

Elder M. Russell Ballard

A well-tuned engine

Before I was called as a General Authority, I was in the automobile business, as was my father before me. Through the years I learned to appreciate the sound and the performance of a well-tuned engine. To me it is almost musical, from the gentle purring of an idling motor to the vibrant roar of a throttle that is fully open. The power that sound represents is even more exciting. Nothing is quite the same as sitting behind the wheel of a fine automobile when the engine is operating at peak performance with the assembled parts working together in perfect harmony.

On the other hand, nothing is more frustrating than a car engine that is not running properly. No matter how beautiful the paint or comfortable the furnishings inside are, a car with an engine that is not operating as it should is just a shell of unrealized potential. An automobile engine will run on only a part of its cylinders, but it never will go as far or as fast, nor will the ride be as smooth, as when it is tuned properly.

The one-cylinder ward

Unfortunately, some wards in the Church are hitting on only a few cylinders, including some that are trying to make do with just one. The one-cylinder ward is the ward where the bishop handles all of the problems, makes all of the decisions, and follows through on all of the assignments. Then, like an overworked cylinder in a car engine, he is soon burned out.

Our bishops have heavy demands placed upon them. They—and they alone—hold certain keys, and only they can fulfill certain responsibilities. But they are not called to be all things, at all times, to all people. They are called to preside and to lead and to extend God's

love to His children. Our Heavenly Father does not expect them to do everything by themselves.

The same is true of our stake presidents, priesthood quorum and auxiliary presidents, and, for that matter, mothers and fathers. All have stewardships that require large amounts of their time, talent, and energy. But none is left to do it alone. God, the Master Organizer, has inspired the creation of a system of committees and councils. If understood and put to proper use, this system will decrease the burden on all individual leaders and will extend the reach and the impact of their ministry through the combined help of others.

Make wise use of councils

Six months ago I stood at this pulpit and talked about the importance of the council system in the Church. I spoke about the great spiritual power and inspired direction that come from properly conducted family, ward, and stake councils. The Spirit continues to bear witness to me of how vital efficiently run Church councils are to the accomplishment of the mission of the Church. For that reason, I have been anxious to see how well my remarks in October were understood, particularly by our faithful and diligent bishops.

During training sessions I have conducted in various locations since last general conference, I have focused attention on the ward council. As part of that training, I invited a ward council to participate. I gave to the bishop a theoretical problem about a less-active family and asked him to use the ward council to develop a plan to activate this family.

Without exception, the bishop took charge of the situation immediately and said, "Here's the problem, and here's what I think we should do to solve it."

Then he made assignments to the various ward council members. This was a good exercise in delegation, I suppose, but it did not even begin to use the experience and wisdom of council members to address the problem.

Eventually I asked the bishop to try again, only this time to solicit ideas and recommendations from his council members before making any assignments. I especially encouraged him to ask the sisters for their ideas. When the bishop opened the meeting to council members and invited them to counsel together, the effect was like opening the floodgates of heaven. A reservoir of insight and inspiration suddenly began to flow between council members as they planned for fellowshipping the less-active family.

As I watched this same scenario played out before me time after time during the past six months, I decided that it would not be out of order to speak about the importance of councils once again. I speak not to scold those who did not give serious attention last time, but because we have an urgent need in the Church for leaders, particularly stake presidents and bishops, to harness and channel spiritual power through councils. Family, ward, and stake problems can be solved if we seek solutions in the Lord's way.

In my experience, lives are blessed when leaders make wise use of committees and councils. They move the work of the Lord forward much faster and farther, like a fine automobile operating at peak efficiency. Committee and council members are unified. Together they experience a much more pleasant trip along the highway of Church service.

Three ward committees and councils

For my purpose today, let me review three ward committees and councils that always should follow a prearranged agenda.

First is the *priesthood executive committee*. It consists of the bishopric, high priests group leader, elders quorum president, ward mission leader, Young Men president, ward executive secretary, and ward clerk. This committee meets weekly under the direction of the bishop to consider ward priesthood programs, including temple and family history, missionary, welfare, home teaching, and member activation.

Second is the *ward welfare committee*. It includes the priesthood executive committee plus the Relief Society presidency. This committee meets at least monthly, again under the direction of the bishop, to consider the temporal needs of ward members. Only the bishop may allocate welfare resources, but the committee helps care for the poor by planning and coordinating the use of ward resources, including the time, talents, skills, materials, and compassionate service of ward members. In this and in other committee and council meetings, delicate matters often are discussed, requiring strict confidentiality.

The third is the *ward council*. It includes the priesthood executive committee; the presidents of the Relief Society, Sunday School, Young Women, and Primary; and the activities committee chairman. The bishop may invite others to attend as needed. This council meets at least monthly to correlate planning for all ward programs and activities and to review ward progress toward accomplishing the mission of the Church. The ward council brings a varied group of priesthood and women leaders together to focus on the broad range of issues that affect ward members and the community. The council reviews suggestions from home teachers and visiting teachers.

Using councils to improve reverence

Recently a bishop who was concerned about reverence in his ward expressed his concern to the members of

the ward council and asked for their suggestions. Hesitantly, the Primary president raised her hand.

"Well," she said, "one person consistently does a lot of enthusiastic visiting in the chapel just before and after sacrament meeting. It can be pretty distracting."

The bishop had not noticed anyone being especially noisy in the chapel but he said he would talk to the offending party. He asked the sister who it was.

She took a deep breath. "It's you, Bishop," she said. "I know you're just reaching out to people, and we all appreciate your desire to greet everyone who comes to the meeting. But when others see you moving around the chapel talking to people during the prelude music, they figure it's OK for them to do the same thing."

When others in the ward council nodded in agreement, the bishop thanked her and asked for recommendations. The council soon decided that the bishop, including the bishop, should be in their places on the stand five minutes before sacrament meeting to set an example of reverence in the chapel. During a follow-up discussion, the council members indicated unanimously that the simple plan had worked and that reverence in sacrament meeting had improved decidedly.

Using councils to improve testimony meetings

Another bishop was concerned about the trend he noticed in ward fast and testimony meetings. Members were bearing few testimonies of Christ and His gospel; instead, they were sermonizing, giving travelogues, sharing personal experiences that were not related to the gospel, and talking about family outings and activities. The bishop understood that those topics were important to the speakers. But they were not testimonies

of Christ and His gospel. He asked the ward council, "How can we teach the importance of using testimony meeting for testifying of Christ and His restored church without offending our members?"

After a little time and some comments by the sisters, the council suggested that the bishop should teach the members what a testimony is and what it is not. In addition the council concluded that the quorums and auxiliaries should discuss the purpose of testimony meeting, and home teachers and visiting teachers should review this subject with individual families during their monthly visits. The bishop now reports, "Our testimony meetings are much better. The witness of Christ and His love for us is expressed by the members, and the spirituality of our ward has improved greatly."

Using councils to help retain converts

One major concern of the General Authorities is the lack of retention in full fellowship of some new converts and those who are less active in the Church. If ward councils are functioning as they should, every new convert will be fellowshipped, will have home teachers or visiting teachers, and will receive an appropriate calling within days after baptism. The less active will receive callings that assure them that they are needed and loved by the ward members.

The Brethren also have expressed "concern regarding Church members' involvement in groups [which are often very expensive] that purport to increase self-awareness, raise self-esteem, and enhance individual agency." Church leaders and members should not become involved in such groups. Instead, "local leaders should counsel those desiring self-improvement to anchor themselves in gospel principles and to adopt wholesome practices that strengthen one's ability to cope with challenges" (*Bulletin*, 1993, number 2:1).

Become a problem-solving team

When stake presidents and bishops allow the priesthood and auxiliary leaders whom the Lord has called to serve with them to become part of a problem-solving team, wonderful things begin to happen. Their participation broadens the base of experience and understanding, leading to better solutions. You bishops energize your ward leaders by giving them a chance to offer suggestions and to be heard. You prepare future leaders by allowing them to participate and learn. You can lift much of the load from your shoulders through this kind of involvement. People who feel ownership of a problem are more willing to help find a solution, greatly improving the possibility of success.

Once the appropriate councils are organized and the brethren and the sisters have full opportunity to contribute, ward and stake leaders can move beyond just maintaining organizations. They can focus their efforts on finding ways to make their world a better place to live. Certainly ward councils can consider such subjects as gang violence, child safety, urban blight, or community cleanup campaigns. Bishops could ask ward councils, "How can we make a difference in our community?" Such broad thinking and participation in community improvement are the right things for Latter-day Saints to do.

How the Apostles counsel together

For the past eight and one-half years I have served as a member of a council of twelve men. We come from different backgrounds, and we bring to the Council of the Twelve Apostles a diverse assortment of experiences in the Church and in the world. In our meetings we do not just sit around and wait for President Howard W. Hunter to tell us what to do. We counsel openly with each other, and we listen to each other with profound respect for the abilities and experiences

our brethren bring to the council. We discuss a wide variety of issues, from Church administration to world events, and we do so frankly and openly. Sometimes we discuss issues for weeks before reaching a decision. We do not always agree during our discussions. But once a decision is made, we are always both united and determined.

Listen and reason in councils

This is the miracle of Church councils: listening to each other and listening to the Spirit! When we support one another in Church councils, we begin to understand how God can take ordinary men and women and make of them extraordinary leaders. The best leaders are not those who work themselves to death trying to do everything single-handedly; the best leaders are those who follow God's plan and *counsel* with their *councils*.

"Come now," said the Lord in an earlier dispensation through the prophet Isaiah, "and let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). And in this dispensation He repeated that admonition: "Let us reason together, that ye may understand" (D&C 50:10).

Let us remember that the basic council of the Church is the family council. Fathers and mothers should apply diligently the principles I have discussed in their relationships with each other and with their children. As we do so, our homes can become a heaven on earth.

Brothers and sisters, let us work together as never before in our stewardships to find ways to make more effective use of the wondrous power of councils. I ask you to consider all that I said on this subject last October with what I have said today. I testify that we can bring the full force of God's revealed plan for gospel governance into our ministries as we counsel together. May God bless us to stand united as we strengthen the Church and our members, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.