

Episode 021

Breaking Your Glass Ceiling

Introduction

What is a glass ceiling? It often refers to the invisible limits that occur in organisations that limit the advancement of certain groups of people. My focus today is not on external factors but internal factors. Invisible but very real internal factors that limits us from developing as leaders. Limitations that exists in our minds and hearts. Limitations that are more imagined limitations than real limitations.

What is the difference between a real limitation in contrast to an imagined limitation? Real limitation means it is humanly impossible for us. For example, I cannot fly unaided. I cannot lift 100kgs.

An imagined limitation is a limitation imposed by our thinking. In other words, it is humanly within our grasp, but we have not reached it because of our mental frame of mind. Exo 4:10 (NIV) "Moses said to the LORD, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue."" Moses actually proved to be quite eloquent later on – he did not need his brother Aaron's help.

In the first half of the 20th century, it was thought that it was humanly impossible to run a mile in less than 4 minutes. For many champion runners tried and simply could not breakthrough. Some thought that the human heart would burst under the strain. It was physiologically impossible for a man to run a mile in less than 4 minutes. Yet Roger Bannister the British did 6 May 1954. When he broke the barrier – it broke not only the physiological barrier but it broke the psychological barrier. Once he did it, the world realized that man could do it. Within weeks the barrier was broken again by another runner. From then one, one runner after another broke it. Today it is common to see champion athletes break the 4 minute mile.

Truncated thinking limits us! It limits us from becoming who we can be. Are you truncated as a leader? Because of the way you are thinking? It is time to break past your glass ceiling! Let us look a few key glass ceilings that leaders are confronted with.



1. FAITH glass ceiling

Faith is the substance of vision, dreams, and moving into the future. Faith is needed to be a great leader because you must have faith to believe in what God can do and “see” what can happen. In Oct 1971, Disneyworld in Florida had a grand opening. A journalist commented to one of the directors, “What a pity that Walt Disney is not alive to see this.” For Walt Disney died in 1966. The director responded, “Oh, but he did see it! That is why we have it today.” Walt Disney had faith. It was a faith in his vision, a faith in the organisation he founded.

A faith glass ceiling means there are areas which we have limited ourselves from believing for. It is a faith limitation rather than a divine limitation. It is a limitation due to our lack of faith in God who can do all things.

When the 12 spies scouted out the Promised Land, they brought back a poor report. Num 13:27-28 (NIV) "They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. {28} But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there." Num 13:32-33 (NIV) "And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.""

In the natural it would be impossible for the Israelites to defeat the people of Canaan. But with God’s help it could be done! The limitation was their trust in God. Consequently, they could not be used by God. In essence, it was a sin of unbelief. They could not see what God saw!

So how do we increase in faith in God? To have faith that God will provide all that is necessary? We have deal with our inner blockages first.



Ignorance.

It can be ignorance of what we are actually capable of. Ignorance of what God has called us to. It is hard to have faith about something you are ignorant about! Do you know that a large majority of Christians today do not operate in supernatural gifts? Even though that is our heritage! Because they are ignorant about supernatural gifts. Ignorant about how the Holy Spirit leads us in it. It is like not knowing what our arms are for!

What can we do about ignorance? Find out what is available for us in God's Word. Read good Christian books that deals with areas of faith that we are ignorant about. Talk to mature Christians who seem to be more knowledgeable in areas of our ignorance.

Doubt.

It is one thing to know God and His Word. It is another to trust Him and His promises. There can be doubt in God's faithfulness, provision and power. Many years ago, I determined that I don't want to be an unbelieving believer.

So how to deal with such doubts? Firstly, we must decide to believe for all that the Bible speaks of. Especially promises that is meant to be ours. Of course, it is crucial that we properly interpret Scripture to understand what promises are ours now or in the coming age. Secondly, specifically repent of our unbelief in any area in our life! Turn to God and ask for faith! Choose to trust God. Then step out with Him.

Fear.

There are many fears that hold us back. The fear of failure. Fear of the cost. Fear of success even. We must recognize that such fear is not of God. 2 Tim 1:7 (NIV) "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."



We must refuse to give in to fear. But instead to let God's promises infuse into our hearts. When I was a young man, one of my fears is of stepping out into the unknown. Because I dislike unpredictability. I like to know what I am getting into. I want to be able to carefully weigh up the pros and cons. When I buy equipment, I like to have manuals to read. It gives me the assurance that I will not use it the wrong way. But as a leader, I had to come to terms with fact I will face lots of unknowns. I had to learn to make decisions and move on with insufficient information.

In addition, I had a fear of mucking up. I like to do things where I can do well. I didn't like to fail, or even do poorly. But that held me back from venturing into the unknown, from making mistakes. I had to break past that inner constrain.

How to grow in faith

It involves 2 main areas:

- Developing convictions based upon God's Word. Many years ago, I started to challenge myself to develop deep convictions in every Scripture I read. Shallowness of conviction was no longer acceptable. I resolved that it was not adequate for me to skim over a Scriptural promise or command. I was determined that I must develop sufficient depth in my convictions! Look up my podcasts on Convictions, especially on Building Deeper Convictions.
- Take deliberate steps to stretch yourself to exercise faith. Convictions is like building deep foundations for a building. Faith is like constructing taller buildings upon these foundations. Choose to trust God in greater ways. Choose to see what God sees by asking Him to open our eyes more. It can cover a huge number of areas. Like faith for generosity. Faith for miracles. Faith to exercise spiritual gifts. Moses had to learn to step out in faith with God. It started with his staff turning to a snake. Then as God led the way, Moses started stepping out more and more with God. As a result, Moses saw bigger and bigger divine miracles.
- For example, you could start to grow in faith for miracles. You could put it into practice during some missions trips by stepping out on a limb as the Holy Spirit leads you.



- You could start in believing for smaller miracles and keep growing to bigger ones. Give it a go. Do it with more experienced people in such areas. Soak in their faith!

2. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT glass ceiling

Have you ever felt like, “I just cannot do it?” “It is just not me?” “I tried but failed, so I cannot?” We have hit a chasm that we cannot seem to cross. But is this the reality of what we cannot develop in? Or what we perceive or assume we cannot develop in? In reality, we can all develop in a lot more areas than we imagine. Perhaps some of us may feel like “my leadership capacity has hit its limit!” Some of us may feel that our counselling has hit its limit. Or our preaching ability has hit its limit. Or our emotional capacity has hit its limit. Often, we feel like we have hit a wall because of one of these 3 key areas:

- Lack of knowledge and understanding so we don’t even know if we can do better.
- Lack of appropriate skills so we don’t know how to do something better.
- Lack of capacity, so we feel like we are unable to do more.



Knowledge & understanding

Knowledge and understanding are an essential part of self-development. The best way to gain knowledge is by reading and studying. Reading strategically and widely as this increases our depth and breadth.

I get rather frustrated with people who say they don't like to read hence they rarely read. When does "like" have to be a limitation? How many of us like to brush our teeth every day? "Ooh, I simply love the taste of toothpaste and the sensation of the brush upon my teeth!" Do we stop brushing our teeth every day because we don't like doing it? We just do it because it is important if you still want to have teeth in your old age. We do many things that we don't really like all the time. Why? Because it is important, it is essential. Reading is important. Reading is essential for our self-development.

We must determine to learn, whether by reading, study, attending courses/conferences. Many of things I have learnt and applied in my life and ministry is through lots of reading, observation, analysis and practice.

Skills

Often we fail to carry out a task well because we actually lack appropriate skills. For example, we may know in principle how to teach the Bible but because we lack experience, we may not know how to lead a Bible discussion with a group well. Then we may feel like we are not suitable at leading Bible studies. But what we need is some training in a range of Bible leading and group dynamics skills. With training, some on-the-job experience and coaching, we can become decent at it very quickly.



How do we gain the necessary skills?

Seek out available training avenues. Seek out skilled people to guide us. Then apply ourselves intentionally.

How did Roger Federer, whom most people thought was well past his prime come back to the top in 2017? He held the most tennis Slam titles ever but since 2012 he had not won a Slam title. In 2017 he was 35 years old, almost a dinosaur by tennis terms. Then he won 2 Slam titles that year. Why? He modified his skills, the tools he had. He was able to improve his already excellent backhand to be even more aggressive by hitting the ball with a topspin instead of slicing, harder and quicker. That takes a lot of eye-hand coordination skill and confidence. After much practice, he achieved that.

When I started preaching, I did not know how to tell jokes. I was poor at storytelling. What did I do? Read jokes, observed how people tell jokes, observe comedians at work. Learnt about comic timing, the punch line, the comedic twist, the delivery. Same with storytelling. I learnt about the descriptive, vivid language, the flow of stories, how to main interest, etc. I was never a natural. I had to train and gain the skills until it is now natural to me. There are so many areas of my life and ministry that I was not good at. But I was intentional, applied myself to learn, to get training, practiced until I became good at it. In so many of those areas, I was just like many of you.



Capacity

Capacity is about how much we can handle. Whether it be emotional, mental, physical, spiritual and even social. When our capacity is low in any of those areas, we run out of ability to cope. For example, I am physically not that fit. So I have a very low capacity to run. I would not be able to run a whole kilometre, not even half!

How can we increase our capacity?

Change our perspective

It might surprise some but the change of how we view things, our attitudes can make a huge difference in our capacities. Sometimes we hold on to negative, defeatist attitudes which undermine our capacity. Out of the starting block, we already have a deduction of our energies. In studying elite athletes, the biggest contributor to them winning against other athletes is their mental attitude, their perspective. With the right perspective and attitudes, it can lift us to a whole new level. Often it has to do with persistence and resilience. A determination to break past pain barriers. At times, it is about finding the joy, the passion in what we need to do.

Understand what builds our capacity

Each of us are unique in what builds our capacity and what may draw it down. As an introvert, deep or on-going interactions with people draw upon my emotional capacity. So when we are ministering to groups of people day after day, it drains me. To regain emotional capacity, I need time by myself doing things that refresh me like reading, thinking, basically alone time.

We have to discover how it works for us and manage it so that we build in more capacity building times and reduce where possible our capacity reduction moments. We have to understand the rhythms of our lives, work and ministry and begin to rearrange our schedule to insert key times of capacity building.



The grace of God

At times it is the grace of God that lifts us beyond our limitations. at times. Paul felt this deeply about being an apostle of Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:10 (NIV) "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." God can provide His grace, His strength, His empowerment. And we begin to be able to perform beyond ourselves. We must learn how to go to God and drink of His strength.

Conclusion

In Judges 6 Gideon felt he had hit his glass ceiling. He saw himself as too small, too insignificant, too inadequate. Judges 6:11-16 (NIV) 11 The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. 12 When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." 13 "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian." 14 The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" 15 "But Lord," Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." 16 The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

But once God turned him around and he began to see as God saw.

He began to see a warrior.

He began to see a warrior big enough

He began to see a warrior significant enough

He began to see a warrior adequate enough.

He began to see a mighty warrior of God.

Will you begin to see yourself as God sees you? Will you allow God to lead you to break past your glass ceiling?



Discussion Questions

These questions could be done personally or as part of a group discussion.

1. Can you identify some areas where you may have a FAITH glass ceiling? What could be some of the contributing factors?
2. Can you identify some areas where you may have a PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT glass ceiling? What do you think could be holding you back?

Actionable Steps

Following questions are to prompt us on suitable actions. Importantly, come up with steps you will take to make progress. Give them datelines and priority.

1. Increasing your FAITH ceiling:
 - Having identified 1 or 2 key factors that is contributing to your Faith glass ceiling, consider specific steps to overcoming/addressing these factors.
 - What are some specific steps you can take to stretch your level of faith?
2. Increasing your PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT ceiling:
 - Having identified 1 or 2 key factors that is contributing to your Personal Development glass ceiling, consider specific steps to overcoming/addressing these factors.
 - What are some specific steps you can take to stretch either in one of these:
 - Knowledge & understanding
 - Skills
 - Capacity



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