

CAVE Dwellers: Consistently Against Virtually Everything

I wish I had thought of that acronym! But I did not. Credit it to Thom Rainer and his blog (“Seven Ways to Deal with CAVE Dwellers in Your Church”), who borrowed it from Curt Coffman in his work researching disengaged employees.

There are CAVE dwellers in Christian schools too. Not long ago a head administrator and board chair approached me. They were very frustrated. The school was facing a decline in its enrollment and there was a community perception that enrollment was primarily restricted to a local church. The leaders wanted to move the school forward. But the school’s by-laws were very restrictive and required 100 percent approval from the board before any significant change could be considered. One board member had said publicly that he would vote against any change no matter what the rationale. He saw it as his role to preserve the past, and so this board member voted against every proposal. Then his term of service ended. He withdrew his children and sent them to a different Christian school.

There are CAVE dwellers among us. Some are vocal; others are passively aggressive. But they have these things in common: they wear down leaders, they stand in the way of joy-filled service, and they resist for the sake of resisting. CAVE dwellers discourage leaders.

What should leaders do about CAVE dwellers?

- 1. Recognize them and understand that most CAVE dwellers like the cave**

It would be nice if most CAVE dwellers were looking for an opportunity to see things differently and to change. But that is not the nature of the CAVE dweller. Most CAVE dwellers prefer the cave. For them the cave is a safe place, because it is a place they have known and understand. Even if the CAVE dweller acknowledges that there may be other safe, and even better, caves, CAVE dwellers prefer their own cave.

- 2. Pray for peace and patience**

While leaders may simply wish that the CAVE dwellers would go away, accept the fact that there are CAVE dwellers among us. Leaders do not get to pick every individual in their own flock. The good shepherd has chosen his flock and entrusted it to the care of the shepherd he has called to lead. So turn to the good shepherd. Ask for peace and patience to deal with every member of the flock. Understand that the flock of God is composed of compliant sheep and stubborn goats. The flock has both; the flock needs both. But the shepherd needs the peace to understand and the patience to care for the entire flock. Peace and patience are the gifts from the good shepherd. Ask for those gifts.

- 3. Leaders cannot let the CAVE dwellers consume them**

The entire flock needs the leadership of the shepherd. But stubborn goats—that is, the CAVE dwellers—are consuming. They will devour your time. They will sap your energy. They will squish your enthusiasm. Understand and recognize those things. If you do not, CAVE dwellers will consume you.

- 4. Spend time and energy with encouragers**

Leaders need the support and encouragement from trusted confidants. Build positive relationships. Gain the respect and trust of your board chair and colleagues (within or beyond your local school). Often the best way to lighten the burden caused by CAVE dwellers is to share the burden with a confidential, trusted listener.

- 5. Press on and persevere**

The Apostle Paul tells us that the race will be long and difficult. He encourages us to press on and to persevere. We are leading for Christ. We are running the race to advance his kingdom. Our prize will come when we run faithfully. We must keep our eyes on the goal.