

Guarding Your CEO's Soul

Wise boards invest time—up front—to ensure their CEO's Soul in not neglected

Jesus indicates that it is possible to gain the world but lose your own soul. If He were talking to us as Christian leaders today, He might point out that it is possible to gain the world of ministry success and lose your own soul in the midst of it all. He might remind us that it is possible to find your soul, after so much seeking, only to lose it again.¹

Ruth Haly Barton

The ministry is growing. The Great Commandment is being lived out in the organization and the Great Commission is being fulfilled.

The respect for and the popularity of the CEO has grown with each year of service. Still, you have a gnawing sense of wonderment, that little question in the back of your mind, the one you wish would go away—is it possible the soul of the CEO is being neglected? And what about the board? With everything going great on the surface, what about the state of the souls of the board members?

Let's start by defining soul care. A spiritual director and friend, Jenni Hoag, describes soul care as “thoughtful and careful attention to the inner being of the individual.”² When the board and the CEO give attention to their souls by engaging in practices that enrich themselves spiritually, it positions them for proper interaction with those on staff, volunteers, and the greater community. When they don't, well, that's when the wheels can come off fast.

How does a board address this topic? Not often enough, according to ECFA research.³ Many boards have never discussed it. Others would not know how to bring it up. It's challenging because factors on the outside are easier to assess. We can see if someone is caring for their body by getting adequate rest, taking time to exercise, enjoying vacation time regularly, and eating healthily to stay in good physical condition. It is far more difficult to discern whether or not someone is attending to their inner being by spending time reading the Scriptures, praying, or simply enjoying solitude with God on a regular basis.

In many cases, soul care does not make the board agenda until a crisis happens. A staff member might blow the whistle on verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. An internet filter may reveal that the CEO is struggling with pornography. These are just a few tragic examples.

Other symptoms often linked to the need for soul care include (but are not limited to): marriage conflict, outbursts of anger, selfish inclinations, and any behavior that appears to exhibit a desire for power or control. Spiritual directors see these tendencies as warning lights that a person's inner being needs care.

These crisis examples and symptoms sober us to the reality that any ministry is susceptible to spiritual problems. Many could be avoided with special attention to soul care.

Today's culture is one where men and women work together, volunteer together, eat together, and perhaps travel together—moreover, they serve together. In our individual and collective ministry efforts, we must do what is right before God and every person, being sure that we bring honor to Jesus Christ.

How can the board ensure that Jesus Christ is being honored in all relationships and interactions? Very simply, it cannot. But the board can live out and promote the “one another” teachings of the Scriptures. The board can demonstrate a “beyond reproach” culture that celebrates biblical integrity and godliness by its words and actions. The board can set and uphold high standards that invite the trust of staff, the board, and a watching world.

Attending to soul care is one way the board can foster a “beyond reproach” culture. As our colleague Stephen Macchia says, “As the CEO goes, so goes the ministry. And, as the soul goes, so goes the CEO.”⁴ The psalmist reminds us to pay attention to the soul when he says, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends You and lead me along the path of everlasting life” (Psalm 139:23-24 NLT). When the soul of the CEO or the souls of the board members are neglected, the organization is in for trouble. It's like a teenager running through a fireworks factory with a lit blowtorch. It isn't whether something is going to blow up—it's just a matter of when.⁵

Various conditions may signal that the board, the CEO, or staff members have neglected soul care. Conditions might include: a sense of isolation, abuse of authority, setting unreasonable expectations in reporting relationships, a competitive attitude, an independent spirit, or a lack of accountability. There are two major warning signals of a troubled soul:

- **Lack of humility.** The measure of a CEO's humility is a true barometer of the soul. Andrew Murray notes that without humility “there can be no true abiding in God's presence, abiding faith, or love or joy or strength. Humility is the only soil in which the graces root; the lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure.”⁶ This is why the lack of humility rates as the number one warning signal.
- **Self-interest.** CEOs must pursue God and focus on abiding in Christ. A major warning sign is when a leader places self-interest ahead of the things of God and the needs of the ministry, evidenced in arrogant language and prideful behavior. You will often hear a spiritually healthy CEO say, “I serve as CEO,” not “I am the CEO”—a subtle but profound indicator of their motivation.

Ralph Enlow warns, “Celebrity will seduce you before you know it. If you have to self-promote in order to get the opportunities you seek, you are selling out. Your capacity

to move people toward God will be slowly supplanted by your ambition.”⁷ Dallas Willard adds, “The blind pride of putting oneself at the center of the universe is the hinge upon which the entire world of the ruined self turns. When we are lost to God, we are also lost to ourselves.”⁸ Board members must hold one another and the CEO accountable for engaging in spiritual practices that reflect the pursuit of God and abiding in Christ.

What are meaningful ways that boards and CEOs may engage on soul care considerations? Adapted from the writings of Stephen Macchia, here are some possible topics:⁹

1. Encourage the CEO to have both a day off and a Sabbath each week. “On the seventh day, He rested” (Gen. 2:2 NIV). The comment made by Moses in Exodus 31:17 is even more enlightening: “In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed.” He refreshed himself. The soul is not well without rest. John Ortberg reminds us that when your soul is at rest, “your will is undivided and obeys God with joy. Your mind has thoughts of truth and beauty. You desire what is wholesome and good.”¹⁰
2. Encourage the CEO to be at home more nights during the week than out for ministry responsibilities. Ignore this rule of thumb at the peril of the organization. When leaders invest and enjoy quality time with their spouses and children, this God-honoring priority will be observed and replicated by others.
3. Encourage the CEO to take his or her full vacation time each year—uninterrupted.
4. Encourage the CEO to have friends, both inside and outside the ministry, and to take time to cultivate healthy friendships.
5. Encourage the CEO to have daily time in the Word, prayer, and reflection.
6. Encourage the CEO to follow best practices for personal accountability. Do your board and CEO agree on what is appropriate when there are closed-door meetings and/or travel involving just two people?
7. Encourage the CEO to take time for his or her soul on retreat, away from the fray of busyness, and find spacious, uncluttered time to rest in God (ideally in a setting conducive to soul care).
8. Encourage the CEO to have hobbies and interests outside of the work of the ministry. There is “life” to be lived, and it’s not all about the “work” of the organization!
9. Encourage the CEO to pursue both self-care (body) and soul-care (spirit).
10. Encourage the CEO to have a team that pursues the same soul care priorities.

Pride, self-centered leadership, sexual misconduct, narcissistic behavior,¹¹ and abuse in all its forms are sins as old as sin itself. As we find ourselves in an increasingly self-absorbed, over-sexualized, controlling culture where incidents of moral failures—though still relatively

rare in Christ-centered ministries—make headlines with devastating effects, there is simply no room for this iniquity in our organizations. Boards can help create a “beyond reproach” culture by attending to the care of their own souls as well as the soul of the CEO and the ministry staff.

BOARDROOM LESSONS

Boards and CEOs that prioritize soul care will not prevent all crisis situations from happening, but they can, in many cases, help their leaders steer clear of spiritual disasters. In so doing, they also preserve God’s honor and reputation and position the communities they serve for vibrant spiritual growth.

Board Actions Steps:

1. **Read:** Ask one or more board members to read *Broken and Whole: A Leader’s Path to Spiritual Transformation* by Stephen A. Macchia¹² and *Soul Keeping* by John Ortberg.
2. **Evaluate:** Discuss with your CEO the 10 steps for soul care listed in this lesson. How is he or she doing with taking time for soul care?
3. **Watch:** Be ever vigilant as a board for warning signs in ministry leaders such as self-interest or a lack of humility.

Prayer

Lord, help us care for our leaders so that they may continue to bring glory to You, and so that our ministry can be “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation” (Philippians 2:15 ESV). Amen.

¹ Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*, exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 13.

² Jenni Hoag, “Soul Care.” *Soulcare Anchoress*: <http://soulcareanchoress.com/soul-care-definitions/>.

³ Warren Bird, *Unleashing Your Board’s Potential: Comprehensive Report from ECFA’s Nonprofit Governance Survey* (Winchester, VA: ECFAPress, 2019), 14, 22, 31, 36-37, 53.

⁴ Stephen A. Macchia’s informal communications with the authors.

⁵ Dan Busby, *TRUST: The Firm Foundation for Kingdom Fruitfulness* (Winchester, VA: ECFAPress, 2015), 8.

⁶ Andrew Murray, *Humility: The Beauty of Holiness* (Radford, VA: Wilder, 2008), 9.

⁷ Ralph Enlow, *The Leader’s Palette: Seven Primary Colors* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow, 2013), 118.

⁸ Dallas Willard with Don Simpson, *Revolution of Character: Discovering Christ’s Pattern for Spiritual Transformation* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 51.

⁹ Stephen A. Macchia, “Recent Revelations Lead Us Back to Trusted Pathways,” *Leadership Transformations* (blog), August 10, 2018, <http://www.leadershiptransformations.org/blog/?p=1552>

¹⁰ John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 140.

¹¹ Glenn Ball and Darrell Puls, *Let Us Prey: The Plague of Narcissist Pastors and What We Can Do About It* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).

¹² Stephen A. Macchia, *Broken and Whole: A Leader’s Path to Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

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