

## **A Closer Look at Christian Leadership Coaching**

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The call to Christian leadership invites individuals into privileged territory: the chance to carry the torch handed down by Jesus, the Apostles, and others leaders throughout church history. Fundamentally, the call centers on building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:13, Matt. 28:19-20), and includes growing in gifts that build up the Church (I Cor. 14:12). Ideally, responding to that call fills our hearts with anticipation, commitment, and gratitude. However, seasoned leaders know that Christian leadership can be very difficult. Struggles with overextension, isolation, and personnel problems can create demands and drains that are often overwhelming, and with that, the hope of fruitful labor (John 15:2, 6, Phil. 1:22, 25) can honestly seem more and more remote.

As one moves into positions of greater responsibility, the challenges become more complex, and often the solutions that worked in less demanding roles no longer fit. Leadership books and seminars do have value in helping leaders grow and navigate through difficult times, but they are limited. They aren't able to provide personalized feedback for a leader's unique context, nor are they able to speak to a leader's unique dreams and drains over the span of time.

All of these realities converge in a new avenue for helping leaders bear fruit and grow in their gifts in today's increasingly complex world. That new avenue is Christian leadership coaching.

### **Why Coaching Works**

Coaching works because it addresses the biggest hurdles that hinder effectiveness in demanding leadership roles: overextension, isolation and a lack of clarity. The combination of these three can put even the best leaders in a reactive, maintenance mode where the vision and mission become mere wishful thinking.

Speaking to these daunting hurdles, there is something profound about the importance of not going through life—or any major challenge—alone. Those words, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18), speak to our hearts even beyond the gift marriage. God addresses this need for sounding boards in leadership through examples like Jethro and Moses (Exodus 18), Ahithophel as a counselor to David (1 Chron. 27:33), and Jesus sending out the disciples two by two (Luke 9:1, 2; 10:1, 2).

On a deeper level, good coaching works because it is patterned after how Christ entered our world and came along side us, filled with grace and truth (John 1:14). As humans, we thrive when we are relationally connected in healthy ways. We struggle when we are isolated and overwhelmed.

Christian leadership coaching can be defined as a relational process between a coach and a “coachee” (the one receiving coaching) that creates a unique context for leaders to gain greater clarity about their values and vision, identify priorities, and process obstacles. It is about coming alongside a leader, and skillfully drawing on grace and truth skills to support God-honoring visions, and help a leader gain greater clarity, confidence and effectiveness in growing God’s Kingdom over time.

In good coaching, the coachee feels connected, safe, honored, and supported. He or she feels free to talk candidly about struggles and hopes, dreams and drains. That kind of a relationship, perhaps more than anything else, creates a context for new possibilities, growing gifts, and a greater impact.

### **How Coaching Works**

The format for Christian leadership coaching is built around a series of regularly scheduled conversations, called sessions. Depending on the approach of the coach, sessions can last between 30 minutes and an hour. Talking twice a month is ideal for growth, although sessions can happen once a month as well in light of time or financial realities. Coaching is done over the phone on most occasions, and sometimes in person. The conversations are confidential (within limits), which creates a sense of freedom and safety for the coachee, and allows for more authentic sharing.

While there are certainly different styles in the spectrum of coaching, there is significant overlap among most of them. Early in the coaching process, the leader’s personal values and vision are clarified through a few focused exercises. These exercises help the leader begin tapping into what matters most to them, and into dreams that bring energy and hope. This is vital to the coaching process, as it helps the leader orient around the most important priorities in his or her role. When this work is done well, it creates a unique kind of energy that enables the leader to increasingly engage his or her work from a place of strength and commitment.

After the values and vision are clarified, the next step typically is for the coachee to set short term goals based on top priorities. This brings greater structure to the coaching conversations and provides an excellent context for future work.

From that point forward, the coaching process unfolds very naturally. As the coachee feels increasingly comfortable, he or she is able to discuss what is most important to them at the time of the coaching conversation. Often a conversation will start with a brief review of what has transpired recently, or with some things that have gone well, and then the focus often shifts to a substantial challenge or obstacle that needs to be addressed in order for the coachee to move forward in his or her role, and move closer to his or her vision.

As time unfolds, the conversations ideally move to deeper levels that strengthen the coachee's confidence and identity as a leader. By engaging in the coaching work over a span of time, from six months to a year or more, the gains typically increase as the coachee continues to grow, resulting in greater internal resources that can be drawn upon when pursuing greater challenges.

Three major tenets set Christian leadership coaching apart from other forms of relational ministry:

- **The coachee sets the agenda.** In other words, the coachee decides what to talk about. The coach spends the bulk of his or her time listening, summarizing, and asking exploratory questions that are designed to help the coachee get to the heart of the issue being tackled.
- **The answers to the coachee's struggles are found in the coachee.** The coach is not a problem solver or solution provider. The coach's role is to help the coachee discover the answers, and to share perspective and perhaps suggestions only after the coachee has really "tilled the soil" in pursuing a deeper understanding of their challenge.
- **Coaching focuses predominantly on the present and the future.** This distinguishes coaching from therapy, which often focuses on the present and the past. Further, therapy is for individuals who are really struggling, whereas coaching works well for those who are in a good place and motivated to take their life and ministry to a new level.

### **The Common Flow of a Coaching Conversation**

In a typical coaching session, the coachee "thinks out loud" or shares about a complex or challenging problem that they don't have clarity on—such as a personnel issue. The coach listens, empathizes, and asks questions that help the coachee move further into the heart of the issue. As the process continues, greater clarity tends to emerge, like a fog gradually lifting. As the core issue becomes more clear, it is eventually "named," which is a way of saying the core emotional and logical aspects of the issue are distilled in a manner that creates clarity and often illuminates the wisest course of action. Susan Scott, the author of *Fierce Conversations*, wisely notes that "a problem named is a problem solved," which often brings confidence and strength to the coachee.

After the issue is named, action steps are explored and a timeline is usually developed to help hold the leader accountable to the desired steps. As appropriate, the coach may then share other things to consider about moving forward well, or affirm the coachee in ways that will encourage positive movement.

By continuing in this process, leaders emerge with greater clarity and confidence to tackle tougher issues that are often neglected in their work—issues that can

seem insurmountable without a place to process them. To make this process clearer, let me provide a real example of how this has worked.

### **A Real Life Illustration**

Joe had recently been promoted to an administrative position from the pastorate. As a pastor, he had found a way to have a healthy rhythm in his role. He had his day off in place, had developed a strong set of lay leaders, and was bearing fruit in his ministry. Then came the jump to administration, which was a lot tougher than he expected. He told me that his new job made pastoring feel easy in comparison! Now, there were so many more expectations and responsibilities that he was often overwhelmed, not to mention the travel demands that swallowed up hours at a time. It wasn't long before he wasn't exercising, wasn't having date nights with his wife, and wasn't maintaining his devotional time.

In the first few sessions of our coaching experience, Joe focused a lot on how over-extended he was and how crazy his schedule felt. He was stunned by what had happened to his life. As I followed the coaching process by listening, empathizing and asking questions, it became more clear to him that his pace just wasn't sustainable, and that his capacity to lead would be truly compromised if he didn't begin to set better limits on his schedule. He also expressed clearly that he didn't want his marriage or wife to suffer over the long term.

Having the chance to talk out loud in our coaching sessions about what was going on, and hearing himself describe how out of balance his life was, helped Joe gain clarity and develop a positive resolve for healthy change. From there I asked about what steps he could take to change things around. He decided to schedule his new day off, resolved to communicate that to his boss, and committed to carving out time for his wife, his devotions, and exercise.

While his schedule can still be crazy at times, since we began the coaching process. Joe has moved much closer to a more balanced schedule. He had the conversation with his boss about his new day off, scheduled time to be with his wife, and has taken the other steps he committed to. In short, he is enjoying his role much more and feeling more grounded and effective as a leader.

In light of the above example, it's fair to wonder, "Couldn't Joe have just figured this out on his own?" It is certainly in the realm of possibility for him to have done so. It is also fair to say that it would have likely taken him much longer to acknowledge the problem, and develop the resolve to make the necessary changes on his own. In my experience, many leaders do not find a way to set appropriate limits and grow in effectiveness over time when they do not have an accessible ally to help them talk about their experiences, and finds ways to overcome role or cultural expectations that push so hard for overextension. You may know people like that. (And you may be one yourself!)

The point is, Christian leadership coaching provides a supportive and challenging context to positively address the kinds of issues that can make a substantial difference one's effectiveness and fulfillment as a leader. It creates a chance to be heard and grow in ways that would be much more unlikely without it.

## **Finding a Coach**

If a leader or conference decides to pursue coaching, finding the right coach or group to work with is clearly important. At this point in the profession, there are no formal requirements that must be met in order for a person to call themselves a "coach." Most people who enter the profession of coaching come from the human resources, or mental health field, or have already had successful leadership careers. Ideally, a coach has at least obtained a certificate in coaching from a reputable coach training institute, or has received extensive training from a skillful coach. (As coaching skills are increasingly recognized as valuable for leaders to possess, coaches training is becoming more common for leaders as well.) Please also see the sidebar for providers of Christian leadership coaching.

From my vantage point, a good Christian leadership coach embodies all of the following: is mature emotionally and spiritually; is able to enter a person's world well; has a rich understanding of leadership, systems thinking, psychology, and spiritual formation; and is skilled at helping people grow. (See sidebar for solid Christian leadership development firms that offer coaching and/or coaches training.)

After finding a list of qualified coaches, the next step is contact a few of them and set up a brief discussion to learn about their respective approaches. The goal is to see which of them feels the best, or is the most natural to engage with. After a coach is decided on, the coach and coachee should discuss expectations and their respective roles. Then the coaching process begins.

It is important to highlight that coaching is not a quick fix for deeply entrenched problems, nor is it a vehicle for growing as a leader overnight. It is a process that allows a leader to grow *over time* in gaining stronger skills, deeper insights, and greater maturity, which enables him or her to bear fruit in more powerful ways.

While I do not believe this is commonplace, it is important to watch out for the coach sliding into a problem-solver mode or an advice-giving posture—that effectively stalls the process of helping the coachee grow through the conversations. It is also important that the coach spends 70 percent or more of their time listening, summarizing, and asking questions. The session is not a forum for the coach to fill with their stories.

## **Ideal Outcomes**

When a skillful, insightful coach connects really well with a leader who has a strong thirst to grow, powerful things can happen. In my experience working

with pastors and administrators, substantial growth can take place in as little as six months, and can continue over the span of years.

A leader's capacity to set better limits in dealing with overextension, to gain skills and insights in confronting personnel issues, and to become more vision and priority focused are common outcomes when the coaching work goes well. Especially as the work goes past the year or two mark, a deeper level of peace and confidence in one's leadership often emerges, and the leader is able to engage his top priorities with greater effectiveness, develop his or her key reports with greater skill, and move into a greater awareness of God's leading in his or her life.

In summary, through the avenue of Christian leadership coaching, some of the main tactics Satan uses to drain and overwhelm leaders are chipped away at, allowing leaders to more faithfully and fruitfully carry his or her torch in growing God's Kingdom for their generation and beyond.