

4 Ways to Avoid Becoming an Abusive Leader

I just got off the phone with a good friend. He is in a situation where the leader of his congregation is abusing the power God has given him. As we talked about this, I said, "Often a leader will surround himself with weak yes-men so no one will ever challenge him. Other gifted, strong leaders will be pushed aside, even though they could help build the vision, because the leader is threatened."

My friend added, "In the end, he becomes the emperor with no clothes. And no one will tell him."

Here are four ways to keep from becoming an insecure, abusive leader who produces little or rotten fruit.

1. Admit You're Screwed Up!

The fact is that we are all dysfunctional to some degree—some more than others. Even those who grew up in healthy homes still live in a dysfunctional world. And so many leaders come to faith out of very tragic, abusive and dysfunctional circumstances. Admit your weaknesses up front.

I am 48 years old. I have been diagnosed with ADHD. Even as I write this, my legs are moving. Dr. Michael Brown actually nicknamed me Squirm'n Sherman (my middle name is Sherman) when I was 19 years old in Bible School. ADHD has caused me to be impulsive, to get bored easily and to not follow through on assignments. By the grace of God, I have learned how to function as an ADHD adult by recognizing those challenges. I have other weaknesses as well. I try to be honest with myself about those weaknesses.

2. Don't Believe Your Own Press

When I preach, people see me at my best. People complement me on my speaking skills. However, that is a gift from God. I didn't earn it. I didn't buy it. It was a gift. It is hard to be full of pride regarding something with which I had nothing to do. However, if I start believing what people say after I speak or write something, I tend toward pride. The truth is, my wife knows me—the good, the bad and the ugly. And my kids do too. Anyone who thinks I'm something special just needs to come live with my ADHD self for a week or so.

However, sometimes leaders become embittered toward their spouses. More than one case of adultery started with flattering words from a female congregant about the preacher's unique gifting. He then wonders why his wife doesn't appreciate him like that. (Hint: She lives with you!)

While a wife should build up her husband with words of encouragement, we all need to remember that the real you (or me, in my case) is not the preacher but the guy she lives with the other 167 hours of the week!

3. Share Your Weaknesses With Other Leaders

Once you admit you have issues, find trusted friends you can confide in. I have three men I consider not just fathers in the faith but ongoing mentors. In addition, I try to meet monthly by phone with a professional life coach. And my wife and I get regular counsel on our relationship.

You cannot be all God wants you to be without other people in your life. No one can. It is time to start opening up.

4. Empower Other Leaders to Speak Into Your Life

It is not enough to be honest about your struggles. You also need to empower those mentors, coaches and counselors to speak into your life. In addition, permit your staff to be honest with you. Pastor Dennis Rouse from Atlanta shared recently at a leadership conference that he, as unpleasant as it is,

regularly asks his leaders if he is doing anything wrong.

The leader about whom my friend and I were speaking has no one to speak into his life. He doesn't seem to admit he has imperfections as a leader, and everyone around him—other leaders, elders and staff—enable him because they refuse to confront him out of fear of losing their jobs or being alienated and rejected.

Can you think of any other ways leaders can be more transparent? Use the comments section below to add your thoughts.

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