



# RETHINK YOUR STAFFING STRATEGY

BY KENNY CONLEY

**The way we staff kidmin is all wrong!**

At least that's what I thought about five years ago when I came across some new insights in relation to a staffing dilemma I was facing. I was leading the largest staff I'd ever had, but I felt like we weren't winning in the way we should.

Sometimes, it can be the result of having the wrong people on the proverbial staffing bus, or it could simply be that we're using an outdated structure that is inefficient. This realization has prompted me to begin taking an entirely new look at the way I hire. No, I haven't uncovered a secret formula, but I have uncovered a few principles that have served my church very well.

This is how I knew that the traditional model is broken. Imagine with me as I paint the scenario we see happen at churches all over the country.

Veronica gets hired as the first ever children's pastor. She's been doing it as a volunteer for years, but now she's finally on staff and getting paid for it. The church is growing and at this point, Veronica is primarily leading in elementary and she has some strong volunteers holding down the fort in preschool. The church gets a little bigger, the budget grows and Veronica hires a part-time preschool director to oversee everything that happens with kids before elementary. The church continues to grow over the next few years and Veronica eventually hires an elementary director and even an assistant, so she can focus on leading the entire ministry.

What I just described is how most kidmin departments grow. Very few deviate. There's nothing really wrong with this model, but it isn't as efficient as it could be.

I have bigger concerns with what happens next, where I believe the traditional model begins to break down. The church grows and money becomes available to hire additional positions. Sometimes, new roles are added that benefit the entire ministry, like a volunteer coordinator or a childcare coordinator. However, growing ministries will often begin hiring staff under the elementary and early childhood directors, forming larger departments. This is where children's ministries can become highly inefficient.

Five years ago I read the book *Lead the Way God Made You* by Larry Shallenberger which prompted my new quest for creative staffing solutions. The premise is that most of us are really good at a few things and not so good at everything else. Unfortunately, we probably only spend 20% of our time doing the stuff we're really good at. What if we staffed in such a way that most of the staff spent 50%, or even 80%, of their time doing the stuff they really loved and the stuff they were really good at? Further conversations with other staff leaders helped me see things I hadn't yet noticed. I found that almost all ministry roles land in one of three ministry buckets.



#### BUCKET 1: ADMINISTRATION

*Systems, organization, and procedures that work in the background allowing ministry to actually happen in a safe and efficient way.*



#### BUCKET 2: PRODUCTION

*Creativity, fun, and compelling environments where truth is communicated to kids in ways that stick*



#### BUCKET 3: VOLUNTEER RELATIONS

*An army of willing men, women, and teenagers who make ministry happen every week and must be recruited, trained, organized and cared for*



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People generally have a bent toward one of these buckets, yet we rarely have roles that allow staff to primarily operate in one of these ways. The traditional elementary director frequently teaches from the stage on the weekends, constantly recruits and trains volunteers, while keeping everything organized. More often than not, the preschool director is doing the same exact thing. What if we moved away from the roles of elementary and preschool directors and thought about roles that allowed staff to operate mostly in one of their gifts? It was an interesting premise that challenged my thinking.

As I began thinking creatively about staffing, it led me to develop questions to ask myself when hiring and evaluating staff positions. Here are three key questions I began asking every time I was ready to hire a new team member.

### 1. IS EVERYONE ON MY STAFF DOING WHAT THEY DO BEST?

This is a tricky question as you might be biased if you have good relationships with your staff. It's also tricky because your staff might not answer it the way they should either. It's natural for a person to fear losing a title, even if it means they'll spend more time doing what they enjoy. Let's be honest with ourselves though. Someone who is absolutely amazing at administration, production, and volunteer aspects of ministry is like a leprechaun or unicorn. They're legendary and likely don't exist. You might get really lucky and find someone who does two of the three really well, but more than likely your people probably only play best in one of these three areas.

If this is true, let's play this out. Veronica's elementary director is really talented when it comes to production and her preschool director is amazing with volunteers (highly characteristic of these positions, I might add). Because of the staffing model, this ministry will have really great productions in elementary with subpar

productions in preschool. Additionally, they will have an excellent volunteer culture in preschool but a struggling volunteer team in elementary. To top it all off, both directors will feel disorganized due to administrative challenges. As great as the directors are, they'll never feel like they're winning. They'll feel like they're drowning and it doesn't have to be that way.

What would happen if the elementary director walked away from his title and took full ownership of productions for all of children's ministry? What if he could spend most of his time developing volunteer teams to lead incredible productions in multiple environments? What would happen if the preschool director walked away from her role and took full ownership of all kidmin volunteers? What if she developed the recruiting, training, and care processes for every age group and environment? Yes, the transition would be challenging and details would need to be worked out to ensure that people and tasks didn't fall through the cracks. However, it's likely that the entire ministry would benefit from better production experiences. It's also likely that a healthier volunteer culture would exist everywhere instead of in just one department. Oh, and your staff would probably enjoy their jobs more because they get to spend more time doing what they love. My favorite part of this organizational idea is the kind of community that develops between the staff. They have to depend on each other to be successful, and they'll feel more like a team working together instead of two people overseeing different departments. Win, win, win!

### 2. DO AGE GROUPS REALLY MATTER?

Early on when the organization is small, we might answer this question with a "yes." You'd want to hire a preschool director who excels with all the munchkins and you'd want the elementary director to be highly relevant to that hard to please 5th grade boy.

What if we moved away from the roles of elementary and preschool directors and thought about roles that allowed staff to operate mostly in one of their gifts?

However, if you have a long term view of your organization, you might answer the question with a “no.” Hopefully, you’re assembling an organization where the volunteers are building relationships with the kids. The characteristic you’re looking for most in a director is their ability to lead volunteers, not their relevance to a specific age group.

A good volunteer director can recruit and develop volunteer coaches/leaders, who will lead volunteers, who will build relationships with the kids. This volunteer director can put the right coaches and volunteers in elementary and the right coaches and volunteers in preschool. Age groups don’t matter as much as we think.

The same is true when it comes to productions. Whether you’re putting together a production for elementary or preschool, you need tech, hosts, storytellers, worship leaders, and actors. A good production director can easily produce programs for any age group.

### 3. AM I THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX?

Maybe you only have a part-time position available to fill a role and you’re finding it really difficult to find someone part-time. Maybe you’ve got the perfect candidate for a full-time role, but he’s only available on a part-time basis.

I think we should get more creative with our roles. Is there someone else on your church staff who is in a similar part-time role? What if you coordinated with them to take on your open role making them full-time? Maybe the full-time position you have available could be divided into two or more roles to adequately support what needs to be done in a creative way. Don’t limit yourself to predefined roles that are less efficient than you can afford.

### FINAL THOUGHTS ON STAFFING

I want to help Veronica and others like her. It’s a very peculiar problem with a very specific solution. She has enough staff to have a children’s ministry that knocks it out of the park every week, but because staff are in positions where they aren’t utilized to their full potential, they’ll always struggle.

Since I began asking these questions about staff, everything has changed. I’ll never go back to the traditional model. I have staff who have responsibilities that span multiple age groups. I have staff who spend almost all of their time doing what they do best. I have a production director who spends half her time working with artists and volunteers in our adult arts department and half of her time leading productions in kidmin. Because she spans both areas, we have access to volunteers and talent that wouldn’t gravitate to the children’s ministry. I love that some of the people who sing on our main stage also sing on our elementary stage.

Turning the traditional and accepted staffing model upside down is one of the best things we’ve ever done. Begin to think differently about how you staff your ministry. Get the most out of your staff, design roles where they love what they do, and create a staff environment where people have to work as a team to be successful. It could be the adjustment your ministry needs that changes everything. **K**

A kidmin leader for nearly two decades, Kenny Conley currently leads all NextGen ministry at Gateway Church in Austin, TX. Outside of his many ministry pursuits, Kenny enjoys taking adventures with his family through travel, hiking, and just about anything outdoors. [childrensministryonline.com](http://childrensministryonline.com), [@kennyconley](https://www.instagram.com/kennyconley)