

Soft Skills for Ministry Leaders – Reflection

The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps.

Proverbs 14:15 (ESV)

Someone in your life has probably given you this advice: “Think before you speak or act.” Most of the troubles I have gotten myself into were a result of not heeding that advice. But what if your thinking is messed up? What if you have fallen into a false way of thinking about someone or something? Your false way of thinking will lead you to say or do things that will negatively impact you and others. I see this happening to ministry leaders often.

Here are some of the common “cognitive distortions” human beings fall into according to *Treatment Plans and Interventions for Depression and Anxiety* by Leahy, Holland, and McGinn (2012).

1. *Mind reading.* This is when we assume we know what someone is thinking, especially when assuming they have negative thoughts about us or unsavory motivations.
2. *Fortune-telling.* This is when we think we can predict the future, especially with bad things.
3. *Catastrophizing.* This is when we build up the awfulness of something in our minds, usually combined with fortune-telling.
4. *Labeling.* This is when we take one instance of behavior and generalize it about ourselves or someone else.
5. *Discounting positives.* This is when we minimize good outcomes as trivial, thus robbing them of any significance.
6. *Negative filtering.* A close cousin to number five, this is when we focus completely on bad outcomes, real or perceived.
7. *All-or-nothing.* This is when we see no nuance or gray area. Things are either amazing or a total failure. There is no in-between.
8. *Blaming.* This is when we find something negative another person has done and focus on it as the reason for how we are feeling or acting. It means we get to avoid responsibility.
9. *What if?* This is when we focus on the possibility of something going wrong and are thus paralyzed from acting.
10. *Emotional reasoning.* This is when the feelings of the moment become the lens through which we interpret, decide, and act, often with lasting consequences.

See how the devil can use these false ways of thinking as campaigning grounds in our lives? The social media, always-connected culture we live in has greatly amplified the potential harm. Our false ways of thinking can be acted upon and sent around the world in no time. The more frantic, the more plugged in, the more harried we are, the more likely that cognitive distortions will do their ugly work.

The cost for ministry leaders is great. The standard is set higher for us. We do not get do-overs. Someone in the congregation can say or do something that is obviously out of line, but if a ministry leader does that he or she is likely to be calling U-Haul very soon.

That is why ministry leaders need to develop the soft skill of reflection. I define reflection as *giving thought to your thoughts and the directions they are leading you.* It involves three components:

Identifying what you are thinking; evaluating the soundness of what you are thinking; and correcting your thinking before speaking or acting. Here are some practices that, over time, will help you develop the skill of reflection.

1. *Listening to God.* I have come to prefer the phrase “listening to God” over other phrases we might use – quiet time, personal Bible study, journaling, etc. Too many times the busyness of ministry leadership causes us to stop listening to God. We may stop reading the Bible and praying at all, or more likely we view it as an expected practice we need to check off the daily to-do list. The concentrated practice of listening to God and internalizing what his word tells you will lead to transformation of your heart and mind. False thinking is diagnosed and corrected by regular doses of truth.

2. *When emotions are strong, give yourself more reflection time.* Nearly every utterance or action taken when feelings are raw will prove to be a mistake. Emotions override our ability to think straight. You are not immune. Don’t kid yourself. Emotions need to be given time to subside before deciding what you should say or do.

3. *Unpack your thoughts with a trusted person.* There needs to be someone in your life with whom you can have this conversation: “Here is what I am thinking. Here is why I am thinking it. Is my thinking sound?” The more important the issue, the more important the conversation.

4. *Take a Sabbath.* You need sometime during the week when you unplug and relax. Turn the phone off. Let the email wait until tomorrow. If you are going 24/7 and not taking the opportunity once a week to just enjoy being alive in God’s grace, then you are doing harm to yourself. Friday is that day for me. I try not to plan anything or have any commitments. It is amazing how often God corrects my false thinking in the open space of a Friday.

5. *Get some rest.* Being chronically tired is a great breeding ground for false thinking. Turn off the TV and go to bed. Turn off the smart phone and take a nap. Sit on the back porch and watch birds.

6. *Get some exercise.* The buildup of stress is another breeding ground for false thinking. Something as simple as a long walk can let off a lot of steam and clear your mind. Your body was made to move. Physical activity will help you give thought to your thoughts by renewing your body.

7. *Get a check-up.* Some of our false ways of thinking are directly tied to physical issues that need to be addressed with the doctor. Get on a regular plan for check-ups and blood work. Follow through on what you learn.

8. *Read widely.* Having one source for news and viewpoints is more likely to lead you into false ways of thinking. Make it a point to expose yourself to people and ideas that will challenge your biases. Narrowness of perspective leads to narrowness of thinking. Grow yourself and challenge yourself with viewpoints that are not the ones to which you naturally gravitate.

Dear brothers and sisters, please give thought to your thoughts and where they are leading you. Don’t just blindly fall into false ways of thinking and acting. Cultivate the skill of reflection through the practices that promote it. Try some of the above. Discover your own. As you develop this soft skill, I believe you will experience a closer walk with God, more peace, and more fruitfulness in your ministry.