

Helping the Helpers

Leaders in certain professions may spend more time taking care of others than themselves, which increase stress levels and the risk for burnout.

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People in the helping professions, such as social work, education, medicine and psychology, often feel a calling to these professions. However, many people who work in these fields become so busy taking care of others, they forget to take care of themselves, leaving them open to stress and burnout. In addition, these challenges can affect the organization by promoting high turnover, low retention and lack of personnel development.

In the pastoral profession, these issues can be even more pronounced.

“Ministry on any given day is like being an EMT,” said the Rev. Eric Sandberg. “Anytime a pastor walks out his door, he’s going to find people who are looking for help. These people are spiritually dying, emotionally wounded, bleeding internally, in a sense. A pastor is expected to be able to drop what he’s doing and perform spiritual CPR. Pastors tend to put their own spiritual well-being on the back burner because people look to them for leadership.”

As is the case with other helping professions, the importance of maintaining work-life balance, job satisfaction and personal satisfaction often is neglected during pastoral training. But a program at Ashland Theological Seminary in Ohio is taking on the challenge of helping pastors achieve and maintain success. Since 2001, the Seminary’s Pastors of Excellence (POE) program has provided support through a series of retreats and activities to empower pastors. The retreats teach and offer spiritual encounters that can instill a vision for transforming church culture.

“In order to be effective, pastors must be authentic,” said Sandberg. “When they are not, they cannot grow.” Sandberg was in one of the first groups of pastors to take part in POE, and he now sits on the program’s advisory board.

“Somewhere along the way, I forgot how to breathe. My relationships were in danger, and I wasn’t helping people as best I could,” he said. “The POE experience taught me how to breathe again. I could be more authentic in my relationships, and I was able to take the time to improve my spiritual health.”

David Oliver, Ph.D., is a mentor in the program. He said he also recognized the need for a support system for pastors.

“On one’s own, it’s difficult to step back from the press of the day to gain true insight into ourselves. Most of us are reactive rather than reflective. A situation arises, and we deal with it. The tools we use in the program allow people to do reflective thinking, and that can impact behavior,” he said.

Measure Progress, Strive for Excellence

POE participants take a combination of assessments, including Human Synergetics International’s Life Styles Inventory (LSI 1 and 2) and Stress Processing Report (SPR), the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Spiritual Competencies Profile (SCP). Through these assessments, small group interaction and reflective exercises, the POE program provides pastors with a holistic view of themselves.

“Most pastors know they are stressed when they get here,” said Mike Catanzarito, manager of POE. “It’s important for them to be able to monitor changes to see how the program helped them with that.”

Each POE program takes place over a two-year period. Participants meet for three-day retreats three times each year. Teaching pastors how to take care of themselves is supported by each retreat’s theme. The first one is a self-discovery retreat, which includes a learning session about the LSI 1 and 2, SPR, MBTI and SCP, followed by discussion of participants’ profiles. Subsequent retreats focus on solidifying leadership competencies by developing community relations, their relationships with God, their capacity to lead and character. Participants complete the LSI 1 and 2 and the SPR two months before the program begins and take them again two months before the two-year program ends to measure their progress.

The LSI 1 measures thinking styles, and the results are presented on a circular graph called a circumplex that shows the relative strength of 12 thinking and behavioral styles, which are grouped into Constructive, Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive styles. Constructive styles characterize self-enhancing thinking and behavior that contribute to one’s level of satisfaction, the

ability to develop healthy relationships, work effectively with people and proficiency in accomplishing tasks. The LSI 2 is filled out by others and provides information to address blind spots that can derail effectiveness. The SPR measures how well individuals deal with stress at work, at home and in everyday life. Pastors are educated on the assessments, and they learn to interpret their results, as well as those of others.

Mentors like Oliver present the assessments as tools to help participants develop a more complete self-image. “I like to think of this process as cross-sectioning an individual,” he said. “By using these assessments, participants get a three-dimensional view — of themselves, of their relationships with others and with God, of how they handle stress, as well as what they find motivating and demotivating.”

“When combined, the support materials help participants get a clear picture of who they are. The LSI [2] clearly points out blind spots and hidden strengths, while the SPR adds value by measuring one specific area [stress],” Catanzarito said.

Enhance Effectiveness With Awareness, and Plan for Change

For many participants, POE is their first exposure to self-assessment inventories. After learning about the assessments, participants are debriefed in one-on-one sessions. Then they discuss their profiles with other participants. Mentors provide coaching and lead discussions of the profiles participants generate, and there is a counseling department on-site for support. Once participants understand and accept their feedback, they develop action plans that are monitored and adjusted at subsequent retreats.

“I have them look at areas where there are differences in perceptions of self and the views of others,” Oliver said. “After discussion, I encourage them to seek deeper insight into their blind spots and to claim their unrecognized strengths.”

The assessments offer POE participants an opportunity to ask questions, make connections and gain insight. Sharing and analyzing the profiles becomes an opportunity to understand and own their results and to gain experience by interpreting and discussing others’ profiles.

To understand and utilize their SPR results, Oliver encourages participants to do reflective writing and praying to help them “unpack” what is contained in the SPR results.

“With the SPR, people see patterns they may not otherwise see in how they relate to others. When people are caught up in a conflict or stressful situation, they miss these [patterns]. The SPR helps them see how the past is playing out in the present. I encourage them to reflect and decide how to react differently based on the insights they have gained,” he said.

Oliver said he found his own LSI 1 and 2 profiles enlightening. “I found that I had strengths others perceived that I did not recognize,” he said. “Through the LSI 2 profile, I was able to learn that I could trust myself. I didn’t need to spend energy proving myself to others again and again.”

Sandberg said he also was pleasantly surprised to discover some unperceived strengths through his LSI 2 report, which offered an opportunity for improvement.

“I have my own perspective, but I don’t trust it to be the best perspective on my strengths and weaknesses. The feedback I received in the LSI 2 gave me more confidence in my abilities,” he said. “I had gotten pretty good at just doing whatever it took to make others believe that I was all things to all people, covering up things I didn’t want people to see — people pleasing.”

“Furthermore, the assessments helped us [POE participants] move beyond our tendency to be competitive with each other and discuss what is really going on. Instead of discussing how big our parishes were, we moved past that and got into an authentic discussion of competencies and confidence to do ministry.”

“The main asset pastors have is high-quality, authentic relationships,” Oliver said. “Influencing others through relationships is their primary commodity. The insights pastors gain from the assessments challenge them to see where there are inconsistencies in their messages. Insight leads to the possibility of behavior change. The tools provide insights and help people decide which types of changes would be constructive.”

Sandberg agreed. “I believe this is the best hope for pastors in the church right now.”

Empowering and preparing employees to deal with stress and to be aware of their strengths and opportunities for improvement can improve performance, job effectiveness and ultimately add value to the organization. For the talent manager, being proactive when dealing with issues such as stress and burnout can help the organization avoid losing quality people, and it can maximize their contributions.



Bio

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