
GROWTH POINTS

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Leading is Tough

Leadership is difficult. Anyone who has served in a leadership role knows there are inherent risks. The fact that around one-third of pastors don't finish well is evidence that leading is a challenge.

One of the common challenges to being a pastoral leader is the added stress created by various pressures. Unless you've been a pastor, it's difficult to understand the constant pressures of preparing sermons, attending to people in emotional situations, being misunderstood, hearing criticism of one's work, etc.

Another challenge comes from the amount of work that is required. Being overworked has been an issue of leadership since the days of Moses. In Exodus 18, Jethro told Moses, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out" (18:17-18).

One of the most difficult issues in being a leader is dealing with leadership backlash and criticism. Leaders expect criticism from outsiders and others who are enemies. But being criticized by insiders is extremely difficult to process.

The Apostle Paul, Moses, and King David all struggled with accepting criticism, and much of it came from insiders. Aaron and Miriam criticized Moses (Num 12:1-2), David responded in his Psalms to personal attacks (Psalms 27; 31; 35; and 37), and some of Paul's letters were responses to criticism (Galatians and Corinthians).

While leaders must expect criticism of their work, it is difficult when they are regularly under fire. Over time, constant criticism wears leaders down. One particular type of criticism—leadership backlash—is especially difficult.

Leadership backlash occurs when followers turn on a leader and blame him or her for unexpected difficulties. Moses experienced this type of backlash after the Children of Israel ended up starving and thirsty in the desert (Exodus 16:2-3). This type of hurtful criticism is quite common among pastors and church planters. In fact it is so common that a clear pattern is identifiable.

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A Cycle of Backlash

Leadership expert, Robert Clinton, identified a common pattern of leadership backlash.

First, a leader gets a vision (some direction) from God.

Second, some followers are convinced that the new direction is the proper way to go.

Third, the leader and followers decide to move forward in the new direction.

Fourth, as they move in the new direction, hard times—persecution, spiritual warfare, or unexpected consequences—happen.

Fifth, reacting to the hard times, there is a backlash from the followers. They criticize the leader's vision, even though they previously agreed to the new direction, too.

Sixth, at this point, the leader either resigns from discouragement, or is driven to God to reconfirm the original vision.

Seventh, God reconfirms the original vision, and impresses on the leader that He will deliver.

Eighth, God vindicates the leader and himself.

Leaders don't always experience all of the steps in a backlash. Sometimes they resign due to the constant criticism. Other times they pull back into a shell and stop leading. It takes real determination to stay focused on the vision to its fulfillment.

Presence of God

Three observations are clear.

Observation 1: There is no doubt about it; leaders are on display. Anyone aspiring to leadership should do so with their eyes wide open regarding the inherent challenges.

Observation 2: There is no doubt about it; leaders will be criticized. Common statements highlight this fact: "The largest roof catches the most snow;" "The tallest tree catches the most wind;" and my favorite, "The Law of the Whale: whenever you rise to the surface and blow, you get harpooned." Painless leadership is impossible. Leaders must be willing to lead with, and through, pain.

Observation 3: There is no doubt about it; leaders need the presence of God to effectively lead others. There are many principles of leadership, but this one appears to supersede them all. At the burning bush, God told Moses "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:10-12).

Do you wish to be a fruitful leader? Then seek the presence of God in all that you do and say. You'll find He is sufficient.

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