

Soft Skills for Ministry Leaders – Rest

The person who is burning the candle at both ends isn't as bright as he thinks he is.

Rick Warren

Most churches will applaud you as you work yourself into an early grave.

They certainly don't intend to kill you. In fact, just the opposite is true. They intend to encourage and affirm you. They want you to know how much you are appreciated for what you do. So if you show up at each small group fellowship, if you stay late at the office many nights for meetings or appointments, if you forgo family vacations for mission trips and youth camp, and if you respond immediately to text messages and email on your day off, the church will most likely reward you. They will certainly reward you with emotional currency, and maybe even the spendable kind, too. They will tell you what a wonderful ministry leader you are. They will tell you how blessed they are to have you as a pastor. They will brag about your "servant heart" to their friends at other churches. Facebook will fill up with your sacrificial exploits.

If you listen to it all, you will slowly kill yourself, and probably your marriage even before that.

Here is a problem I have observed among ministry leaders. Ministry is a stressful calling. It wears you down emotionally as well as physically. Most ministry leaders do not build adequate times of rest and renewal into their routines. To make matters worse, often ministry leaders crave the affirmation of people in their churches because that is how the leaders gain their sense of self-worth. We call it "loving the sheep," but it is really people-pleasing. We love the strokes...*until we have one.*

Rest is a soft skill that ministry leaders must develop intentionally. You must take ownership of this and grow in it over the life of your ministry. It is critical for all your relationships - with the Lord, with your spouse, with your church, with your blood pressure. It is critical for ministry success, defined as *doing what God has called you to do in a way that honors him over the long haul.* Developing the soft skill of rest just isn't optional.

I'm on this journey, too. Here are three practices that have helped me find rest.

1. *Rest begins and ends in the Lord.* Stated another way, the only real rest you will find is in Jesus. If you are trying to gain your self-worth from positive responses to your ministry, you will be running on a treadmill that never stops. No matter how hard you run, the rest stop will never get any closer. Why? Because as soon as one "attaboy" is over, you need another one. You need one more proof that you're significant. When the affirmation does not come, you're shattered. When the numbers are not what you want them to be, your soul is anxious. Let's get off this treadmill. Positive responses are great, but they do not provide rest for the soul. Only the Christ of Calvary can do that. *Nurture the disciplines that nurture your peace in Him.* This is the foundation of a life of true rest. The bonus to finding true rest in Christ is that you can now do ministry out of the joy of serving Him rather than the need to gain affirmation. That makes a big difference.

2. *Discuss expectations with the appropriate leaders in your church.* Often ministry leaders make assumptions about what is expected of them. Making significant decisions based on assumptions is rarely a good idea. If you are wearing yourself out by doing things you *think* others expect, stop thinking. Talk with them about it. Discuss your weekly schedule and priorities with your (fill in appropriate person or group here). Help them understand the demands on your time and the schedule stresses you are experiencing from week to week. Let them speak into your life about what is most important. I did this a couple years ago with the Mission Coordinating Team, the leadership group that oversees the ministries of the association in pursuit of our mission of *assisting churches*. They removed a big burden from my shoulders, one that I had assumed was expected but in fact was not. Bottom line: You may be putting burdens on yourself that are unnecessary. Talk with folks about it. Let them help you instead of “assuming” yourself into exhaustion.

3. *Practice a weekly Sabbath.* Remember these words: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (Exodus 20:9 & Deuteronomy 5:13). If you are in ministry leadership, Sunday is not your Sabbath. Sunday is the most intensive workday of the week. You need to find another day in which you withdraw, unplug, recreate, and rest. Communicate this to the people in your ministry. Help them understand why you do it and the benefit to the church. If you need help doing this, let me know. I’ll be glad to assist you with developing the practice of a Sabbath and how to communicate it. (Except on Friday, of course. That’s my Sabbath.)

By the way, I know that many of you are bi-vocational ministry leaders. You draw a significant portion of your livelihood from work outside of the church. There are advantages to bi-vocational ministry, but there is also the increased potential for burnout. These three practices – nurturing true rest in Christ, discussing expectations instead of assuming, and taking a weekly Sabbath – will be critical for your long-term ministry. You can’t go 24/7 and expect to make it to the finish line in a healthy way.

Ministry leaders, if you are having a difficult time developing the practice of rest, please talk with someone who can help you think through the challenges and come up with a game plan. Don’t put this off! Developing the soft skill of rest is critical for long-term obedience to your calling.

One final word to lay leaders in the church. Be an advocate for your pastor and ministerial staff in this area. Help them protect their day off. Make sure they get ample vacation time and use it. Implement a sabbatical policy that will give them extended time to renew and recharge every few years. Help the church have reasonable expectations of their ministry leaders. These practices will help increase pastoral tenure and benefit the church. You will be doing yourself a favor if you help your shepherds develop the soft skill of rest.