

On the Practice of Ministry Leadership: *Prevention*

“It’s a good thing you came in when you did.”

Those were the first words I heard from Dr. Coles when I awoke from my recent colonoscopy. I was there because I turned 50 last fall and my family doctor said it was time for a routine screening. Truth is, I did not want to be there. I am in good health and try to stay fit. I have no symptoms related to colon problems. I eat a healthy diet. The whole thing seemed like a waste of time. I griped about it, especially the prep you have to do before the procedure. I do not have time for this, I told myself. I am too busy.

Well, it turns out I had a significant polyp in my colon. In the gastroenterology world, polyp often means *pre-cancer*. Dr. Coles removed it and I am grateful for that. Yes, the screening was a pain and I really did not have time for it. But when it comes to having a colonoscopy, “Do I have time for it?” is the wrong question. The right question, as my wife pointed out, is, “Do I have time for cancer?”

As a leadership concept, prevention has a number of things working against it. First, it is never convenient. It is something you have to make time for in a busy schedule. Second, there is no urgency about it. The things that are already problems tend to get our attention, not the things that might become problems. Third, running diagnostics might reveal something we do not want to know. Ignorance is bliss, after all. Until it isn’t.

Another thing prevention has working against it is that it is rarely rewarded. Leaders who tackle highly visible problems get lots of kudos - and raises. Good preventive leaders may very well go unappreciated. As Taylor Field says, “We are often not even able to recognize leadership that avoids terrible things. We more easily recognize leaders who clean up messes, although the one who could completely avoid the disaster would be a far more valuable leader” (Upside Down Leadership, p.34).

I am not saying you should not tackle problems as a ministry leader. You have to. What I am saying is that a wise person does not ignore preventive leadership. That means you allocate some portion of your time to matters that are not urgent, but have much potential importance in the long run. Stephen Covey calls these Quadrant II activities. These are the things we tend to ignore because, like the possibility of colon cancer, they are not urgent and visible and screaming at us this very moment. “We *react* to urgent matters. Important matters that are not urgent require more initiative, more proactivity...What one thing could you do in your personal and professional life that, if you did it on a regular basis, *would make a tremendous positive difference in your life?*” (The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, pp.151, 154).

Good preventive leadership means fewer urgent matters to react to down the road. With that in mind, here are some questions that the preventive ministry leader will want to address proactively.

1) *What is working that has the potential to start not working?* We tend to assume that effective ministries will just keep humming along. For example, you may have an effective Sunday School or small groups ministry right now. You realize that committed, well-trained group leaders are the key to the ministry's success. What if you lost a significant number of your group leaders over a short period of time due to illnesses, relocations, or other causes? And who will start and lead new groups so that the ministry will not stagnate? While things are going well the need for a training and development process for group leaders will not seem urgent, but long-term it is the most important thing you can do for the continued effectiveness and expansion of the ministry.

2) *Am I perceiving positive results without actually measuring them?* We can fool ourselves as ministry leaders by focusing on the anecdotal and ignoring the measurable. It is important to know what is actually happening. Facts are our friends even if they tell us something we do not want to hear. For instance, if you see new faces regularly at your church, you may perceive that the church is healthy and growing. But is it true? Are new people sticking? If not, why not? It is probably not an urgent matter, but long-term what is more important to your church than an effective process of connecting with guests and helping them assimilate into the relational web of the gospel community?

3) *Where are the significant opportunities?* Again, if things are going well or at least are stable, there is probably no sense of urgency about scanning the horizon for new ministry opportunities. The mistake is to assume that the status quo will hold indefinitely. It probably won't. Needs change, conditions change, lifestyle patterns change. Where are the emerging and unmet needs in your local mission field? Which ones might your church have the means to address? How can you build gospel bridges through addressing those needs? The best time to identify new opportunities is when the church is relatively healthy, not when the wheels fall off.

4) *What do I need to stop doing?* Preventive leadership is not just adding new items to your to-do list. It means taking some things off your list lest you burn out or handicap the organization by making everything run through you. Ministry leader, take a look at what you currently do on a weekly basis. Are there things that are not a good use of your time? Are there items of importance where you need to shift from being the doer to being the equipper so the church can be strengthened? One of the challenging aspects of being a preventive leader is that it will require you to streamline. You will need to stop doing some things so you can go the distance. You will need to delegate some things you enjoy so the ministry can thrive beyond you. Preventive leaders do not just keep stacking burdens on themselves. They prioritize and streamline.

Here is my suggestion: Block out some time each week to apply one of these questions to your personal and ministerial life. Think about it, discuss ideas with others, and zero in on an application. Do not try to address everything at once. Start small and begin to develop the habit of proactivity in matters that are not urgent but have long-term importance. You will still have plenty of fires to put out, I'm sure. But over time you will find yourself reacting to fewer crises and enjoying the rewards of prevention.