

Soft Skills for Ministry Leaders – *Forgiveness*

Ministry leaders must master all kinds of skills. Some skills are “hard” in that they contribute to direct ministry outputs. Sermon preparation, leading a meeting, and supervising people are all skills that directly lead to a work product. Some skills are “soft” in that they are primarily about the depth of the ministry leader. They contribute to the habits, traits, understanding, and soul-health of the person.

Soft skills certainly impact hard skills and ministry outputs over time, but soft skills are rarely pressing. They are easy to ignore in favor of what is most urgent or immediately practical. Yet in the long run it's the soft skills that will determine the type of person you are and thus the quality of your ministry. We need both hard and soft skills, but the soft ones are easiest to neglect.

So in 2016 I will use this space to address some soft skills. I hope you will find this series both challenging and encouraging. If you have a role of ministry leadership – from teaching a class to shepherding a church – *who you are* will be the key factor in the length and depth of your ministry. I urge you to make soft skill development an intentional part of your life.

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“I forgive you.”

Recently I was on the receiving end of those words. It had come to my attention that I had hurt some brothers in Christ with my words. I had been careless both in what I said and how I said it, and my carelessness had wounded people. In the context of a broader discussion, I had to own up to that. It was painful. Then one of the brothers said, “I forgive you.” That was painful, too, because I had to accept my need for forgiveness and be willing to accept the healing balm offered by the brother.

In reflecting on this experience, I was reminded of the Holy Spirit's words through James: “We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2, with specific reference to ministry leaders and the words we use). Given our stumbling nature, can there be a more important soft skill for a ministry leader than the practice of forgiveness?

We tend to think of forgiveness as a feeling, and certainly feelings are involved. But I would encourage you to think of forgiveness as one of the essential *practices* of a ministry leader. It's a soft skill. We need to learn how to do certain things where forgiveness is concerned. So let's explore the practice of forgiveness from both directions. Sometimes we need forgiveness. Sometimes we need to extend forgiveness. What thoughts and actions are required?

1. *A recognition of our sinful nature.* We all know this in principle, but ministry leaders can forget it in practice. We're used to telling people what to do in spiritual matters. We view ourselves as having an authoritative voice, and appropriately so. The temptation is to forget that we, too, stumble in many ways. We also have a sin nature. As ministry leaders, hopefully we are setting a positive example, but we will still blow it plenty of times. We're normal; we're sinners. It's healthy to remember that.

2. *A willingness to go to the brother who has sinned against us.* This is hard. We tend to think, “Why should I have to go to him? He's the one that did wrong. He should come to me!” Yes, he should, if he realizes the offense and is sensitive to the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 5:23ff). But that is not the

offended party's concern. The Lord has instructed us, when we're the offended party, to be proactive about going to the brother and telling him about his offense (Matthew 18:15). This requires courage and the ability to endure awkward situations. It is much easier to talk to everyone *except* the offender. Most of the time we'd rather recruit some people to our side rather than risk confrontation. The willingness to go to the brother is an essential practice in the soft skill of forgiveness.

3. *A willingness to listen to the brother who is hurt.* It is often hard for us to recognize when we have sinned against another person. We don't see it and feel it the way the person on the other end does. That's why we need to listen. In the personal example above, I was initially oblivious to my wrong. Two brothers took the time to sit down with me at different times, talk out the situation in detail, and in so doing they helped me see my fault. They weren't angry or mean about it. They were honest and straightforward. They listened to me, too. Their demeanor helped me see my wrong.

4. *Sober reflection on what the Lord has forgiven.* That is the lesson of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:23-35). The soft skill of forgiveness requires us to cultivate a deep appreciation for the size of the debt that has been forgiven us by the Lord. Unless we intentionally carry that with us, we will have the tendency to hold on to hurts and magnify out of all proportion wrongs that are done to us.

5. *A real apology.* We have become experts at weasel apologies. I've heard many a leader, when excuses and obfuscations run out, try to paper the whole thing over with a weasel apology. "If I offended you, I'm sorry." That's a weasel apology, not a real apology. It does not actually admit wrong. In fact, it subtly puts the fault on the other person for being so sensitive. A real apology says, "I did it and I was wrong. It was my fault and the blame is on me." The soft skill of forgiveness requires us to have the humility and courage to make a real apology.

6. *Release of debt.* That is what the brother did for me when he said, "I forgive you." I understood him to be saying that there was no more debt. There was no more obstruction to our fellowship. What had happened had now been removed and wasn't to be brought up again. It's that "not to be brought up again" part that probably causes us the most trouble. If the debt has been filed away somewhere out of sight but is available to be brought up again if needed, then it hasn't really been released. Imagine if the Lord did that with us? When we forgive, we are removing the debt and forfeiting our right to throw it back in the person's face in some future situation.

My purpose in writing about forgiveness is to help you move beyond thinking about it as a feeling or something that is intuitive, but as a soft skill that we must work on. Forgiveness has many moving parts. It requires us to intentionally and prayerfully develop certain practices. The alternative is to ignore debts and allow the weight to accumulate on us. That will hurt much more in the long run.