



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: This is the second of three sessions on the need for courage in leadership. This session offers some reflections on how we can avoid burnout as leaders, and how we can resist becoming 'defended' i.e. self-protecting by retreating into a leadership style in which, rather than open up to others and empower them, we can increasingly "manage" ourselves and others. You may wish to split the session into two - one looking at burnout, and the other at not being defended.

Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

What does "defended" leadership feel like for those who are on the receiving end of it?



Understanding the information (45 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

The risk of burnout is lessened if we can have the courage to "lead ourselves" before we lead others. Here are three suggestions as to what this might look like:



Being disciples first. Paul tells the Ephesian elders to "keep watch over yourselves" first and then the flock for whom they have responsibility. (Acts 20:28) The first victory in long-term leadership is over ourselves – to know our strengths, limits and weaknesses. As leaders our instincts may be to invest ourselves in the task, or in others, but we have nothing to offer others if we are not internally whole.

This can be the most challenging aspect of being a leader – it is easier to inspire or control the behaviour of other people than to reflect on ourselves honestly, and seek to grow as disciples. A reporter once asked D L Moody which people gave him the most trouble. He replied, 'I've had more trouble with D L Moody than with any person alive.' We are disciples before we are leaders. In fact, being the leader is being the first follower. John Maxwell reinforces this point: "A leader can never take others further than they have gone themselves, for no-one can travel without unless he or she has travelled within."

This means paying attention to our inner life and character. The most defining thing about us as leaders is not what we do but who we are becoming in Christ. “Character...is about being the person God intends you to be for the sake of the people whom God brings across your path.” (Walter Wright) Our inner life, leading to the shaping of our character, is what is under the ground. And, as with any plant, it is the attention given to what is under the ground that makes all the difference. It is only as we win our internal struggles over fear, loss, and our willingness to embrace cost that we are able to fight the more public battles we face.

As leaders, leading ourselves will mean paying attention to our discipleship – and the interior life which shapes our characters – before anything else. We will ask ourselves: how is my mind being renewed? What are the practices that enable God’s Spirit to change me? Where is the environment of community in which I am being supported and challenged?

Getting our significance outside of ourselves. Our own identity and self-understanding influence all our leadership behaviours and relationships. No human relationships are big enough to give us a proper sense of ourselves - our security and significance cannot come from our own selves, or from others, but from God’s love, which is never affected by our success or failure. At the heart of this self-leading is the knowledge that in order to be free to lead others, and to face all the inevitable challenges we have outlined, we need a source of approval that is not put in danger by how we perform.

The habit of being able to do nothing. The gift of Sabbath – one day a week in which we can rest – is the main source of our re-creation, as well as the biggest way we express that God is in charge. Sabbath was originally God’s way of telling His people that they were free from slavery, from the need to be constantly productive. It is also the way we let God be God. The writer Marva Dawn says, “A great benefit of Sabbath keeping is that we learn to let God take care of us – not by becoming passive and lazy, but in the freedom of giving up our feeble attempts to be God in our own lives.” Sabbath is taking a day a week to remind ourselves that we did not make the world and that it will continue to exist without our efforts. Stopping in order to be with God reinforces the truth that only God can truly satisfy our desires in a way that our career, possessions or reputation cannot.

When we are able to get to the point that we can regularly cease from our labours, and pay attention to our own health, sleep, and enjoyment, we are in fact expressing a deep trust in God, which will help us to persevere through inevitable challenges. We need to get to the point where we surrender our desire to fix everything and our sense that we are the solution to our lives.

We will find it easier to be an “undefended”, secure person, able to deal with our challenges by:

Letting ourselves be seen. The original meaning of courage means “coming from the heart”. To be truly courageous is to tell the whole story of who we are with our whole heart. To allow our backstage selves to be seen front stage. (Of course, we need wisdom about how, when, and with whom to do this).

Jesus was unafraid to reveal His tiredness, to retreat even when many wanted His attention, to share His need for His disciples to be with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Vulnerability is a great gift of leadership. Jesus said, “For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open” (Mark 4:22). While we might hope to impress people with our strengths, but we will connect with them through our vulnerabilities.

In his book “In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership”, Henri Nouwen writes that Christian leaders must be “persons always willing to confess their own brokenness and ask for forgiveness from those to whom they minister ... When the members of the community of faith cannot truly know their shepherd,” leading others “quickly becomes a subtle way of exercising power over others and begins to show authoritarian and dictatorial traits” (p. 62).

Being comfortable with setting boundaries. If self-care is to be possible, it will mean we are able to comfortably set aside time, sometimes risking the disappointment of others, and knowing that we ourselves cannot fulfil their needs. The writer Henry Cloud says, “Boundaries define us. They define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership. Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility for gives me freedom.”

Just as Jesus knew who to entrust Himself to, when to rest, and would frequently move on after His encounters, leaders who are not defended can establish boundaries because they know: It is the only way to **keep focussed on their main calling**. “The greatest incentive to saying ‘no’ is having an even greater ‘yes’ burning within you.” (Stephen Covey) They keep us from **resentment**. A lack of boundaries can quickly lead to a loss of genuine compassion.

Boundaries model a healthy lifestyle to others. Particularly in the areas of being able to rest well, a key question for any servant-leader is, “Do I have a lifestyle I would want others to imitate?” Boundaries **create respect** for others. It is helpful if we are reasonably available to others. It is unhelpful if we think we are indispensable to them. If we find ourselves unable to establish boundaries, perhaps it is an indication that we are relying on others too much for our own unmet needs.

Risking failure. The athlete Jonathan Edwards prepared for competing as an Olympics triple-jumper by spending time contemplating what it would mean if he failed to do so. Having decided it wouldn’t be as bad as he feared, he went on to win gold. Success in leadership is not about an absence of failure. It is about the ability to be secure in the midst of failure. As we have seen we live at a time of fast-paced change in which we cannot just rely on the wisdom of what has gone before. We are therefore often called upon to take risks and experiment. Having the security to risk failure is not an added extra to leadership – it is a requirement. It may help us to be reminded that 95% of success is said to be built on failure. The first 50 years in the life of Winston Churchill have often been called 'A study in Failure'.

Dealing with criticism well. Most of us find dealing with criticism hard – if we receive nine positive comments we tend to dwell on the one negative. Yet good leadership will always create movement, and discomfort through change, and therefore the absence of criticism is not always a positive sign.

These principles may help: Always asking, “What is the 1% of truth in this criticism which I need to pay attention to?” **Pausing.** Our initial natural response will always be fuelled by adrenaline, which causes a “fight or flight” reaction in us.

Waiting (if we can) for 48 hours before responding will give our feelings time to settle, and our thoughts to gather. Avoiding responding by email or text – face to face will enable a more genuine encounter. Welcoming “the Lord’s discipline.” Whether the criticism is intended for good or not, God can use our circumstances to shape us if we allow Him. We are always works in progress. Coming against things in the opposite spirit. This is the secret of agape love and the way of the cross – to return anger with compassion, or aggression with love. Processing with others, who can help us discern what is helpful in the criticism, and how to respond. Praying before responding – that we may see the critic as God sees them. Forgiving ruthlessly. In leadership we cannot control others’ responses to us. We risk being misinterpreted at best and disliked or rejected at worst. We will seldom feel as if we deserve it. Every leader will at some point have to echo Jesus’ words, “Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.” In order to genuinely forgive, like Jesus we will have to experience a death, before resurrection. This will mean acknowledging the pain of the wound, without being able to strike out at those who have inflicted it upon us. It is a sharing in Christ’s sufferings – absorbing the “debt” of the hurt into yourself – having in some ways to die to what you want, or even deserve. By growing in being able to forgive people, we begin to see them, and hopefully love them, as they really are. If we are able to forgive we will know that we, too, can go through pain and still survive. Being good at forgiving is an essential quality for any leader.

Discuss: Being disciples first, focussing on our inner life and character, getting our significance outside of ourselves, the habit of being able to do nothing, letting ourselves be seen, setting boundaries, risking failure, dealing with criticism well...which one of these do you find easiest? Which one do you find most difficult? Why?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read 2 Corinthians 12: 6-10 in which Paul is remarkably undefended.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:

What does this passage teach me about God?

What does this passage teach me about people?

How does this passage call me to obey God?

What might I do in response to this this week?



Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

There is no video, but you are invited to discuss your experience of what has helped you avoid burnout or defendedness.



Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, "What might God be showing me and how might I respond?" They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, "Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?"



Group prayer (5 minutes)

Reflect on these "commandments":

1. Thou shalt not be perfect or try to be.
2. Thou shalt not try to be all things to all people.
3. Thou shalt leave things undone that ought to be done.
4. Thou shalt not spread thyself too thin.
5. Thou shalt learn to say 'no'.
6. Thou shalt schedule time for thyself, and for thy supporting network.
7. Thou shalt switch off and do nothing regularly.
8. Thou shalt be boring, untidy, inelegant and unattractive at times.
9. Thou shalt not even feel guilty.
10. Thou shalt not be thine own worst enemy, but thine own best friend.



from Sarah Myhill's book 'CFS – it's Mitochondria, not Hypochondria'



Leading: The challenges of leadership 2. Avoiding burnout and being ourselves



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