

Looking Beneath the Tiles: What I learned about spiritual leadership health in studying leaders at risk and moral failure?

“What went wrong? What did I miss?” These questions hit me like a slap to the face when I discovered that a ministry leader I supervised and coached was involved in an affair, numerous sexual exploits, and drugs. His moral failure caused me to question our leader development efforts. Was there a flaw in our selection process? Was there something inherent in our organizational culture that made leaders more susceptible to failure?

For the past 20 years I have led the leadership development efforts of Cru. These questions prompted me to look deeper at the issue of leadership failure and eventually write my doctoral thesis on the subject. Most of what I have learned about healthy spiritual leadership has come from my experience and research on leaders at risk and moral failure. Though many of those findings are beyond the scope of this short article, there are some lessons that have informed our spiritual leader development process.

Do Not Assume Health...Look under the tiles

Above all, you can never assume leader health; you must look below the surface.

Several years ago, my wife and I decided to remodel our master bath. Lacking financial resources for purchasing and installing new tile, we hired a man to refinish the existing tiles. The process involved removing the shower doors, cleaning the tiles, and then re-colorizing them. During that process, the tiles began to fall off the wall. My first response was, “You can glue those back up there, right?”

His response, “No Mr. Rutter, you have a problem!” He pulled back more tiles revealing rot, water, and termite damage. The studs designed to hold the tiles in place had deteriorated.

I persisted, “You can glue those back, right?”

He shot back, “No, Mr. Rutter. This problem requires a contractor. You need to rebuild with new studs and wall board.”

Though I noticed the tiles were loose in places, I had ignored it. They looked okay on the outside despite the huge problem growing underneath. As Brennan Manning in *The Ragamuffin Gospel* powerfully notes “the temptation of the age is to look good without being good” (2000:26) I discovered that looking good and functioning according to the builders’ design are very different. Likewise with spiritual leadership, you cannot assume health. It is detrimental to ignore warning signs, deny problems or settle for cover-ups, as the foundation below the tiles erodes.

His Design and Our Drift: the Lies and Red Flags

So what characterizes a healthy leadership foundation? What are the red flags that indicate potential failure?

God lays out His design in Genesis where He emphasizes His role as creator and man’s role as a steward. God is the source of life, the truth, and the sovereign way. The foundation for leadership health is contingent on one’s posture toward those three pillars.

Man was created to depend on God and His word for life. Man was to obey and live in truth and reality by experiencing life as God defined it. Man was to follow God as Sovereign King and submit to His way resting in His control.

Character is living in light of God's order and design. Character problems, sin and leader failure are rooted in attempts to live apart from His order and design. Foundational cracks include attachment to life apart from Christ, (e.g., addictions); a denial of reality and truth; and an inability to submit (e.g., power and control issues). Often these roots are fed by a system of lies that include: "you cannot trust God, so depend on yourself"; "there is life to be found apart from God"; "meet your own needs"; "there are no consequences for sin".

As I studied at risk leaders I observed common behavioral patterns that warned of root character problems. These red flags are clustered around: where one gets life, how one responds to truth, how one is postured towards submitting and following God as the way?

Red flags related to the leader's posture towards relationship and life includes: hiding, isolation, relational disconnection or independence, and lack of empathy. A leader at risk is often duplicitous while hiding and seeking life outside of Christ by overeating, overwork, sexual addiction etc. Red flags related to the leader's posture towards truth include: difficulty in responding to feedback; blame-shifting; minimizing; inability to admit mistakes and weakness; no track record of forgiveness and resolved conflict. Their response to living in an imperfect world is often characterized by protest, anger and rage. Finally, red flags related to the leader's posture towards power and authority include: excessive need to control; territorialism; using people; entitlement; and power imbalances in marriage, team or other key relationships.

Promoting health comes as both the leader and ministries pay attention to the red flags that indicate cracks below the tiles. This requires identifying red flag behaviors and being willing to truthfully and graciously address them.

Beware of the Deadly Duo: Self-Reliance and Secrecy

When leaders drift from their created design and the Gospel- they often get caught in the deadly duo of self-reliance and secrecy. Often ministries unintentionally create cultures that underpin this dangerous tendency.

Self-reliance and secrecy are reinforced by the common false beliefs and lies discussed above. In my interviews of almost every fallen leader, they had a tape that played "it all depends on me". They carried the weight that their leadership, their ability to grow the ministry, and grow spiritually all depended on them. They had started with Jesus but along the way slipped into self-reliance.

Self-reliance and secrecy ignore the compulsive nature of sin, which cannot be overcome by trying harder, will power or a privatized approach. Self-reliance fuels addiction, shame and the process of sin management and keeps leaders from the help they desperately need. Secrecy causes the leader to hide in shame and bury darkness from the light that can bring healing. Ultimately, shame kills while grace and truth heals.

These tendencies are subtle and antithetical to the gospel and the scriptures that admonish us to humility (1 Peter 5:5), poverty of Spirit (Mt. 5:3) and open confession to God and others. Healthy spiritual leaders are humbly dependent and

rigorously honest. They recognize that their limits and needs become the space for grace to flow. (2 Cor. 12:9)

The scriptures outline a clear path to leader health. Honesty is the path of truth that says “I have a problem-I cannot do it myself”. It counters self-reliance by admitting need, dealing with secrecy by exposing the lies and the roots of sin, and embraces the gospel through community. Community is the path that admits, “I need you”. I am dependent on God and interdependent on you. Finally, worship is the path that declares, “I will rest in God and submit to His way.”

Practices on the Path to Healthy Spiritual Leadership

Healthy spiritual leaders adopt practices that allow them to examine what is under the tiles. They address the roots, lies and the deadly combination of self-reliance and secrecy.

Healthy leaders Take inventory

I encourage all of our leaders to regularly ask four “under the tile” questions.

1. Where do you get life? How are your relationships?
2. How do you deal with reality (truth)? ...Respond to feedback?
3. How do you relate to failure? ...Living in an imperfect world?
4. What role does control play in your life? In what ways are you submitting to God and resting?

With each question I encourage them to note any behavioral red flags and lies/false beliefs that deviate from God’s design.

Get into community and become known

Given the drift to self-reliance and secrecy, healthy leaders get into honest community! Secrecy and shame are broken by the power of confession in community. As one recovering leader noted, “As I told my secrets, they lost some of their power over me, and I wasn’t so afraid to be known” Community provides an environment to bring sin and false beliefs out of the dark and secret places so it can be mortified (exposed, confessed, dismantled, and repented of) and not hidden, while also providing the life-giving reminder of the gospel that there is no condemnation and God delights in us.

In my research, most leaders who fell did not have a concentric circle of relationships around them. When I am coaching or interviewing new leader candidates I always inquire: How are your relationships? Where are you knowing others and being known by others? Who knows you deeply?

I encourage leaders to get in a process or “red dot” (like on the mall map directory “you are here”) group that meets solely for the purpose of checking in, being honest and acknowledging how things really are. An authentic leader acknowledges reality without faking or hiding. As my professor Jim Coffield says, “Jesus Christ died on the cross so you would not have to pretend.” Healthy leaders find places to bring the real person into the light without rejection. We have that in Christ and the cross, but we need to have it reinforced in the context of the body of Christ.

Conclusion

Wise ministries do not assume health. They are vigilant to identify and address red flags and roots indicating a lack of it. They call their leaders to live in

light of God's design, create safe environments and encourage practices that avoid the dangerous lure of self-reliance and secrecy. Ultimately, they call their leaders back to Christ - who came to deal with the roots of sin, failure and shame as our way, the truth and our life.

Likewise, spiritual leaders do not assume health. They regularly hit the pause button on their life, look under the tiles, and expose their darkness to the light before Christ and in community.

The gospel is for the lost and that includes us as leaders. As spiritual leaders, we lead out of brokenness and powerlessness. We live like people in recovery; not perfect, but redeemed and being restored. We are all at risk, therefore the ultimate challenge and call is to live like we are in recovery because we are.

(Marc Rutter serves on the US Leadership team with Cru as the director of Leadership Development and HR (<http://www.cru.org/>). He and his wife Patty live in Orlando, FL and have served as missionaries with Cru for 36 years. They have 4 adult children and recently became grandparents. You can connect with him at Marc.Rutter@cru.org)

This article was published in Outcomes Magazine

Copyright © 2013 by Marc V. Rutter
All Rights Reserved