

Sabbaticals

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Edited: 1 December 2020

In our lives, Father has us all on a leadership journey. This journey takes us from life-phase to life-phase or biblically, from 'glory to ever increasing glory.'

The context of a sabbatical (It's a liminal space between two life-phases)

Each of us have been intentionally placed in a specific moment, with a specific role in his kingdom. We may be directly involved, or indirectly involved in a ministry task (A job at work, or a role in a community etc.). There are times we are given a set of circumstances, growth mechanisms, or challenges that move us from one chapter to another. These chapters of our lives often have distinct boundaries to them. These boundaries can be geographical moves, a promotion or a loss of a job, a dramatic change in energy level in the task, a family change such as a baby being born or a family member dying. Often times, these markers are signals that the previous chapter is coming to a close, and the leader is moving to another phase of life.

When moving from one major phase to another, God sometimes arranges for his leaders to take a neutral phase in between the two tasks. This neutral phase is an important time For God to re-tool his leader for the task ahead. Often times, the leader is not fully equipped for the season ahead, and God desires to do some internal re-wiring for effectiveness in the next phase.

The F-150 Factory

Imagine a factory that makes cars on an assembly line. For example, the Ford Motor Company may want to convert it's factory from making Ford Fiestas to making Ford F-150s. The factory may have been excellent at making these Fiestas, but the upper management have decided that it would be better for the whole company if this factory were to now make F-150s. The management begin their planning of shutting down the Fiesta factory. (We were having such a good time!) and the factory begins the ending process. The old processes begin to slow, and some things end that will never be reactivated again. This is the 'Endings' Phase. It may sound counter-intuitive, but these transitions begin with ending.

The endings phase must complete it's work so that everything is left in a proper mode.

Finally, a day arrives when the factory has completely stopped producing cars. This is the 'Neutral' phase of sabbatical. This is the time when the master engineers are busy at work inside the factory. Old machines that put windows on the car, may now be converted to install tires. Machines that installed door handles, may now calibrate exhaust gases. Outside the

factory, no one sees the transformation taking place inside the factory. This is the neutral phase. Nothing is being produced. But significant work is being done.

As the neutral phase draws to a close, a day approaches when the factory begins to operate again.

This is the 'New Beginnings' phase. Brand New F-150 trucks begin to roll off the line. But, upon closer inspection, something appears to be wrong. Some new trucks are missing tires. Some don't have engines. Some are painted the wrong color. And so further tweaks are made to the system to refine it, and after a while, the factory is back up and running, producing something similar, yet altogether different than it had before this transformation took place.

Sabbaticals have the same three phases as this car factory.

1. Endings. Planning is needed at the beginning, production begins to slow down, and then eventually wanes completely.
2. Neutral. Nothing is being produced in this phase. Work done deep in the heart of the leader. The Master Engineer is tinkering away, almost imperceptibly to the leader. However, the Master's work requires the full cooperation of the leader. If the leader resists the change, it will not happen.
3. New Beginnings. Production begins again. The leader is discovering a new manifestation of his gifting and wiring. The first few attempts may feel like they are mis-fires, but eventually, the leader aligns himself with the will of the Master, and in partnership, they produce some amazing fruit.

The Primary Muscle of a sabbatical

Similar to every other phase of our growth, the primary question that God has for the leader in the neutral phase is "Will you trust me with yourself?" Inherent in a neutral phase is the need for the leader to trust God with his future, his finances, his relationships, his reputation, and most importantly, his identity. Each of these core areas of our lives may be tested in a sabbatical.

Sabbaticals are not for the faint of heart. They can challenge us to our core. And in some ways, they are meant to challenge us. These challenges strengthen us, and build capacity for the new task ahead.

The elements of a sabbatical

A sabbatical has three main defining components: Time, Team and Boundaries

Time. Sabbaticals start on a specific day which can be planned for. However, they don't always end as planned. At the beginning of the sabbatical, it's important to choose a day when the end neutral phase will be decided. This is not the 'End Date' of a sabbatical. It's the day when the sabbatical team will decide together if the one on Sabbatical is nearing the 'new beginnings' phase. On the decision date, the team can decide if the neutral phase needs to be extended longer, or if the neutral phase has run its course. Sabbaticals have two timing elements - a begin date, and a decision date.

Team - A sabbatical team is made up of the person going on sabbatical, a sabbatical coach, sabbatical buddies, and sabbatical liaisons (if needed)

1. Sabbatical coach - this is a trusted advisor and a critical part of the sabbatical. It is near impossible for the one on sabbatical to be able to discern for himself the work of the Spirit in his life. A coach can point out what the spirit is working on during the sabbatical. The Sabbatical coach's primary question is "What is God doing in this person's life?" and then partnering with that, and shining light and clarity on it for the person on sabbatical.
2. Sabbatical buddies - these are friends that are not going to pull the one on sabbatical back into 'production' mode. They are people that are fun and life giving. They don't need anything from the one on sabbatical. They can just relax.
3. Sabbatical Liaisons. These are people that represent spheres of influence the one on sabbatical was engaged in. These liaisons can communicate with the one on sabbatical in case an emergency arises during the neutral phase. For example, if a leader in a business is taking a sabbatical, a liaison may be another leader in that company who can tactfully engage the situation without interrupting the neutral phase. Some sabbaticals do not require this element of the team.

Boundary Items. Every person on sabbatical must answer two questions:

1. What are you sabbaticaling from? What primary muscles are you resting during this phase? What will you not be doing on this sabbatical?
2. What are you not sabbaticaling from? What will you enjoy? What will you pay special attention to during your sabbatical?

Other Notes on Sabbaticals

- It's a season of life. It's a natural and necessary season in the life of a leader. There are times for growth, and there are times for dormancy. It's not a cure-all for issues. It's not a promotion in rank. It's a natural growth phase similar to winters in a tree's life.
- Sabbaticals are a part of a healthy leadership rhythm, they are not the answer to immediate problems, nor are they a sign of promotion (We aren't more spiritually mature because we've taken a sabbatical). Leaders take sabbaticals because they are leaders, not because they are deficient or weak, nor because they are strong or super-spiritual. It's a natural part of the growth of a leader.

- It has 3 main types of boundaries. a. What you will do and what you won't do on your sabbatical. (What are you sabbaticalizing from? What dominant muscle are you resting during this season?) b. It has a time frame. (Beginning date, and decision day) c. It has a team of people that are journeying with you on the sabbatical.
- It has 3 phases. a. Endings b. Neutral Zone c. New Beginnings. All three distinct phases are critical to the sabbatical journey. Endings are the closing of responsibilities, relationships, roles that are clearly part of the old life. Neutral zone is where the productive season is dormant and rest is primary. New Beginnings are the re-engagement of the new life roles and responsibilities. The team has 3 main components. Sabbatical buddies, Sabbatical coach(es), Sabbatical liaisons (people that may need to connect with the leader in times of dire emergency)
- It may be a time for transitioning roles/responsibilities. Often, before a sabbatical, a leader will employ a certain style, or have certain responsibilities. After the sabbatical is over, the leader goes back to the original role they left. After consulting with the team, they may discern together that those styles and responsibilities and roles may go through significant changes. The leader cannot fully transition to the next season of ministry, unless he goes through the wilderness of a neutral zone.
- Sabbatical is a time for deep renewal. Spiritual energy, emotional, physical and mental energy are renewed through rest. Sabbatical is a time for laying productive territory to rest for a season.
- The primary muscle that God works to develop during a sabbatical is trust.
- The primary script that God is writing during a sabbatical is the leader's identity. He's giving new information to "Who am I?"
- Although rest is a big part of sabbatical, sabbatical is not for 'recharging the batteries.'" The primary purpose of sabbatical is to build trust, not strength. Strength is a bi-product of a sabbatical, but not the focus.

Is a Sabbatical for me?

These are some elements to look for if a sabbatical is on the horizon. They are not hard and fast rules, or 'tick the box' type criteria. They are just indicators. The ultimate indicator is the Holy Spirit.

- The Deep Energy Levels - I have tools that I use when my energy levels are low that have recharged my batteries in the past. But now those tools don't seem to be working. It takes longer and more effort to get my batteries back to 'normal' again. Sometimes the way this pops up is by a lack of margin to absorb bumps you once were able to navigate easily, or it is taking a longer time to recuperate from a relational speed bump.

- There has been a major life phase change recently, or there is one coming up.
- There's a stirring inside your heart that sounds something like "There must be more than this." or "is this all there is?" It can feel like being stuck, or things in your life are too rigid.