

### Soft Skills for Ministry Leaders – *Transparency*

In ministry leadership circles today you will often hear the words “transparent” and “authentic.” These are good words even if sometimes overused and ill-defined. The desire on the part of ministry leaders to “keep it real” seems to come in part from perceived abuses in the church. Glitzy worship shows, TV pastors in heavy make-up, and the practice of “putting on your church face” for fellow church members to see has caused a transparency reaction.

There is much good in this. I am very much in favor of transparency on the part of ministry leaders. However, we need to reflect on what we mean by transparency and give thought to how we practice it. Transparency is a soft skill that ministry leaders need to develop intentionally.

According to my dictionary, to be transparent in a positive sense is to be “open” as well as “frank or candid.” Ministry leaders should think of transparency as *the alignment of the public and private self*. It does not mean we display everything about our private lives. It means that what we say and do in public is not an act, but is representative of who we really are. Included in that is the willingness to tell the truth about our struggles and shortcomings in a way that encourages people and connects them to biblical truth.

On this matter of transparency there are two extremes to avoid. One is the façade of omniscience, where you never display any weakness. The false idea is that if I pull back the curtain and put my real self on display, people will think less of me. This idea is really about the leader’s insecurity. The other extreme, to use a phrase I picked up from the late Calvin Miller, is constantly “unzipping the viscera” in public. The first extreme will cut you off from emotional connection with the people you serve. The second one – constantly spilling your guts – will overwhelm people and make the ministry about you instead of Christ. Both will undermine your effectiveness as a ministry leader.

In between these two extremes is a healthy practice of transparency. This requires some well-developed inner resources on the part of the ministry leader, including:

1. *An overwhelming experience of grace.* If we harbor any ideas of earning God’s favor, even just a little bit, that will tend to choke off transparency. It will be hard to tell the truth about ourselves to other human beings if we’re afraid or too prideful to be real with God. On the other hand, if the flood of God’s grace engulfs your soul on a regular basis, you will tend to have the humility and sense of security that allows you to be real in front of others. Transparency is directly related to the experience of God’s unmerited favor in Jesus Christ.

2. *Self-worth that is rooted in relationship with Christ, not strokes from church members.* Again, if we are not secure in our standing with the Lord, we will tend to be insecure about our standing with people, too. Insecurity and transparency are usually not seen in the same individual. On the other hand, self-worth that is anchored in Christ, not in the approval of other people, allows ministry leaders to be comfortable in their own skin. They are able to be transparent without feeling threatened.

Transparency can strengthen your ministry. It can help folks gain a better understanding of biblical truth through your life lessons. It can encourage them and give them the confidence to talk about their own struggles. Years ago when Susan and I were struggling with infertility, at first it was hard for us to talk about it with others. The dashed hopes of having our own birth children were just too painful. But over time, as the gracious Lord worked in our lives, my wife began to share the struggle openly. Immediately she began hearing from other ladies who had been through the same thing or were dealing with it in the present. Susan's transparency about a painful subject opened up amazing doors of ministry with women. I have experienced similar responses when I share about my struggle with depression. Nearly anytime I share it in a church context, someone will come up to me later and thank me for doing so. I've had the opportunity to help and encourage lots of folks as a result.

Here are some guidelines I have discovered about practicing the soft skill of transparency.

1. *Remember that your purpose is to point people to Christ, not yourself.* Share your struggles at appropriate moments, but don't linger on them. The point of transparency is not to be pitiful or gain sympathy. The point is to help someone find and follow Jesus. Share your story when it will help someone connect with biblical truth, but make sure the focus is on the biblical truth, not you.

2. *Keep a sense of humor about it.* Most of the time when I share something about depression, I say, "Some people have high blood pressure. Some people have hemorrhoids. I have depression. It's not who I am, it's just something I have. I'm learning to deal with it." Yes, it's okay to say hemorrhoids in church. People will chuckle (except maybe those with hemorrhoids). What I have discovered is that humor allows you to reveal things about yourself in a way that people appreciate. When people know you're real and can laugh about it, it cuts the tension and opens ears.

3. *Don't use it as a cover for laziness.* I have seen some ministry leaders use a false kind of transparency as a cover for sloth. "Oh, I'm just not a detail person. I'm terrible with administration." That may be true, but it is no excuse for not taking care of the necessary details in your area of responsibility. Just because you reveal something about yourself in front of others does not relieve you of accountability.

4. *Be careful about compromising others.* Make sure your "transparency" is not actually a way of throwing someone else under the bus. "Wow, I'm so forgetful! My secretary didn't remind me about the meeting, and I always forget those things." Leave the secretary out of it. Own your own stuff.

Ministry leadership is a tough calling. It can be scary to let others know us as we really are. Brothers and sisters, I appreciate so much the work you do to help others find and follow Jesus. May the Lord bless you as you practice appropriate transparency in your ministry.