for better communication. Send your elders an email on the first of every month to update them on your work (keep it brief and use bullet points). Also, take responsibility for relational chemistry. Effective deacons find ways to spend one-on-one time with their overseeing elders. Owning results puts you in the driver's seat. Denying responsibility takes the wheel out of your hands. Do not be a back seat driver in your own life.
- 12. Promote Peace and Progress in the Church (Hebrews 12.14).** A deacon is a facilitator, not a dictator. His job is to serve and not to boss. He does not cling to predetermined methods or demand that everyone fall in line with his plans. He blesses his elders by promoting unity as he goes about his tasks. The church is closer and stronger because of the gracious way he handles his responsibilities.

Refer to this checklist once a month. Choose an area to work on and make at least one positive change. By doing this, you are sure to become a highly effective deacon.