

3 Obstacles That Hold Leaders Back

Mindset ... Fatigue ... Blind Spots

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What's holding you back?

Elite runners regularly ask themselves this question. They watch endless videos to catch any movement that might be slowing them down. They seek out lighter running shoes and even sleep in oxygen tents to gain a tiny edge.

When I reflect on this question as a leader, I usually focus first on the external forces and obstacles that are holding me back. However, as Christian leaders we also need to discern the internal obstacles holding us back. And we need to find ways to “throw off anything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles” (Hebrews 12:1).

The list of possibilities is long, so over the next three posts I will focus in on three internal obstacles that hold Christian leaders back: mindset, fatigue and blind spots and then provide practical tools to throw them off.

The first internal obstacle is a leader's mindset.

How our mind “is set” is incredibly important and powerful. How we think directly impacts how we love God, how we live and how we lead.

Dallas Willard makes this point in *Renovation of the Heart* when he writes: “The prospering of God's cause on earth depends upon his people thinking well.”

He goes on to say, “Bluntly, to see God well we must think straight; and crooked thinking, unintentional or not, always favors evil. And when the crooked thinking gets elevated into group orthodoxy, whether religious or secular, there is, quite literally, ‘hell to pay.’”

Consider where your mindset can become an internal obstacle:

1. Negativity – Discouraging news reports, disruptive change and very real losses around us breed negative thought patterns. A negativity spiral can start, and it can quickly become hard to stop and hard to contain. Leaders simply can't afford to add to the pandemic spread of negativity.

2. Entitlement – Difficult times are also prime breeding grounds for the quickly spreading weed of entitlement. Despite being blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing and being co-heirs with Christ, we begin to believe that we deserve or are due better.

3. Flirtations – Running hard miles can stir daydreams about escape. We fill in the following blank with a flirtation: “Maybe I would be better off if I _____.” Filling in this blank isn’t usually helpful, holy, or stirred by the Spirit.

Are any of these mindsets an internal obstacle right now? If so, they won’t help you run your race with perseverance. Your mission is to throw them off.

Throw off dangerous mindsets with the following:

1. Refix your eyes – As Thomas Watson beautifully wrote long ago in *A Divine Cordial*: “The first fruit of love is the musing of the mind upon God. He who is in love, his thoughts are ever upon the object... By this we may test our love to God. What are our thoughts most upon? Can we say we are ravished with delight when we think on God? Oh, how far are they from being lovers of God, who scarcely ever think of God!”

We need a bigger, clearer, and fuller picture of the truth and magnitude of who God is and to trust that He is still on the throne and actively about His business.

In the midst of all that is going on around you, what do you need to do to regularly create space to “fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2)?

2. Shut down unhealthy soundtracks – You have both the choice and ability to shut down unhealthy mindsets. As Dallas Willard writes in *Renovation of the Heart*, “The ultimate freedom we have as human beings is the power to select what we will allow our minds to dwell upon.”

When these soundtracks begin to find a voice in your head, you need to shut them down. This is living out 2 Corinthians 10:5: “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

You can start taking thoughts captive and making them obedient to Christ by prayerfully (and even verbally) calling out and rejecting unhealthy and sinful thoughts. Next, you need to change the mental channel by fixing your eyes on God and declaring specific biblical truth.

Seek to shut down these soundtracks as soon as possible. The longer you let an unhealthy soundtrack play, the harder it is to shut down.

Ask yourself these closing reflection questions:

1. *What mindsets are holding you back?*
2. *How can you refix your focus more firmly on Jesus?*
3. *What internal voices do you need to shut down right now?*

Remember to examine your movements, like an elite runner, to evaluate what’s holding you back. And then fix your eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of your faith.

Feeling Weary

Winter is often a tough time for many pastors and Christian leaders. Beyond the very real everyday challenges, the midpoint in the ministry calendar can be a grind. Then you add in long, dark winters which can stir up symptoms of SAD (seasonal affective disorder) and, of course, the ongoing saga of all things impacted by COVID. The bottom line is that its totally understandable why many leaders feel weary these days.

Weariness can be a very real internal obstacle holding a leader back.

14 ways to overcome the internal obstacle of feeling weary.

1. As runners in the race marked out for us, we are to “fix our eyes on Jesus” and “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:3).

To combat weariness, we first need to fix our eyes back on Jesus. When we internalize Jesus’ example, it helps revive our energy, His power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9) and Jesus is able to give us strength for today.

2. Are you stalling on a decision? If so, do what it takes to make the decision. Sitting too long on a decision takes an emotional and physical toll.

3. Enjoy Sabbath weekly. Keep focused on three elements: worship, rest, and delight. What would bring life to you in each element?

4. Get moving. Multiple studies show that exercise can significantly help in non-severe depression.

5. Eat well and keep hydrated with lots of water. Avoid the cycle of escape through emotional eating.

6. Establish a regular rhythm to connect with a special friend, e.g., every second and fourth Friday at 2 pm.

7. Engage a hobby. General Colin Powell tinkered with old Volvos to clear his head and refresh his spirit in the midst of high-pressure leadership. What’s your version of Powell’s Volvo?

8. Plan an extra hour of sleep each night for a week and/or take a 25-minute afternoon nap in the early afternoon as often as possible.

9. Establish screen-free/news-free boundaries each day.

10. Start the daily habit of thankfulness. Identify and write down at least three things you are thankful for from each day.

11. Get something fun on your calendar four weeks ahead of time, like a night out, a long weekend, a special dinner in, a games night, etc. Keep repeating this four-week cycle.

12. If you are preaching, get someone to pinch hit for a weekend (or two), OR swap churches with another pastor for a weekend. Swapping can save prep time by recycling a sermon. Swapping also provides a fresh environment and models churches working together.

13. Add an extra day off to your weekend for a week or few weeks in a row. One day off per week often includes lots of errands, which are not particularly refreshing. Two or more days off lead to deeper rest.

14. A different workspace setup can give you fresh energy. Move your office furniture around or even switch offices with a colleague.

Your Blind Spots

Blind spots can be deadly when you are driving. A car can be almost right beside you, but you can't see it. A quick lane change can lead to the angry sound of a car horn or the crunching sound of metal on metal.

Blind spots are real obstacles. Not only can they hold a leader back, but they can also cause significant consequences to the team and the mission. And we all have blind spots. And, yes, you have them too.

We don't fully see how others experience us. And we don't fully see how we impact others. Our blind spots can frustrate and even infuriate others. They usually don't flow from bad intentions, but blind spots can—and do—hold us back. They cost us respect, trust, relationships, opportunities and even our jobs.

So how do we overcome this common internal obstacle that holds leaders back? *How can you avoid being the only person who doesn't see your own blind spots?*

Four Practices:

1. Reflect – Take regular time to reflect.

Pray Psalm 139:23, 24, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."

Ask the Lord to guide you and reveal to you anything you cannot see or need to see. Reflect on where the fruit of the Spirit might not have been evident in your words, posture or actions. Reflect on any direct or subtle feedback that others may have given you in their words, posture or actions.

2. Ask – Use intentional questions to learn more about how other people experience you.

For instance, at the end of a key meeting, ask a colleague, "How did I come across in that meeting?"

Ask your supervisor this open-ended and pointed question: Is there anything I'm doing or not doing that negatively impacts the team or my work?

Then, listen!

Don't get defensive. Don't make excuses. Don't minimize. Be appreciative for any and all feedback.

Reflect on what you can learn from the feedback. Have you heard this before? What might the cost be? Do you need to monitor this area or make some changes?

3. Pursue – The majority of Christian leaders I work with don't receive formal 360-degree feedback. Most don't even get an annual performance review. Too many never get a review.

Blind spots grow without feedback.

You can pursue informal feedback by inviting it from your supervisor or team. You can ask for a formal review.

4. Watch – Strengths often come with a shadow side. The apostle Peter had the strengths of being bold, forthright and action oriented. The shadow side was acting or speaking too quickly and sometimes missing Jesus' way.

Be attentive to the blind spots that your strengths cast. Your depth of experience may mean you are slow to listen or adverse to change. Your quick intuitive mind may mean you go faster than people can follow. Your ability to focus on tasks may mean you miss caring for people.

What do you need to do to see yourself more clearly and reduce your blind spots?