

Healthy Leadership

by Ashley West
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As I led small groups throughout my life and eventually led the Small Groups Ministry at a church, I learned how important my spiritual growth was to being a healthy leader. Unfortunately, we live in a world where we see so many leaders fall from their pedestals. As of late, it seems like there has been one leader after another falling and their masks are crashing around them. It's sad and so unfortunate. But we as leaders must stop and ask: What leads to healthy, sustainable leadership? What habits can I be intentional about to remain healthy and strong as a leader?

There is an author named Stephen Smith who has a lot of great books on soul care and self-growth. A few years ago he wrote a book called *Inside Job: Doing the Work Within the Work*. In summary, he says that leaders must do the inner work of character building and knowing themselves if they want to lead in healthy, sustainable ways.

Otherwise, he writes, “erosion will happen in our heart. We drift. We become complacent. We ignore the threat within. Like King David in the Old Testament, we find ourselves doing things we vowed to never do. We lower our guard because we're tired. We live with little margin. We feel spread too thin, like we're living on fumes. And then—*boom!* What we thought would never happen happens—and it happens to us.”

And, if your first thought is, “That could never happen to me!” Smith explains that you're most at risk!

So let's think about Peter from the New Testament as an example for leaders to follow. He was a disciple, a family man, and was definitely busy in ministry. But his character was solid. Peter did the inner work of knowing himself and building his character over time. In 2 Peter 1:5–7, he gives us a picture of what that inner work entails.

“For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.”

Peter shares with us eight building blocks of character that we are to make every effort to grow in—faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, kindness, and love.

Here's the truth, our character matters. It's the evidence of God at work in our life! But character doesn't just happen. Instead, the Bible calls us to work at it. It's something we must DO. There is action involved. Peter actually pleads with us to “make every effort.”

Interestingly, when Paul and Peter write about leadership requirements in the New Testament, they focus on character traits. See, we can acquire skills. We can collect information. We can receive resources. We can gain tips. But nothing replaces our need to do the work WITHIN the work.

We must take the time to consistently ask God to examine us. We see how King David did this in Psalm 139:23-24. He said *“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.” David courageously asked God to conduct an internal excavation. This was a brave request considering God knows all things, even that which we hide from ourselves.

It’s interesting to think about this passage in light of Psalm 51. In Psalm 51 we see how David poured out his heart to God and confessed his sin after some major mistakes. And now here in Psalm 139 this had become a way of life for him. This type of prayer kept him in check. He was intentionally inviting God to do the inner work in his heart and soul. He asked if there was any unknown or unperceived sin. This is an admission that God knew David better than David knew himself, and that he needed God to search and know him. We need that too. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He loves us and can be trusted to know us at the deepest levels. God is a master heart pruner, who purges because He knows it will make us better. It isn’t always an easy process. But it’s necessary.

This prayer by David showed how much he cared about holiness in his life. And how humble he was in recognizing there could be an unperceived, wicked way in himself. So we need to be regularly asking God the same thing. Sin can sneak up on us so quickly and it can take hold of us faster than we realize. Just as we regularly clean up our physical homes we need to take the time allow Jesus to do some spiritual cleansing in our hearts and minds.

All of this is not only critical to your own well-being as a leader but also for the benefit of the group you are leading. Your lack of inner work *will* affect those you lead. It’s inevitable. Why? Because character spills over into every area of our lives. There are no silos in life. Everything we do, have done, and will do is connected and affects our lives and those around us. This is why the inner spiritual work is so important.

As shepherds investing in and guiding a group of people, we must first and foremost be on a journey with Jesus ourselves. Chip Ingram, pastor and author, once said “we can’t lead anyone beyond where we’ve gone ourselves and we can’t impart what we don’t possess.” We need to be able to speak out of the work God is doing in our lives. We must be purposefully building our character. And only when we’ve done the hard work of inner work can we invite our group members to do the same.

I pray we all have the courage to do the inner work that is necessary so we can lead our groups in healthy, sustainable ways.

Ashley resides in Coconut Creek, FL with her husband Jeremy and their 2 daughters. She loves serving alongside her husband who is the Geographic Vice President of Asia for OneHope.

She has over 15 years of local church and international missions experience. She has taught at various women’s and small group events, led small groups ministries, and equipped leaders for service. Ashley graduated from Evangel University where she received her Bachelor’s Degree in Biblical Studies. She also completed her Master of Arts Degree in Ministerial Leadership at Southeastern University.

Her favorite Bible verse reminds her to keep going and be faithful to the Lord regardless of what each day holds, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” 1 Corinthians 15:58