

2023 | LESSON 4

DISCIPLE-CYCLE:

SUPPORTING YOUR LEADERS – PART 2

REINFORCING THE PROCESS

Duke University basketball head coach Mike Krzyzewski, is the winningest coach in history with 1,202 victories. During this time, he has led his teams to five national championships. Coach K's outstanding record can partially be credited to his "next play" philosophy. This philosophy can be summarized in the following manner: It's not about what has happened, the mistakes you've made, or the success you've had, it's about the next thing you're going to do. Focus on your next play or you fall behind.

As a Christian coach/disciple-maker, our aim is to keep a disciple's focus on their "next play," in their journey. Our role is to help M.O.V.E. a disciple forward so that he or she discerns the direction they need to be heading in order to take that next step toward Christ-likeness. In order to be as effective as possible, we need to grow as leaders. One of the best ways to do this is to boost key skills that help us be excellent coaches. Good coaching operates through four primary skills: active listening, penetrating discernment, positive reinforcement, and adaptive planning.

ACTIVE LISTENING

In his book, *Jesus Is the Question*, Martin B. Copenhaver writes, “Jesus is a questioner. Jesus is not the ultimate Answer man – he’s more like the Great Questioner. Jesus asks many more questions than he is asked. In the four Gospels Jesus asks 307 different questions. By contrast, he is only asked 183 questions. More striking still, Jesus directly answers very few of the 183 questions he is asked. Jesus prefers to ask questions rather than to provide direct answers.” As God in human form, Jesus certainly knew all things, including the thoughts and intentions of every person with whom He spoke. Yet, He chose to ask questions more often than giving answers as a way of guiding people to understand their own hearts.

The following examples show how Jesus did this. As you read, notice his underlying purposes in each:

John 4:7-9 to make a personal connection

Mark 8:29 to assess personal awareness

John 6:66-68 to call for commitments

John 21:15-17 to lead towards reconciliation

Jesus was a questioner and an active listener. Jesus cared deeply for people and listened deeply to them. Of course, Jesus did not listen to learn since He knows all things. So, perhaps Jesus’ questions were invitations for people to listen to themselves – to discern and express their own thoughts, values and intentions.

A true disciple-coach is a listener. In our communication age, many voices speak into our lives. The voices of culture speak as social media influencers, entertainers, politicians, commentators, preachers, etc . All these voices can crowd out the most important voice to us: God’s voice. We live in a “sea of telling voices”. A skilled coach steps into that chaos as a “listening voice” to help us discern God’s voice – the Ultimate Voice. Good coaches use questions to connect with a disciple to help them clarify the most important issue they face and then, the most crucial step they can take on their journey with Christ.

PENETRATING DISCERNMENT

Discernment is an essential life skill. Proverbs 20:5 says, *“The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.”* Among other things, this verse seems to imply that without understanding a person cannot help people understand the deeper issues in their lives.

There are many ways we can help people. Two major ways could be summarized as mentoring and coaching. In his book, *Sending Well: A Field Guide to Great Church Planter Coaching*, Dino Senesi highlights the difference between a mentor and a coach. A mentor dispenses wisdom from their knowledge and/or experience. Think of a personal trainer who shows a trainee how to get in better shape based on what the trainer has done – or learned to do. A mentor pours into the life of another person.

A coach, on the other hand, draws out of a disciple what God has poured in. In this sense a coach is like an Uber driver who shares the ride with a passenger, but does not determine the destination. The driver simply listens to where he or she wants to go and then travels with them to their chosen destination.

Therefore, coaching requires penetrating discernment – Spirit-infused wisdom to draw out what God has poured into the disciple. Of course, Jesus demonstrated absolute discernment to know what was in peoples’ hearts and minds (John 2:25, Matthew 9:4, Mark 2:8). We are not Jesus, of course, but the Bible guides us in how to develop discernment. Based on the following Scripture verses, we see some clear ways we can grow in this skill:

1 Kings 3:7-9, James 1:5 asking God for discernment

Proverbs 12:15, 15:22 seeking discernment from others

Hebrews 5:14 getting discernment by doing good

People get stuck. Sometimes the reason is obvious. Other times, it is not initially clear to the coach or coachee what is really getting in the way of progress. Penetrating discernment cuts through the morass of excuses, confusion or at times dishonesty to get to the heart of the matter. A coach who leans on the Spirit’s guidance and deepens their discernment through practice helps a coachee move courageously through difficulties to gain breakthroughs.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

A supporting actor/actress is a person who plays a role other than the lead. They participate in the storyline without being the focus of the story. They support, highlight or draw attention toward the lead actor/actress. A support role is crucial to the storyline and yet not central to the story. Such is the role of a coach who is skilled in positive reinforcement. An effective coach is an encourager. Jesus is the Great Encourager. The phrase “have courage” or “take heart” appears seven times in the New Testament – six times from the lips of Jesus (Matthew 9:2, 22; Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50; Mark 10:49; and John 16:33).

To grow in this skill, you need to learn the discipline of looking for the best in people and finding hidden opportunities in the midst of disappointment. This is not some “pollyannish” approach to life where you ignore human frailty or sweep difficulties under the rug. Rather, you realize that you will often need to “pour gasoline” on the fire of potential breakthrough to infuse discouraged folks with a sense of real empowerment.

One biblical example of a coach is a brother named Joseph from Cyprus. Joseph plays a supporting role in the expansion of the early church recorded in Acts. He is not a lead actor. In fact, you may recognize him more by his nickname, Barnabas, which means, “son of encouragement.” Barnabas is always coming alongside God’s people to encourage – to provide positive reinforcement – in a variety of situations. From the passages below, how did Barnabas model positive reinforcement – encouragement, cheering? Here are examples:

Acts 4:32-37 giving generously to people in need

Acts 9:19b-30, 11:25-26 supporting God’s work in Saul’s life

Acts 11:19-24 welcoming new believers

Acts 15:36-41 giving a second chance to someone who failed

Barnabas was skilled in Positive Reinforcement. He was used by God’s Spirit to M.O.V.E. disciples forward in their relationships with Christ. His whole life seemed to be centered on encouraging growth or forward spiritual progress. He trusted the work of God’s grace in the lives of Greek believers and even in the life of the former persecutor turned preacher. He did not believe that failure is final when God is involved by giving Mark a second chance to engage in God’s mission. Barnabas modeled Paul’s confident confession, “*He who started a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*”(Philippians 1:6, CSB).

The role of a coach is to keep the disciple focused on God’s grace in the midst of life’s ups and downs, successes and failures. A coach does this by providing positive reinforcement through drawing attention to what God is doing in the disciple’s life.

ADAPTIVE PLANNING

While setting overarching, long-term goals is essential, it is also important to be able to take unforeseen circumstances or unanticipated variables and leverage them to help the coachee grow. When things don't go according to plan, a coach is nimble enough to switch gears and deal with the pressing issue at hand.

Michael Jordan is considered by many to be the greatest basketball player of all time. But it was never easy to climb to this height of excellence. Early in his pursuit of basketball greatness he was almost derailed when he was cut from his High School Varsity team. He explains: "When I got cut from the varsity team as a sophomore in high school, I learned something. I learned I never wanted to feel that bad again. So, I set a goal of becoming a starter on the varsity. That's what I focused on all summer. When I worked on my game, that's what I thought about. When it happened, I set another goal a reasonable, manageable goal that I could realistically achieve. I guess I approached it with the end in mind. I knew exactly where I wanted to go, and I focused on getting there. As I reached those goals, they built on one another. Take those small steps. All those steps are like pieces of a puzzle. They all come together to form a picture. Step by step, I can't see any other way of accomplishing anything."

At every stage of the Disciple-Cycle, the goal of a disciple is intentional obedience to the commands of Christ in order to experience the abundant life he has provided for all who believe in him. Jesus invites us to "Come and See;" he challenges us to "Repent and Believe;" he instructs us to "Pray and Obey;" he charges us to "Go and Share." Expanding obedience to Christ is the life-long experience of every disciple who seeks to follow him. Since no one is ever perfectly obedient, we must regularly evaluate our progress on the journey and take appropriate 'next steps'. We live continually challenged to close the gap between what we believe and how we behave. Such progress requires adaptive planning - a strategy or action plan - that moves us from where we are to where God wants us to be in relationship with Him.

In our role as coaches, we can help disciples discern their next step of obedience. We can help a disciple develop a map – a pathway – to M.O.V.E. forward with Christ. We must help a disciple Elaborate Goals, that is, choose specific ‘next steps’ toward the goal of becoming like Christ. Taking a step-by-step approach enables us to coach someone out of the fog of circumstances into the light of Jesus’ plan for them. Helping a disciple make progress requires our guiding the person to identify and commit to their next step of obedience. That’s the whole goal of coaching.

In Luke 14:25-33, Jesus lays out the requirements for discipleship. These two parables are about the necessity of “counting the cost” of following Jesus – assessing their commitment to follow through with the challenge into which Jesus has invited them. The coach’s role, under the leadership of God’s Spirit, is to help the disciple evaluate where they are, estimate what it would take to get where they need to be, and establish a plan for obedience.

Each of the key coaching skills represents some very basic ways for pastors to create a leadership development process. This not only ensures a way to build a disciple-making movement, it also provides a repeatable template that helps you fashion your own leadership pipeline.



QUESTIONS

1. What is hard about Active Listening?

2. What are the ways you can build Penetrating Discernment in your life?

3. How would you describe Positive Reinforcement?

4. Who has helped you in your journey with Christ and how did they do it?

5. How does the skill of Adaptive Planning relate to good coaching?

6. What can get in the way of Adaptive Planning?