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HOW DO YOU SPELL SUCCESS? Take this leadership audit

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Working in youth ministry in the late seventies and during the eighties, I had a clear definition of success. It could be summed up in these words: *Òbuild a big ministry, make my pastor and God happy with meÓ.*



I spent many of those years trying to prove my worth and prove my call to people that mattered to me. I was afraid that I would be rejected by my pastor, the people of the church and then ultimately God, if I didn't *ÒproduceÓ.* I'd read the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-29, where Jesus says, *ÒCome to me and I will give you rest - all of you who work so hard beneath a heavy yoke. Wear my yoke - for it fits perfectly - and let me teach you; for I am gentle and humble, and you shall find rest for your souls; for I give you only light burdens.Ó* I'd teach on this passage but I could never believe that it was true. Why? Because I couldn't figure out how to make it true in my life and I'd never known anyone in ministry who was making it true.

All I knew were other youth pastors like me who were always tired and burned out because of the pressures of the ministry. They were always on the go doing church work, but their personal lives were struggling, their marriages were not what God wanted them to be and their children only got their dad's left over energy and attention.

What would it take to earn God's favor? Was having a large

group and serving a large number of hours the formula for receiving God's stamp of approval on my life and ministry? Is that how I was going to define success in ministry?

In God's eyes, success for us was to be defined in another way. He took me through a process of changing my definition of success. The journey was painful; but if I had to do it over again, I would.

During those early years, we would have never admitted publicly that success was determined by ministry performance, but it was the underlying reality in the mind of every youth worker that I knew.

This reality gave birth to at least three ugly and Spirit-grieving characteristics of my life and ministry.

The first was that the youth workers in our town were in quiet, intense competition with each other. Instead of praising each other, praying for each other, and serving the Lord together in unity, we competed for the hottest program and the biggest crowd on a given night. We became distrustful of each other and rarely came together for fear that we might lose some of our students to the opposition. We could have become close friends, but we chose to compete. All in the name of the ministry.

The second ugly head that was reared by our definition of success was program generated Christians. You know what a program-generated student looks like don't you? It's when you invite a young person to church and their first question is, "what are you doing there?" What they are really asking is, "Is your program good enough for me to be there?" We had trained students to be impressed by our flashy programs and our funny guest speakers; and when those were gone, so were the students.

The third, and most serious effect of our definition of success was a group of tired youth workers, trying hard to keep up with competitive, driving youth ministry demands, and still be good spouses and parents. We were doing God's work in such a way that was killing God's work in us. The church was growing, but the little temple in our hearts was shrinking fast.

In an attempt to provide the biggest and best menu of activities for students, we were away from home too many nights of the week.

Were we successful? By our functioning definition, we were very successful. We had crowds of students at our events, but I began to have a gnawing sense that God was not pleased with me, or the way I was doing His work. I needed to change. In His gentle way, He demanded that I change; but He needed to get my attention first.

At first, there was the gnawing sense that what I was doing wasn't making a lasting difference in the lives of youth. Then came restless nights where I wrestled with the Lord in prayer, wrestling for the answers to the questions that harassed me.

Finally, one Friday afternoon, I came home exhausted and spent. My joy for God's work had dried up; and I knew it. From that point on, I quietly searched for a new way of thinking; a new way to define success.

Through brokenness and tears, the Lord was specific to tell me of a new way of defining success in youth ministry; where every student is with a shepherd (Matt. 9:36). The Lord had to take me through a process of un-learning old habits and of reformatting the way I looked at success. After a three year process of searching through Scripture, books, articles, and the minds of great men, I learned to define success not by ministry performance, but by answering the five following questions.

The **first** is, Did caring occur? Did my students arrive and feel cared for? When students spent time with me, the adult staff, or their student leader, did they sense that they were focused on and listened to? Did we make them feel like we cared about them more than anything else? When students feel cared for, they will come back. When students experience care that flows from a minister that is empowered by the Holy Spirit, we believe that they will invite their friends to come and get cared for too. This generation, the Millennials, does not want to be treated as just another face in the crowd; they want to be known by name and in nature. They want to come to a place

where they are recognized, significant, and loved. We cannot consider ourselves successful, if we are too busy to meet the needs of youth.

The **second** question we ask is, "Is life-change happening?" Did we do anything that helped a student be conformed to the character and likeness of Christ? Are we actively helping students move from a faith-decision to a lifestyle of obedience in Christ? Are people's lives being changed by the power of God? Are we helping people apply God's transforming Word to their lives in such a way that it actually is making an impact on their lives? This is success in youth ministry! This should have been our goal all along!

A **third** question that we base our success on is, "Did people have significant conversations?" As leaders, were we more worried about doing "ministry" or were we concerned with "ministering?" As leaders, did we stop, look students in the eyes and take time to find out what's really happening in their lives? Did we pray for students, and model the principle of taking each other's problems before the Lord? For too long, we were too busy putting program before people. We wanted to evaluate ourselves by how well we stopped and listened.

A **fourth** evaluating question we ask ourselves is, "Did friends bring friends?" If caring is occurring, then students will bring their friends. We no longer exist to manipulate students to come and be another face in the crowd; another name on the roll-sheet. We exist to care for students to the point that they will choose to invite their friends to come and receive that same care. We rate our level of care by how many friends were invited to church.

A **fifth** and equally important question that we evaluate ourselves by is, "Was the Truth communicated?" Did we communicate God's Word? Did we use it as we counseled young people? Was it the source for our discussions, our answers, our insights? Are we helping young people hide God's Word in their hearts? We exist to help young people be transformed by God's power; in order to do that, we need to take them directly to the power source: communication with God- through the Bible. Scripture tells us that God's Word is

sharper than a two-edged sword. It fights the enemy. It is a light to our path. It is spiritual food. God's Word is the food and the fertilizer that help a young person grow into maturity.

We have cut back many of our old programs; and I can say with integrity that I have never been more fulfilled in youth ministry as I am today! Am I still busy? You better believe it. Is it still hard work? Of course! However, I could never imagine doing youth ministry any other way! I can finish my life doing ministry this way. I can sleep at night knowing that I am doing youth ministry in such a way that I am building the Kingdom of God in me and those I love. I can sleep knowing that every student that touches our ministry will be cared for. I can sleep knowing that God is satisfied with my definition of success, and my ministry; or rather, HIS ministry.

Youth worker, how do you define success? Really? Is it all about "ministry performance"? Or will you evaluate yourself by the care that "every student and staff with a shepherd" can give each other? For the sake of your life, family, ministry, and your marriage, I hope you choose the latter.