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I Needed Coaching

... and Why You Might Too.

Michael J. Rubino | posted July 19, 2016



Jeremy Bishop

Like most things in my life, I learned the hard way that I needed to bring coaching into my ministry. I was heading home one evening at 6:30 p.m. and the weather matched my mood: dark, stormy, and miserable! As I approached my front door, I looked up to see my wife there, arms crossed. I was tempted to turn around and avoid the conversation I knew was brewing. For weeks she had been dropping hints about my work schedule; I was not maintaining a

consistent day off, working most days from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The night she met me at the door was one of her least favorite kinds of nights, where dinner would be a pit stop before racing out for yet *another* meeting at church.

As I trudged in, I quietly began to prepare my defense. Didn't she understand how important serving the Lord was? Didn't she know how much everyone depended on me to do my job well? I knew defense wasn't enough. I wanted to lash out and attack the areas in her life that needed work. But I couldn't because I knew she was right. I wasn't treating my family the way they deserved. I spent hours counseling other's people's kids but didn't spend enough time with my own. I preached sermons on the importance of spending quality time with one's spouse, but I couldn't pinpoint the last time I took my wife out on a date. More important, in doing the work of the Lord, I began to forget the Lord of the work! My personal devotion and prayer time were slowly getting crowded out of my schedule.

Looking into the faces of my wife and children, I knew I was on the road to becoming another pastoral burnout statistic. Something had to change and fast.

How did this happen? I'm certainly not new to high-pressure leadership. In my previous career in higher education I managed large departments and multi-million dollar budgets. I taught college classes based on the work of John Maxwell, Jim Collins, Stephen Covey and many others—leadership experts who

consistently emphasize the need for personal balance in the life of the leader. Yet looking into the faces of my wife and children, I knew I was on the road to becoming another pastoral burnout statistic. Something had to change and fast.

Meeting my coach

A few months before this realization, I had read an article by Thom Rainer suggesting that pastors form peer support groups as a means to maintaining personal, spiritual, and relational health. I had already taken that counsel and formed one with several pastors in the area. As I reflected on my close brush with burnout, I realized that now was the time to reach out to my pastor friends for help. But my pride bristled at the thought of admitting that I didn't have it all together. However, Proverbs 16:18, "Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall," convinced me to move forward.

I drafted the email, stared at it for a few moments, took a deep breath, and pressed send, knowing I had done the right thing by being vulnerable. What I didn't know was that one of the pastors in my support group was also an executive coach. In response to my email, he reached out to me with an offer to schedule a coaching session to talk through the challenges I was facing. I immediately agreed to his offer, and looking back I can see that it was the best decision that I have made in a long time.

Within two weeks I was able to identify some of the root causes for my out-of-control schedule and began making real changes in my habits. For starters, coaching helped me recognize that I'm a little controlling. Like Moses, I needed a Jethro to help me see the power of delegation. My priorities were also in need of realignment, and answering tough questions about what was most important brought me back to Covey's principle of putting the big rocks in the bucket first. As I took care of the big rocks, the others started to fit. My sermon preparation schedule needed to change, too. As a result of talking through my weekly rhythms, I decided that beginning my week with sermon preparation would enable me to meet my Sunday deadline with less stress. I also made a commitment to get out of the office by 4:00 p.m., and somehow the same amount of work was still getting done. In short, working with a coach helped me to see what I needed to change and provided the support and accountability I needed to take real action.

As I have lived out my new commitments, my relationship with God, my wife, and children are all thriving once again. It is still a struggle at times to consistently nurture my new habits. However, with the accountability I have established with my coach and the faithful prayers of the rest of my peer support group, I continue to see tremendous positive results in my life and leadership. Bringing coaching into my ministry has been a huge part of getting me off the road to pastoral burnout. I've invited my coach, Roger, to explain a little more about the philosophy and methodology of coaching below.

Listening, asking, setting goals

When I received the email from Mike about the challenges he faced in managing his schedule, I knew right away he could benefit from coaching. Mike is a great leader with lots of experience, so I knew he didn't need another lecture on priority management or the importance of spending time at home. I saw that he needed support and accountability to make the changes he likely already knew he needed to make; he needed coaching.

My own journey into coaching began in a period of my own pastoral leadership when I was frustrated by the lack genuine change in people's lives. For all my efforts at preaching, teaching, praying, encouraging, and mentoring, I did not see change in proportion to the time and effort I spent in trying to help others. Too often we pastors imagine that if we just say the right words and offer the right solutions, people will "get it" and make great progress. Many of our one-on-one conversations with people are largely spent trying to figure out what words we can say to make the biggest immediate impact. Unfortunately, my experience was that lasting change doesn't usually start that way.

On a recommendation from a friend who was aware of my frustration, I enrolled in a professional coach training program. Soon after getting started, I knew that coaching skills were essential for my pastoral toolbox. As I was trained over the course of an entire year, I learned to purposely *not* have the answers for people. Coaching upends our normal tendency to attempt to fix other people's problems, and instead positions us to guide and support them as they create and pursue solutions to their challenges.

Coaching is built upon the idea that in most cases, people don't need more information about how to grow or to overcome challenges. Instead, they need specific and strategic support in applying what they already know. With this core value as a foundation, there are three basic skills that a coach uses: active listening, asking good questions, and helping to set actionable goals.

Coaching conversations require us to silence that pesky inner conversation and devote ourselves to really hearing what someone else is saying.

Active listening involves shutting off the conversation in my head, fully attending to what the other person is saying. When I am not 100 percent focused on what someone is saying, allowing multiple thoughts to run through my minds while the other person talks, I end up being a terrible listener. It's kind of like having too many

apps open on a smart phone at once; eventually it gets bogged down and nothing works properly. Coaching conversations require us to silence that pesky inner conversation and devote ourselves to really hearing what someone else is saying.

The next skill a coach employs is *asking good questions*. Good questions are open-ended, non-judgmental, and directly related to the other person's own insights. They help a person unearth the motivation and solutions for their own problems, all the while keeping him or her responsible for growth. An effective question is like the push of a shovel into the earth to dig up treasure. A poor question resembles a shovel with a big hole in it—you spend a lot of energy trying to dig, but you don't make any progress.

Finally, active listening and good questions are used in the context of helping the other person to *generate actionable goals* that will move him or her ahead in growth. From the start of a coaching conversation, the focus is walking away with something to do, even just a small something. Skillful coaching helps a person decide what to do, how, and when it will be done, and how they'll know it's been accomplished. Coaching is action-oriented.

When Mike took me up on my offer to coach him, we began a series of monthly, one-hour conversations completely focused on what he wanted to accomplish. As he said above, his main challenge was managing the crushing demands in his calendar, and he readily admitted that the old ways of operating were not working. While I could readily identify with his challenges, my role was not to read my autobiography onto his life and offer the solutions and suggestions that have worked for me. Rather, by listening intently to his story and asking probing questions, I helped him decide what he needed to do to make progress. The solutions Mike came up with were actually quite straightforward, but because he identified them himself, he owned them, and was highly motivated to act on them.

After each coaching conversation, I'd send Mike a summary of what we discussed and a list of the action steps he decided to take. Every Wednesday, he sent me status updates on his action steps. Mike is a great leader, and he didn't need my ideas or solutions; he needed strategic support in finding and implementing his own answers while retaining ownership of his life and leadership choices.

You don't need a year of professional-level coach training to become more effective in supporting others as they grow; you can practice the coaching skills in just about every leadership conversation. To get started, begin to listen more closely to others and shut off the conversation in your head. Ask open-ended and exploratory questions that are based on what other people are saying. Close conversations with a call for clear action steps. These simple disciplines can change the way you lead and ultimately, the way you help others develop their own leadership capacity.

Mike didn't need someone to tell him what to do to fix his problems. He needed someone to help him tap into the knowledge and skills he already had and apply them in the new situation he was facing. He needed a coach, not a mentor or another time-management seminar. He already had the resources he needed, but he needed someone to listen well, to ask good questions, and to help craft realistic goals. Coaching skills are essential to the pastor (or friend!) who wants to invest time more strategically in helping others to experience real change.

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