



Know what distracts you

TN62 Training Notes series: Leadership

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Christian leaders face a range of distractions that prevent them using their time effectively.

Some of these will be shared by those in a more normal work environment, some relate specifically to working from home or alone, others will be linked to the peculiar pressures of leadership itself.

Here are three possible reasons for such distractions which can then take leaders away from what should be their priorities.

- Lack of the natural **discipline and accountability** for those who work largely on their own or outside a normal management structure.
- Little effective **support and encouragement** in much of Christian ministry.
- High **expectations from different parties** and criticism or conflict when these are not met.

Here now are 20 distractions that you may succumb to. Some may surprise you because they are not issues for you. The point is to identify one or two that do ring true – and then to do something about them.

Note, first, that some of these points certainly need our time – but at the right time.

Secondly, these notes do not attempt to deal with the wider issue of delegation. You may be undertaking tasks that others should be doing, or checking up on work that is no longer your direct responsibility, but that's a slightly different point.

The 20 are grouped under five general headings.

Working from home (for those who do)

Working in the confines of your living space provides distractions that are not present to the same extent at the office, school, factory or hospital. On the other hand, working solo does avoid the distraction of colleagues for ever interrupting you in person.

1 Friends and family

It may be a partner or close friend in the house, elderly parents or kids around your work space. In this last case the distraction might be a baby crying, children coming home from school or teenagers playing loud music in their bedroom. If you live alone you do all the shopping and housework and there's possibly the distraction of loneliness.

2 Pets

Whether it is the cat asleep in your in tray (no joking – I can cite an example), or the python wrapped round your filing cabinet, occasionally stroking your pet can lower stress (though I'm not so sure about the python). Walking the dog may be a useful break from preparing a talk. But it is easy for any of these to get out of hand and to disrupt concentration.

3 Jobs to do

Your home 'To Do' list today includes the ironing, say. The pressure to get a tick against this may be greater than the wish to plan a difficult interview – and so you look in at the utility room. Or it might be that you are in trouble for not oiling the squeaky door. Half-way through your planning you hear someone opening that door ...

4 Food and drink

When faced with starting a major task it is amazing how attractive the idea of a cup of coffee and yet another biscuit can appear. It only takes five minutes to pop into the kitchen ... Or might it be that another late night glass of wine will help you compose that tricky bereavement letter?

The first secret to success is to acknowledge the problem, so which of these four, if any, affect you? Would it be possible and better to work from another location? Or to add boundaries somehow? See Article A25 on this website for more detail on issues of working from home.

Messages

Messages come in sound, on screen, in print and in person. The battle here concerns your level of curiosity and any need to feel wanted, whether you are at home, in the church office or walking down the street.

5 Telephone

The telephone, be it landline or mobile, rings at times that are certain to distract you from something else. Those who love to be needed rush at once towards its strident tones. Wiser people take into consideration the likelihood of it being urgent and the need to focus on a different priority just then (be it work or family).

6 **Electronic messages**

This is surely one of the greatest distractions today. If this is a problem, try checking emails only at one or two fixed points of the day rather than setting the automatic check to every five minutes or having your smartphone always in view. The same applies to texts and, especially, to social networking sites.

7 **Post**

If you are the type who listens for that letterbox noise and rushes out to see what has come, try the discipline of not opening post until a time in the afternoon to suit you so that you deal with it then.

8 **Unplanned visitors**

Have a plan for how you answer unexpected callers or colleagues who drop into your office. As with the telephone it may be that your priority ministry should be the 'interruption'. Take care not to come across as someone who views this as an annoyance, but learn the art of giving quality attention for five minutes rather than offering half an hour.

Again, which of these four needs your action plan? When do you need to be available and when should your door be closed or voicemail on? What kind of discipline do you need to follow, and where might support be forthcoming? In point 8, are interruptions what your ministry should be all about?

Seeing and listening

The following are, again, likely to be much more a problem for those who work alone – so working with a staff team from a common base may make better sense if this is possible.

9 **Radio / TV / computer**

You may work best (for some tasks) with the radio on – but if there are constant interruptions to the music (say) by a continuity announcer, might it not be better to try a CD or something else? For some the TV remote may be a real temptation, especially in the evening. 'Throw the box out' might be a free translation of Matthew 5:30. Or what about computer games?

10 **Internet**

The internet offers three major distractions. First for those who love following web-links – you can so easily lose a regular half-hour this way. Secondly, social media sites as 6 above. Thirdly, the internet is a powerful magnet for visual stimulation of a more pornographic nature for solo workers. If this is a problem for you, accountability contracts with co-workers can be the key to success. They are probably struggling too.

11 **Books/magazines**

Some pastors with a library in the study find it a delight to spend just ten minutes browsing the shelves or flicking through a well-loved volume on systematic theology. One hour later... Or it may be something as magnetic as the daily newspaper or the church weekly. Or the Sudoku, Wordle or a crossword!

12 **Others in your view**

Open-plan offices can be great but can also generate huge amounts of distraction when you listen in to conversations or notice who is moving around where. Or it may be that your desk faces the window and the traffic and passers-by outside keep impinging on your thoughts. Do you need to move something?

Try a simple exercise for a week. Each day list the time lost because of an inappropriate use of the above. Again, it is awareness of the problem that helps you tackle the issue.

Administration

Various points here where discipline and support need to be provided in some way.

13 **Key-holders**

For some clergy and church staff, being the possessor of the church key or working out of the church office can result in a stream of visitors who just pop in to mention that the loo paper has run out or the crockery cupboard is locked. Not to mention the meter-reader who needs to get to the boiler cupboard or the caterer just wanting to check the kitchen over for next week's party. You need someone to cover.

14 **Untidiness**

Ever added up how much time is lost in a week by looking for things you know were here only five minutes ago? So when did you last have to spend time searching for your car keys, the takeaway menu, the missing gerbil, or the specs you just put down to peer for the car keys? Some regular sort-out times can prove an excellent investment. Clutter can be a great distraction.

15 **Business**

If you pray or read the Scriptures at your desk, do you ever find as you seek to dwell on the spiritual realm that administrative matters around you need urgent action: an email to reply to, a Facebook page to check, a letter to file? For many a separate chapel area is called for, however small, preferably in a different room.

16 **Delaying jobs**

When faced with a tough letter to write, a talk to prepare or a weighty book to read, the lure of finding some small, inessential or non-urgent tasks is great. So you check your online bank balance again, deal with that piece of filing and empty the waste-paper basket though it's hardly full. Quick-tick tasks can be helpful to build up morale, but these examples delay the start of something that really matters.

Does one of these four need action? Administration will always be a part of everyone's life. What matters is to recognise what the priorities should be and to keep day-to-day admin from smothering those.

Worry

We live in a complex society where our main distractions may be emotional more than physical. Leaders have much to worry about, especially if they are in conflict or being criticised.

17 External nuisance

For some of us major distractions, physically and emotionally, come in the form of local vandalism and crime around the work-base. If you are constantly having to watch the CCTV screen on the entrance or check every time you hear a group of kids in the church grounds, it is hard to focus.

18 Lack of peace

We all have worries: from something as minor as getting a plumber in to mend the tap to a family illness or a relationship breakdown especially if in the workplace. It might be concern about a forthcoming meeting, a feeling of utter failure in ministry, or simply knowing the agony about others' problems. We need close friends to share our worries with who can offer constructive advice.

19 Poor health

We may well be feeling down, or ill or just tired but our state of general health may be distracting us from effective ministry day by day. Action here may be a trip to the surgery, proper exercise or discipline about bedtime.

20 Responsibility

Finally, a major issue for many is the level of leadership responsibility, the handling of human conflict and the line management of others. Part of the leader's role is to carry the worries of holding a position that involves tough decision-making and dealing with people who may not be easy to relate to.

No, the list is **not** designed to make you feel worse than you already do! It is there to enable you to identify two or three areas where you could take some action and see progress.

Try a couple and work on them for a month. Finding best ways forward for your two identified problems needs to be personal to you, and probably requires some close friends or family to help you. You rarely succeed on your own in such matters.

If you want to maximise your effectiveness in ministry, identifying key distractions is not a bad place to start. Now let me just see if anyone has emailed me during the past three minutes since I last checked.....

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN62. See also Articles A25, *Working from home*, and A51, *The 'To Do Diary' guide*. Also Training Notes TN7, *Ideas for how to make time for life*, TN11, *Keeping a time log*, TN23, *How to do 'To Do' lists*, TN43, *Did Jesus use an iPhone?*, TN67, *Stress and the Christian worker*, and TN84, *How to say 'No' when you should*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN62 under Leadership.

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