

Obstacles to Christian Leadership...and How You Can Overcome Them

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"Knowing" and "doing" are surely distinct entities. Legions of Christians traveling the circuitous road toward sanctification understand this well. We Christians may know what God wills us to do, but often we still don't do it.

Counted among those struggling with this "implementation gap" are some of the giants of the Bible. Phillip Yancey notes this in his trenchant work, *I Was Just Wondering*, posing the question: "Why did King Solomon show such wisdom in writing the proverbs and then spend the latter part of his life breaking those proverbs?" We could add similar questions from Biblical history. Why did King David, a man who knew God's law as well as anyone of his day, sleep with Bathsheba anyway? Why did Peter, having recently confessed Jesus as the Christ, turn around and deny that he even knew Jesus? Why did Paul, after planting churches and preaching the Good News for years, say late in his ministry that he still couldn't stop himself from doing what is wrong (Romans 7)?

The answer is this: because these people, like all of us, stand in the dubious human tradition of being unwilling to always submit to God's will. Something's in the way - many things, actually. Some of these obstacles are internal to us; others are external. But every one of these obstacles separates knowing from doing. Every one prevents us from traveling God's higher road.

These obstacles, as we'll see below, are no less a problem for Christians in the contemporary workplace. We'll first look at some quantitative evidence of the implementation gap for Christian leaders and then turn to understanding that gap qualitatively, examining in more detail leaders' biggest obstacles to living the faith at work. Hopefully, seeing the obstacles of others more clearly will put each one of us in a better position to identify and address our own obstacles, thus enabling us to more consistently do that which we know.

A Gap Between Belief and Behaviour

Consider this: if someone has made a sincere personal commitment to Jesus Christ, would that person also consider God to be his Boss at work? One might think so, but that's not always the case. What if we look exclusively at those who *do* strongly agree that God is their Boss at work? Would not that affirmation dominate their approach to selling, to employee management, and to financial management? It should, but again, that's not always the case.

This isn't just conjecture, though. Consider the following six statements from a survey I conducted of 300+ Christian leaders:

1. I have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today
2. At work, God is my ultimate Boss
3. I avoid overselling what my product or service can do
4. At work, I consider the financial resources at my disposal to really be God's resources
5. It is a high priority for me to serve my employees
6. Profit is a means, not an end

Although almost all (95%) Christian leaders in the survey strongly agreed that they have made a personal commitment to Christ, fewer (82%) strongly agreed that God is their ultimate boss at work. Furthermore, when it comes to what are arguably Christ-centred approaches to sales (Statement 3: avoiding overselling: 66% in strong agreement), employee management (Statement 5: serving employees: 61% in strong agreement) and financial management (Statements 4 and 6: financial resources are God's and profit is a means: 53% and 42% in strong agreement, respectively), the percentages become smaller still. This gap between knowing and doing illustrates the continuing challenge for Christians to walk the talk in the workplace.

In light of this gap, the next logical question is: "Why do Christian leaders stumble?" What trips them up? What should they guard against when trying to be God-honouring leaders? ***What are the primary obstacles to applying the Christian faith at work?*** To find out, I followed up my survey by conducting interviews with 152 leaders.

The Primary Obstacles

The leaders I consulted about these obstacles come from various backgrounds and have a wide range of management experience. The interviewed group is also reasonably balanced by gender, with 40 percent of the responses coming from female leaders.

Specifically, I asked the straightforward, open-ended question: "For you personally, what are the greatest obstacles to consistently living your faith at work?" Their responses were introspective. They were humble. They seemed candid. And collectively, the responses confirmed both a diversity of problems as well as some significant commonalities. In sum, these leaders listed 72 distinct obstacles. More helpful for our purposes here, though, as a group they pointed to a handful of the most pervasive, most tenacious obstacles. As shown in the table below, there appear to be more than rocks in the road to Christ-like leadership. There are some genuine boulders as well. Here are the bigger ones:

"For you personally, what are the greatest obstacles for living your faith at work?"

(Based on 152 responses from Christians leaders; responses could list more than one obstacle.)

Pride: Foremost among these obstacles is "pride" in its myriad forms. It's the antithesis of God-centred humility. While a few leaders identified "pride" generally as an obstacle, most elaborated further, citing self-centeredness, an unwillingness to take advice, a mind-set that they are "above" others, demands to be in control, refusing to trust God or to submit to Him, an unwillingness to accept criticism, a propensity to impose views on others, and a refusal to trust others enough to delegate work. Both men and women put pride atop their obstacles lists.

Reputation and Ambition: One could also include in the pride category obstacles like "concern for one's reputation" and "drive for success," but these are separated out in the table, given the significant frequency with which they appear. The reputation issue is a biggie, it seems. Call it concern for one's image. Call it a focus on "people-pleasing" over God-pleasing. Regardless the label, many Christians say they don't want to risk friendships and promotion opportunities for the sake of their faith. They also wrestle with ambition - the desire to climb higher and faster in their career - at the expense of a consistently Christ-like disposition. Clearly, the potential social consequences and job consequences of taking one's faith seriously sometimes crowd God out of Christians' work lives.

Communication problems, in their various forms, are also a major inhibitor. Cited in this general category are things like an unwillingness to communicate, an inability to criticize constructively, and poor listening skills. Relatedly, there is the issue of ***controlling one's tongue***. Many report difficulty here, saying that they are not gentle, they are not meek, they lose their temper too often, they are hyper-critical, or that they have a tendency to gossip. Relatedly, the interviewees also reported that underlying their communication problems were root issues of ***impatience*** and ***lack of forgiveness***. As noted under "Other Issues" in the table, a noteworthy proportion of both men and women cited these as obstacles.

Conflict resolution skills: Also related to communication issues, some leaders cited poor conflict resolution skills as a barrier to living their faith at work. These Christians understand that they are called to be "peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9), but many avoid or ignore conflict, saying they "don't like to deal with it" or that they are "not very good at resolving inter-personal problems."

Task or financial orientation: Christian leaders are challenged to balance concern for results with a concern for people. Apparently, many are keenly aware that the former inhibits the latter for them.

Lack of care for others: This may be the other side of the task-orientation coin. Clearly it would be impossible to love and serve others consistently, and to put others' needs first, if one doesn't really care about those other people. A notable proportion of the interviewees stated candidly that they have little compassion or care for those around them at work, precluding them from being authentic witnesses to the truth of God's love.

Busyness or over-commitment showed up frequently in the interviews as well. It's a problem that transcends genders, but in this sample, more women than men indicated that their frenetic darting from task to task undermines their ability to care

about and meet others' needs. Relatedly, leaders also reported that the natural end of this busyness - **burnout** - also limits their witness.

Corporate culture: Whereas ambition, concern for reputation, communication problems, and lack of care are internal obstacles, the corporate culture - the environment in which one works - is an external obstacle that can have similar effects on one's behaviour. Without vigilance, people can drift to become like those around them at work and some of our leaders recognize this problem. Adopting the assumptions of the secular organizations (e.g., assumptions about the way work should be done, about the way to relate to people, and about how to make decisions) sometimes undermines one's ability to act like Jesus on the job and to make the decisions that He would make, as acknowledged by a handful of respondents.

BEATING THE OBSTACLE COURSE

This is quite an array of obstacles. But for the Christian who is willing to work at it, this is one obstacle course that can be conquered.

Some of the impediments have reasonably obvious solutions. Busyness is remedied by adopting a simpler lifestyle - by choosing to do fewer things, by saying no to the lesser things in favour of excellence in doing the greater things. It's a choice, by God's grace, and myriad magazine articles and best-selling Christian books show that the power to beat busyness resides with you. Similarly, having poor conflict resolution skills can be addressed somewhat efficiently by learning about and how to do this better and by practicing the techniques. Influential secular resources like *Getting to Yes* and *Getting Past No*, as well as Christian resources like *The Peacemaker* will take you to the next level in this area if you make the time to adopt and implement their recommendations. These are skills, and like any other skills, the more you practice them the more capable you become in conflict resolution.

But what about the other obstacles? What about character flaws like pride, people-pleasing, impatience, low compassion or a loose tongue? What about the tendency to be molded in the worldly image of a corporate culture? How does one remedy such obstinate problems? How does one finally move the boulders that have for decades blocked the road between knowing and doing?

First, I should say that there's no quick-and-easy fix here. There's no magic wand that you can wave to assure sanctified leadership by next Monday morning. Contrary to what you might infer from reading certain magazine articles, hearing well-intended sermons, or picking up a popular book on the subject, no one can take three easy steps to become a God-honouring Christian leader. That's far too simplistic. Overcoming one's character flaws and one's very nature, not to mention lifetime of bad habits, is one of the most challenging conundrums with which man has ever wrestled.

Today, though, we are the beneficiaries of all of that wrestling. Centuries of exegesis, experience, and examen have furnished us with perspective, with hope, with a way to remove the boulders in the road that runs from knowing the faith to consistently and joyfully living the faith.

The first part of the solution is this: **recognize that you're not strong enough to remove the boulders**. On our own, we don't have the power to permanently beat things like pride, greed, ambition, impatience, concern for reputation, or lack of compassion. And that's by God's design. God does not want us to pursue sanctification and Christian living by ourselves. Quite the opposite, God wants us to **depend on Him** to move the boulders for us.

That's a very different approach from the one tried by legions of Christians. Many have attempted to become Christian leaders - and have achieved quite patchy results - by learning about how Christianity applies to leadership or to various organizational functions like employee management, marketing, or financial management. The problem with that is not necessarily with the books, classes, and seminars themselves, but with the **exclusive reliance** on such resources. This myopic reliance ignores the foundational inward journey that must take place if one wants to consistently practice the things that one learns about in these books and in these educational venues.

Reading is not enough. Hearing is not enough. Knowing is not enough. Trying hard is not enough. And making sincere vows to do better next time is not enough. What's required is something more, something deeper. something **relational**.

I'm not a fan of silver bullets, especially in the theological realm. But this much is true here. If there's one "secret to success" in Christian leadership, it is that **we lead best when God is leading us**. That's far from a quick fix; rather, it's a declaration that God-honouring leadership doesn't happen because we try to make it happen. Successful leadership is a product of much groundwork, of much time spent with the One whom we are ultimately seeking to please. Making the right decisions at work, choosing the correct priorities, relating to people as Jesus would relate to them, performing with excellence no matter the task or the pay - all of the attitudes and behaviours to which Christians should aspire in the workplace - happen more consistently when they are the outgrowth of an active and growing relationship with God.

When you make relationship with God a priority in your life, correct attitudes and behaviours are an **automatic response** at work and everywhere else. They're instinctive and inevitable. The obstacles are still in proximity, but they are less of a nuisance because God confers on those close to Him a clearer vision to see the world as He sees it. You're more likely to live in continued cognizance of God's will, a cognizance that bulldozes your personal obstacles by keeping you mindful of what really matters in life. It's not a magic wand, but it is quite miraculous. You become a fundamentally different person, empowered to do things that you were never able to do in your own strength.

By contrast, when we do not give relationship with God top priority, the yoke of Christian leadership often seems arduous. It becomes a burden rather than a blessing because it contravenes what is intrinsic both to us and, often, to our work environments. As a result, considerable obstacles appear at every turn. We are tempted to live and work for ourselves and by our own rules. Career or paycheck may become an idol, leading to a busyness that only accelerates the downward spiral. Our values and priorities are more easily tossed about by the powerful waves of corporate culture. Desire to preserve friendships and to "fit in" become more important than friendship with God. The norms of the workplace govern the use of our tongue. And an innate self-centeredness may desensitize us to the needs of others. Under these circumstances, even if we do discern the obstacles, it is to little avail since those obstacles appear to be impassable.

So there is a choice to be made, a choice that is freely available to anyone who seeks to take seriously a calling to Christian leadership. You can lay the foundation by cultivating your relationship with God, making it top priority in your life, or you may choose to relegate the relationship to a lesser position. Appreciate, though, that choosing the former is a prerequisite for successful Christian leadership.

How does one make that choice - and really follow through on it? Let me first say how this is not done, because many have been sidetracked into this dead end. It is not done by becoming more religious or by doing a lot of religious things. Relationship with God is different from religiosity. One business owner in my study made this point so compellingly that it deserves extended quotation. He writes:

"It I had 'religion' down pat. However, I had little or no 'relationship' with Him. Yes, I knew how to 'pray,' and I could be eloquent, covering all the bases of request with a heartfelt attitude. I knew how to 'read the Word' and even dabble in Greek and Hebrew. I knew how to 'give tithes and offerings.' I knew how to 'attend meetings' with fervency and regularity. I knew how to participate in 'missions' and 'local outreach programs.' And I knew how to 'evangelize.' I was a 'good person,' and a doer at that. But, the Lord stopped me in my tracks and said that all I had amassed was a great ability to be religious. Those are all good things, not to be derided, but I had them out of order. They are to come after getting one thing straight. It was time to know Him first and deeply."

That quote speaks volumes because it shows that even seasoned Christians often buy-in to the myth that doing religious things is a pathway to growth. It's not, as many, like this leader, have learned through laborious and often painful trial-and-error. Instead, the pathway entails making the time to practice the spiritual disciplines taught by the giants of the faith for centuries, disciplines perhaps best summarized in the contemporary classic, *Celebration of Discipline*. As shown there and in other fine resources on the subject, the pathway entails spending time with God in prayer, worship meditation, and bible study. It entails confessing sin, submitting to God's will, and receiving encouragement and guidance from those who are more mature in the faith. It entails living a life of relative simplicity, making time for solitude, celebrating and enjoying life, and cheerfully serving others. These are not legalistic requirements, more things for the to-do list. Rather, they collectively represent a lifestyle that put us in a place where God generously pours out His grace. Many are familiar with the disciplines, but if you are not, know that they are the starting point

for you. To become a better leader and a better Christian generally, become a student and a practitioner of the spiritual disciplines.

This is not new information. It is very old information. But it is timeless and among the most valuable information one can receive. Christ-like leadership does not begin with a leadership book, with a sermon, with a course or with the knowledge of best practices and clever ideas. Such things are important adjuncts, but recognize that they are only adjuncts. Instead, Christ-like leadership begins with Christ.

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