

How God Gets Our Attention

By Tony Stoltzfus

Because coaches engage people at the growth edges and challenging places in life, they often encounter situations where God is trying to get a leader's attention and the leader isn't getting it. Understanding what God does to get our attention can help you grasp where in the process a leader is and how to help him or her tune in again to God's agenda.

Access Points

There are three primary access points God has to our lives:

Direct Access

God speaks to our heart, emotion or intellect through his Word, our prayer life, dreams and visions, reflection or meditation.

Relational Access

God speaks to us through the people in our lives. We may take the initiative to hear from others (like through counsel or feedback); others may initiate with us through affirmation or confrontation, or we may tune into the relational fruit of our conduct (for instance, many people voting with their feet and leaving our ministry).

Circumstantial Access

God uses circumstances good and bad to get our attention and call us to his agenda. Anything that happens to us in life can work for good (the Greek here means "good character") if we engage our circumstances as opportunities to be conformed to Christ's image (Rm 8:28-29)

Direct Access

God's first option is to speak to us directly about his work in our lives. This is important: if an issue is really on God's agenda, there will be some evidence that God is already speaking to the individual's heart or conscience. Often just helping the leader slow down and start paying attention to what God is saying in a key relationship or area of life will surface these insights.

However, sometimes direct access is blocked even with leaders who are genuinely sold out to God. Past hurts and ungodly beliefs are often the root issue behind an inability to receive discipline directly from god. Sometimes basic sinful patterns like arrogance, self-sufficiency or just being too busy and failing to reflect or pray can block the direct channel. Sometimes a coach's challenge to really hear from God on an issue or directly confronting the pattern can lead to a breakthrough.

One evidence that the direct channel is not working is that you'll see God begin to speak the same message through the people around that leader.

Relational Access

Relationships aren't just a nice bonus or a necessary burden to get the Kingdom work done: they are an absolutely crucial access point God uses to get our attention on the difficult issues in life. If you have not cultivated regular, structured accountability, or if you do not have people in your life that you've cultivated a transparent, challenging relationship, it is certain that God has things he is trying to say to you that you are missing.



As a leader, if you hear multiple people close to you challenge you about an issue, that is a clear signal to sit up and take notice. Sometimes we treat people like speed bumps: they are obstacles we have to drive over (using the resources of our power position) or around (using our confidence or verbal skills) to get them to acqueiss. Coaches need to be looking for this pattern: here again, just having the leader reflect back or journal on what people have been saying may bring the pattern to their attention. Perspective change is another highly effective technique: can you construct a hypothetical scenario that puts the leader in the follower's position and lets them experience the effect of their leadership (this is what Nathan did with King David after his tryst with Bathsheba).

Most of all, as a coach you should cultivate a relationship where challenge and critical examination of the client's life at the heart level are a normal part of the dialog. Many leaders are used to making tactical adjustments in response to feedback without ever going their at the heart level. Engage your clients' hearts, at the level where the response is repentance and changed behavior instead of just adaptation to circumstances.

Circumstantial Access

God's last resort when we aren't hearing him is to speak to us is through painful circumstance. Burnout, divorce, financial and moral failures (what some have called "the earthquake") are often examples of God speaking through circumstances when the direct and relational channels are blocked. Even though God is speaking for our good, it still often happens that leaders misinterpret circumstances and miss this golden (and sometimes final) opportunity for repentance and change. A victim posture is often the culprit: people have treated me wrong, the world is messed up, it is not my fault. As a coach, use gentleness, but don't let your clients get away with playing the victim without challenging that attitude. Helping the person change perspective toward God's purposes for growth instead of what people are doing to me is often the key to moving forward.

Remember that circumstances are a last resort. If God is speaking to a leader in this way, the issue is probably deep rooted and quite difficult to face. God is well able to bring the appropriate amount of pressure to bear on the situation: your job as a coach is to position yourself so that when the leader is ready to talk they have someone (you!) that they feel safe talking to. This is where your investment in an authentic relationship and in prayer for the client really pays off.

Keep in mind, however, that continued resistance to God's voice ultimately leads to hardness of hearing. Leaders who go through extended painful circumstances and without dealing with God's agenda for them come out the other side hardened to God's voice. That response also results in a reduction of the scope of the individual's call: God will still use whatever we give him, but there comes a point where He stops trying to get us to do something we fundamentally refuse to do, and says, "OK, you don't want to go there: so be it."

To go to the cusp of a major breakthrough (with all the attendant pain and pressure) and then slip back is a tragic waste of Kingdom resources. Can I challenge you to raise your level of prayer, your level of challenge, and your level of belief in the person in those places, so that they have the best chance they've ever had to deal with God in that issue?

Tony Stoltzfus coaches pastors and ministry leaders to meet God in every life situation through www.CoachingPastors.com