

Becoming a Professional: How to Manage Yourself and Your Ministry
By Robbie Mackenzie

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Scenario #1: Greg has been a youth minister for only a couple months and the elders are starting to grow concerned. He rarely shows up to the office, which is not a huge deal, but the students say they have not seen him outside of regular services. Greg is a competent bible student and the kids naturally gravitate towards him but he just does not show up. The elders sat down to talk with Greg and he was upset stating that youth ministry is different than a corporate job and he should not be required to have office hours because ministry is done “in the trenches.” The elders disagree and the youth minister and the elders argue over this for the next month. It seems that the writing is on the wall and the youth minister is going to get terminated.
- II. Scenario #2: Todd has been a youth minister for well over five years at the same church in the great state of Tennessee. Todd will spend, on average, about 40 hours in the office not to mention he visits the kids outside the office, answers all of their “important” texts, emails, Facebook messages and photo comments and he even finds the time to counsel some of them during their many crises. On top of that Todd keeps up a blog and even contributes to other blogs and even has his own podcast where he interviews teens, parents and youth ministers about their struggles. On average, Todd works 70-80 a week. His congregation loves him and praises him for his work ethic.
- III. My question to you right now is which youth minister is doing ministry incorrectly?
- IV. The answer, in my opinion, is both of them. Both seem to not have their schedules under control and both lack the self-discipline needed to do youth ministry. One works too much probably neglecting his family and his own spiritual well being while the other seems to be neglecting just about everything.
- V. My assignment for you this afternoon is to talk about youth ministry as a profession or a job. While ministry differs in a lot of ways from the corporate world it is still a paid position only with certain requirements and often some hidden expectations.
- VI. Paul was right when he said, “***As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry***” (2 Tim. 4:5). In other places Paul is concerned that Timothy pursue a life of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7-8; 6:3-6, 11) and even goes so far as to say that in the last days there will be some who will have the appearance of godliness but will deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5).

- VII. Peter Scazzero was dead-on in his book *Emotionally Healthy Churches* when he said, ***“The overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership.”***¹ When I hear of youth ministers who will not show up for work, will not report to the elders or who will not leave work I think the problem is not the fact that he is not showing up for work or that he is working too much. The problem is that the youth minister has not handled himself emotionally to do the work he feels called to do.
- VIII. Mark DeVries has a great line in his book that I want to build-off of when it comes to being a professional in youth ministry. He says, ***“The greatest threat to youth worker longevity is not our lack of skills or creativity, but our inability to manage the competing, confusing, often chaotic demands on our time. Sustainable youth ministers recognize one fact to be true: we’ll never get it all done. Show me a youth director whose job feels manageable, and there’s a good possibility he or she simply doesn’t understand the job.”***²
- IX. I read a book by Geoff Surratt called *10 Stupid Things Keep Churches Growing* that really blessed me. In like fashion I want to share with you *10 Stupid Things that Keep Youth Ministers From Longevity*.

BODY:

I. #10 – Embrace Laziness

- a. Proverbs 10:4-5 say, ***“A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame.”***
- b. I was working in a hay field with one of my youth group students and a few other high-schoolers. He and his older brother owned a business where they sold hay and I offered my services free to help them out. We were to pick up hay-bales and stack them on the truck. It was tiring work and it was in the hottest part of the summer. One guy just did not cut it. He was physically able to do the work but there was no initiative in him to pick these bales. The problem soon escalated because the rest of us had to pick up (literally) his slack.
- c. Laziness ruins a youth ministry and stymies potential growth. Paul had to deal with laziness (idleness) with the Thessalonian church because they were anticipating the Lord’s return so they thought, “Why should we do anything if Christ is about to return?” Paul’s response is poignant: ***“If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat”*** (2 Thess. 3:10). For Paul the risk of being lazy and idle could jeopardize the influence of the church. He told the Thessalonians the first time to: ***“to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your***

¹ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010): 20.

² Mark Devries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008): 128.

own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (1 Thess. 4:11-12).

- d. We are given a lot of freedom as youth ministers and with a lot of freedom comes a lot of responsibility. We need youth ministers to work and labor for the cause of Christ helping teenagers find Christ and to grow in him.
- e. **YOU SOLVE IT: WHAT DO YOUTH MINISTERS NEED TO DO TO KEEP FROM BECOMING LAZY OR TO FIX THEIR LAZYNES?**

II. #9 – Ignore Opportunities for Increased Learning

- a. Do you want to manage yourself and your ministry? Then learn how to do it. For some that means taking graduate courses furthering their education. For others it means attending youth ministry seminars where you get hands-on training from youth ministry experts. And for a lot of us it means sitting down for a cup of coffee with someone we respect who is at a place in life we want to be.
- b. Andy Stanley said, *“Great leaders are great learners.”*³ I love to see aged ministers who still break out the legal pad and take notes during a sermon because they might learn something. God uses circumstances of this world as his canvas for learning and we would do well to pay attention to his painting.
 - i. *“Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance”* (Prov. 1:5).
 - ii. *“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice”* (Prov. 12:15).
 - iii. *“Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed”* (Prov. 15:22).
 - iv. *“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future”* (Prov. 19:20).
- c. **YOU SOLVE IT: HOW DO WE AVOID GETTING INTO A POSITION WHERE WE DO NOT LEARN OR WILL NOT LEARN?**

III. #8 - Be Selfish

- a. Paul gave us an obligatory command, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others”* (Phil. 2:3-4).
- b. You would think that ministry is an atmosphere where selfishness would not prevail but there a lot of times we are not professional with ourselves and with our ministry because we are selfish.
- c. We want things done a certain way and if anyone has a differing opinion than they are cast away immediately.

³ Andy Stanley, *The Next Generation Leader* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003): 110.

- d. Selfishness has no place in our ministries and the quicker we realize that the better off our ministries will be. Besides, the work of God in our churches is something he does not us. Now he chooses to use us as his instruments but it is not about us at all.
- e. **YOU SOLVE IT: WHAT CAN WE DO TO AVOID BEING SELFISH?**

IV. #7 – Develop a Victim-Mentality

- a. How many times have you said or at least heard something said that sounded like this?
 - i. “I would love to take our youth ministry to the next level but my elders won’t let me...”
 - ii. “My preacher is against me and never backs me up.”
 - iii. “The parents are trying to sabotage me.”
 - iv. “The students could care less about youth group stuff.”
 - v. “If moms and dads cared more about church than they did sports our ministry would be incredible.”
 - vi. “My elders never meet with me one and one to pray with me.”
- b. Mark DeVries writes, “...*this sort of thinking keeps youth workers in a victim state, trapped in emotional ruts. I’m not talking about denying that problems exist. I’m talking about facing those problems with brutal honesty, not just the problems ‘out there,’ but more importantly our own toxic tendency to become enmeshed him, defensive about or overwhelmed by those problems.*”⁴
- c. Problems are going to arise in our ministries and there is nothing we can do to be problem-free. However, we are not victims of these problems but sent to help solve them.
- d. **YOU SOLVE IT: WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO TO AVOID THE VICTIM-MENTALITY?**

V. #6 – Make Ministry Your Idol

- a. An idol is simply defined as anything that takes the place only Christ deserves.
- b. Tim Keller writes, “*What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life, that should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.*”⁵

⁴ DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 113.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Dutton, 2009): xvii-xviii. In his notes section Keller defines what he calls “Religious idols.” He writes that religious idols is, “Moralism and legalism; idolatry of success and gifts; religion as a pretext for abuse of power” (204).

- c. Using that terminology it is easy for one to see how ministry could be seen as an idol. It is not that ministry is good to have as a passion or even a vocation but ministry is not the end of all. Ministry is something God allows us to do as we are able. When we place ministry above God and do not use him to guide our ways but instead do things on our own I believe we are guilty of religious idolatry.
- d. **YOU SOLVE IT: HOW DO WE AVOID MAKING MINISTRY OUR IDOL?**

VI. #5 – Don't Take Care of Yourself Emotionally

- a. DeVries writes, *“One of the most important lessons I had to learn as a youth pastor was that one of the greatest gifts I can bring to my ministry is myself. If I sacrifice my joy in Christ or my passion for the gospel on the altar of ‘successful ministry,’ everybody loses.”*⁶
- b. Often this means doing some serious work like understanding your family-systems history like you are the scapegoat, the hero, the clown and the lost child. All of those are incredibly important for your ministry.
- c. I remember a time at camp where I lost it. I was emotionally high-strung anyways because I had to get things ready for camp and it had been a stressful three months leading to camp. One of my youth parents thought it would be funny if one of my students pushed me into the pool with all of my clothes on. He pushed me in and everyone was laughing—everyone except me. I screamed at this kid and stormed off to the cabins acting like a two year-old. At that point I knew I had to do a lot of work emotionally.
- d. Youth Ministries do not need an anxious presence among the people because anxiety spreads like a plague. Youth ministries need strong people to guide the storm and weather the difficult circumstances.
- e. In his monumental work *Good to Great* Jim Collins outlines different qualities of what he calls Level-5 leaders. These leaders were able to lead the companies to the next level by doing different things. One of those things was called “confront the brutal facts.” He says, *“This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”*⁷
- f. If your youth ministry is in shambles and going nowhere that might be the best time to look no further than the mirror.
- g. DeVries outlines what he calls “The Anatomy of Emotional Health in Ministry”:
 - i. Do I have a life outside of ministry?
 - ii. Do I have an emotionally healthy schedule?
 - iii. How much do I know about what I don't know?

⁶ DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 116-17.

⁷ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001): 85. Collins is quoting Admiral Jim Stockdale who used this principle in confronting the brutal facts when he was imprisoned in Vietnam.

- iv. Do I rule my tongue or does it rule me?
 - v. Whom do I take more seriously—God or myself?
 - vi. What am I fighting about?
 - vii. What do I do after I fail?
 - viii. Is no a four-letter word to me?
 - ix. Am I burning out or just burning?⁸
- h. **YOU SOLVE IT: WHAT DO YOU DO TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF EMOTIONALLY?**

VII. #4 – Neglect a Plan for Your Ministry

- a. Andy Stanley writes, *“Everybody ends up somewhere in life. A few people end up somewhere on purpose. Those are the ones with vision.”*⁹
- b. A youth minister friend asked me to give him some ideas because he was struggling at finding out what to do when he got to the office. He said, “I just don’t know what to do.” He planned all of the long-term activities but struggled with the short-term.
- c. Do you have goals for your ministry? I am not just talking about long-term goals like, “Get students to love Jesus.” That goes without saying. I mean do you have specific long-term and short-term goals. Ministry experts agree that in order to be effective in youth ministry you must have specific discipleship goals for every student in your group. Not only every student but also every teacher, parent and volunteer who is associated with the youth group.
- d. That means we have to meet and meet often.
- e. **SOLVE IT: HOW DO WE DEVELOP A PLAN FOR OUR MINISTRIES?**

VIII. #3 – Don’t Involve a Team of People in Your Ministry

- a. *“But he [Rehoboam] abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him”* (1 Kings 12:8).
- b. I hesitated putting this one so high on our list but the most effective way for me to manage my ministry and myself is to make sure I enlist a host of teams and then become a team player.
 - i. Teams involving your students.
 - ii. Teams involving your parents.
 - iii. Teams involving your staff.
 - iv. Teams involving your elders.
- c. When I first started working at Main Street in 2004 the elders asked me to sign-in when I arrived and sign-out when I left so they could keep track of my hours. I detested that and started voicing my opposition to anyone who

⁸ DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 114-23.

⁹ Andy Stanley, *Visioneering* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 1999): 8

would listen....anyone but the elders of course. I found out that they did this because people who would not show up to the office had burned them and they were trying to be more accountable. I was in the wrong. So I filled out a time sheet for the better part of a year until one of the elders came up to me and said, "Don't worry about filling this out anymore Robbie, we can tell that you work hard."

- d. God created us to be in a community together and we are never to be alone. Look at all of the passages in Paul's epistles that have the phrase "one-another" in them.
- e. If we fail to involve a team then we will fail in our ministries.
- f. **SOLVE IT: HOW DO YOU INVOLVE PEOPLE IN YOUR MINISTRIES?**

IX. #2 – Neglect your families.

- a. Adam McLane (former Youth Specialties Tech guy) shared something on his blog that slapped me right in the face: *“The reason I hate church is that you pay attention to everyone else there but us.” ~ Megan, age 7. Those words rattled my soul. I’d rather have gotten cold-cocked by Mike Tyson in a bar fight than heard those words. That’s when I knew that things had to drastically change in how both how I related to my family and serving the church. Every time I volunteered somewhere or went to a meeting it lead to fights with the kids. ‘You don’t love us you only love stuff at church!’ Their anger lead to my tears.”*¹⁰
- b. Not every youth minister is married so for those of you who are not just store this in the back of your mind until you do and wait for the next point I make.
- c. If some of you were honest with me right now I bet that some of your marriages are struggling right now. Some of you have spent hours and hours preparing for sermons, bible classes retreats and the coolest PowerPoint slide yet have not sat down with your wife and children and read the Bible.
- d. Something is wrong with that picture. If you gain the whole youth but lose your family then you have done nothing. There is one tool I have used that has blessed my ministry for the past four years. You want to know what that tool is? It is the word “no”. At first I started feeling guilty at saying no but now I say it all the time. One of the youth group students wanted me to speak at a football team chapel this past Thursday afternoon. Four years ago I would have jumped on the opportunity but I knew I had to leave Friday to be here and time away from my family is precious so I said no. He came up to me Wednesday night and said, “My coach was upset that you didn’t come speak.” I told him, “He’ll get over it.”
- e. Find me a youth ministry that is thriving spiritually I will show you a youth minister who spends time with his family.
- f. Don’t forget to love your family, which is your number one priority.
- g. **YOU SOLVE IT: HOW DO WE PAY ATTENTION TO OUR FAMILIES?**

¹⁰ Adam McLane, “Helping our kids love church, again,” Adam McLane Blog, entry posted June 3, 2011, <http://adammcclane.com/2011/06/03/helping-our-kids-love-church-again/> (accessed September 23, 2011).

X. #1 - Neglect your Spiritual Well-Being

- a. Wayne Cordeiro talked about his realization that his well had rung dry: ***“Slowly, the unwelcome symptoms began to surface. Ministry became more arduous. My daily tasks seemed unending, and e-mails began to stack up. People I deeply cared about became problems to be avoided, and deliberating about new vision no longer stirred my soul. Although I never doubted my calling and gifting, what began as a joy that filled me now became a load that drained me.”***¹¹
- b. People often ask what I do as a youth minister because they are surprised that a church would waste money to pay someone to do this full-time. I tell them that the first part of my day is to read Scripture, pray, meditate and journal. If I miss out on that regiment than my well of offering runs dry.
- c. The nature of our jobs is contingent on the depth of our spiritual souls. I am convinced that most of my issues of professionalism is directly proportionate to the amount of time I have spent with God.
- d. We need to block out huge amounts of time that are non-negotiable. That means you engage yourself spiritually with no distractions. I had an elder who called me a few weeks ago during my devotional time. He said, “Why didn’t you answer the phone?” I told him, “Because I was doing something more important.” I told him and he was cool with it because it is a non-negotiable. The phone calls, text messages, emails will all be there when you get back. We have gotten to the point where we think we have to answer a phone call or a text message immediately. People at Main Street know I rarely answer my phone because I am usually in the middle of something. But I will always call them back if they leave a message.
- e. Psalm 42:1-2, “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?”
- f. Listen to this quote that will change you, ***“Young people need youth workers who have God—rather than youth ministry—first and foremost in view.”***¹²
- g. **YOU SOLVE IT: HOW DO WE BECOME MORE SPIRITUALLY FOCUSED IN OUR MINISTRIES?**

CONCLUSION:

- I. This lesson went in a direction that I did not intend as I thought I would talk more about office hours, time management, resources and practical ideas.

¹¹ Wayne Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty* (Minneapolis, MN: BethanyHouse, 2009): 22.

¹² Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006): 62.

- II. However, the more I studied for that the more I felt drawn to talk about the spiritual components of professionalism and how they directly influence everything else.
- III. I can't express enough how important it is for a minister to understand himself or herself emotionally in order to lead others for the cause of Christ. The older I get the more I am drawn towards systems theory and emotional processes.
- IV. I will leave you with a quote from Henri Nouwen who talked about ministry and leadership in all of its brokenness: ***"We do not know where we will be two, ten or twenty years from now. What we can know, however, is that man suffers and that a sharing of suffering can make us move forward. The minister is called to make this forward thrust credible to his many guests, so that they do not stay but have a growing desire to move on, in the conviction that the full liberation of man and his world is still to come."***¹³

¹³ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image, 1979): 100.