

sustainable children's ministry

from
last-minute
scrambling
to long-term
solutions



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The Workhorse Syndrome

*Moving Beyond a
Do-It-Yourself Ministry*

*If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.*

AFRICAN PROVERB

*Any time the majority of the people behave a
particular way the majority of the time, the people are
not the problem. The problem is inherent in the system.
As a leader, you own responsibility for the system.*

CHRIS MCCHESENEY, SEAN COVEY, AND JIM HULING,
THE FOUR DISCIPLINES OF EXECUTION

Most children's ministry leaders I know didn't know they were on a path to professional children's ministry until they were already there. Many begin their journey, innocently enough, as volunteers, committed to creating a great church experience for their own children. They see a need and immediately

jump in to take care of it. Soon they gain a reputation for getting things done, for taking on the many thankless tasks required of any healthy children's ministry.

And then, when the children's director position becomes vacant, these high-capacity supervolunteers step into the gap, often heroically holding things together. Eventually, someone in the church raises the question, "Why are we looking for a new children's director when we already have you? Have you ever thought of doing this work permanently?"

Sound familiar? An astounding number of the best children's ministry leaders I've met tell a remarkably similar story. In the process of *doing* children's ministry, we hear a call. Something about this work makes our hearts sing. We shake our heads and wonder that the work we would gladly volunteer to do we now get to do as a job!

So far so good. But far too often the next part of the story is not quite as pretty. But it is almost as predictable.

Because very few of us have much in the way of formal training in the work we're doing, we scramble to learn as much as we can—a conference here, a half-read book there, articles, blogs, and lots of conversations with friends. It doesn't take long before, a few years into our professional children's ministry careers, the grind of expanding expectations becomes, well, a grind.

The pressure to draw more young families in the church, combined with the expectation of keeping current programs running *and* adding new programs each year, conspires to eat away at the passion that launched us. We begin to realize that if there is a gap in children's programming, families *will* go elsewhere.

Normal constructive criticism and "concerns" voiced by parents, leaders, and fellow staff members poke holes in our unassailable enthusiasm. Before long, our passion has subtly turned to willingness. Willingness becomes obligation. Obligation turns to

chronic exhaustion, until the once-passionate children's ministers find themselves increasingly frustrated, frayed, and defensive. If this journey sounds familiar, you're not alone.

This, of course, is a sad state of affairs. But you know what is even sadder? How many children's ministry workers *stay* in this depressing arrangement for decades! They come to believe that the greatness of the need obligates them to hang in there, even though it's been a long time since anything about this work made their hearts sing.

Sure, a few children's ministry professionals take a direct route, mapping out a clear path for education and training, seeking the shortest point between points A and B. From the outset they choose to be Christian educators or children's pastors. I have met a few of these folks. Even though I was one, I found myself struggling with the same issues of the supervolunteer turned children's minister. But my training didn't prepare me for the day-to-day reality of running a children's ministry.

To put our situation in context, the typical *youth* ministry professional often takes the opposite route, choosing from a wide array of undergraduate and graduate programs to train for the profession of youth ministry. Even those who do not get a formal education spend countless hours at high-energy continuing-education events or conferences, learning from experienced professionals in their field. When it comes to youth ministry, the temptation for churches is to look for the "superstar," someone with a sparkling personality who can easily draw young people into a youth group, attend endless sports events, and disciple multitudes of teenagers. But those who step into professional children's ministry (and the churches they serve) face an entirely different temptation all together.

The Parable of the Workhorse

Once upon a time, there was a farmer who had a small, well-kept farm. And on that farm he had some chickens. They were strong,

healthy chickens and laid their eggs right on time, every time. He also had some goats who kept the grass well manicured, and some crops, a few rows of this and a few rows of that.

What the farmer and his family earned from selling the crops, eggs, and a little bit of goats' milk supported the family. The farmer began to look around at some of the other farms in the area. He saw that many of the farmers had at least one horse. He thought, *If we had a horse, we could expand our crops and make more money to support the family.* He scraped together his savings and went out to find a horse.

He found the perfect horse for the farm. She was a beauty; just watching her run in the pasture was enough to convince the farmer that she was the one. Her name was Sassie. She had previously been a show horse. She was a perfect equine overachiever.

The farmer only needed Sassie to pull the plow. Other than that, she would have plenty of room to run and enjoy the farm. He brought Sassie home, and showed her around the farm. She got connected to the plow, and started plowing.

Knowing that Sassie loved to run free in the pasture, the farmer often let her run free, which she loved. And she was so beautiful when she ran.

One thing led to another, and not only was Sassie pulling the plow but she had increased the size of the plot for crops. She made herself useful by pulling the family to town in a wagon, rounding up cattle, and helping to deliver the harvested crops to the market.

Everyone agreed. Bringing Sassie to the farm was the best decision they could have possibly made.

After many days of harvesting and carrying goods to the market, the farmer remembered how much Sassie loved to run. He led her to her favorite pasture. But Sassie felt tired. All she could think about was all the work she had left to do. *This is no time to run,* she thought.

The farmer saw a very different horse in the field. Her once beautiful gait was a labored walk. In the field, Sassie felt restless without a job to do. So she lay down to take a nap. As she dropped off to sleep, she began to feel sorry for herself, with just a hint of resentment, wishing so many people didn't expect so much from her so often.

The Problem with “I Can Do That”

Many of the children's ministry tasks are little ones, for which we naturally say, “I'll just take care of that.” Need the bulletin board updated? I can do that. Need to post those pictures on Facebook? I can do that. Need to reserve the van for the fifth- and sixth-grade retreat? I can do that.

At first, we *can* do just about everything ourselves. We can prepare crafts and lessons each week. We can recruit a few volunteers when some drop out. We can create a training program when volunteers don't live up to our expectations.

Then, the fall festival sneaks up on us. The church is expecting something as exciting as last year's festival. So we make a list and start managing all the details. No need to put this burden on someone else. Maybe next year we can start earlier.

Then one fine fall day, as we are disinfecting toys in the nursery, the choir director comes in and asks what our plans are for the Christmas musical. We take it in stride, but it's late November. We've got no expertise in music, but hey, we like Christmas. We find a few cute songs, gets some motions off of YouTube, and get a few rehearsals on the calendar.

In the meantime, that wonderful couple who was teaching the first- through third-grade Sunday school class calls to say they are moving. We begin to feel like we're merely reacting, just trying to keep up with the treadmill on high speed. The idea of asking for help is oceans away. There is no time to explain what needs to be done.

And if we are not careful, we are in danger of being nibbled to death by a million tiny tasks. Because the tasks are so small, it feels silly to ask for help. And so we don't. We don't, that is, until we are so overwhelmed that we find ourselves saying no to things we ought to be saying yes to.

I've seen some of the most gifted children's ministers I know become so reactive that it would be comical if it weren't so sad. I was in a volunteer leaders' meeting with one of them not long ago. He was asked, "Could you call these three potential volunteers to see if they could help next year?" What could have been a collaboration-building "Sure, I'll reach out to them this week and get back to you next week," he said, "I *cannot* make one more phone call! People don't call me back. Someone else is going to have to make those calls!"

Um. Maybe not the best way to build the confidence of a volunteer team! The Workhorse Syndrome happens to children's ministers when they least expect it. While we are doing the work of the ministry, tending to the urgent and important, it becomes increasingly difficult to focus on building the systems that make delegating tasks successful. Planning ahead and building processes in which delegation actually works doesn't happen by accident. If we do not intentionally choose to build them, we have chosen not to build them.

When the point leader for children's ministry shoulders all of the work with very little help from a team, that leader has fallen victim to the Workhorse Syndrome. So, how do you know if you have fallen into the workhorse trap? Chances are, you already know, but just in case, the following are a few questions to help you know whether you (or someone you know) has become a workhorse.

The Workhorse in the Mirror

Over the years, working with lots of children's ministry professionals, I have observed a definite type. Though not everyone fits

the mold, there's enough of a pattern that I think I can, with relative confidence, paint a picture of the typical children's pastor.

Commitment to get stuff done. When I began in children's ministry, I was amazed at what we could get accomplished, especially when we were under the gun with a surprise assignment.

Every now and then my boss could bring a last-minute directive about new way to operate the check-in process, or a special event that needed to be pulled together, or a last-minute change to the programming for the upcoming weekend. It can be difficult for me to change course once I'm moving forward on something. I may have forgotten to wear my joyful-spirit face when I was working on these last-minute expectations.

Almost every time, though, the thing I thought would have been impossible was up and ready by the time Sunday morning rolled around. I was amazed at what I could accomplish (even with an embarrassingly crummy attitude) when I finally decided to get on-board with each new idea.

If I knew that something would be good for the kids or would allow me to keep my job, there wasn't much I wouldn't do. I would stay up late, give up time with my husband, and forgo taking care of myself physically.

After working with children's ministers around the country, this type of get-it-done-no-matter-the-cost attitude is shared by the vast majority of us. And while a can-do attitude is exactly what we need to bring to our churches, we sometimes imagine that our only option is working in ways that sacrifice our families, our sanity, and ultimately our longevity in ministry.

Willing to burn the midnight oil. Sometimes part of "making it happen" means giving up some sleep. My most creative ideas often don't come three months in advance. Sometimes they come with less than twenty-four hours' notice! (Thank goodness that Walmart is always open!)

We do what has to be done to get those VBS decorations ready, get the Advent Fair crafts prepared, or the game props ready for Sunday morning. Sure, it would be nice to have some help, but we also know it would be rude to ask for help on such short notice.

So we get the job done, even if we have to do most of it ourselves. Of course, senior pastors love never having to worry about the children's ministry, knowing that every detail *will* be taken care of, even if it is just in the nick of time!

Hyper-responsibility. People who take responsibility for things *they* are not necessarily responsible for are hyper-responsible. Though they get a lot of work done, this pattern takes its toll on both the person taking too much responsibility and the one who is actually responsible.

Hyper-responsible children's ministers have trouble letting their volunteers *own* parts of the ministry. Too many children's ministry veterans feel like *they* have to purchase every goldfish, cut out every little lamb, and disinfect every infant toy. We know in our heads that our nursery volunteers could easily stay an extra five minutes to wipe down toys or throw them in the dishwasher, but we feel compelled to do it ourselves.

Do the math with me. It takes a volunteer team less than five minutes to get a room cleaned and set. It can take us as much as forty-five minutes every week to reset all the rooms. (Over the course of a year, that is the equivalent of almost three full workdays.) It's in the avalanche of simple tasks that we are most often tempted toward a hyper-responsibility. Because it is always easier (on the front end) to "just to do it ourselves," we wind up robbing the ministry of our time and energy that might be put to much more strategic use.

Before long, these three traits conspire to create the Workhorse Syndrome. The symptoms come on slowly, often so slowly they are

hard to recognize. But one day the veteran children's worker looks in the mirror and sees

1. a loss of joy in ministry
2. lack of personal interests outside of church
3. no significant relationships outside of church or ministry
4. short-fuse frustration
5. exhaustion ("really, really, really tired")
6. feelings of isolation
7. a victim mentality ("There's really nothing I can do about . . .")

When the systems and organizational structures that allow the workload to be shared among a team are missing, the conditions are right for the building of a workhorse leader.

The workhorse syndrome affects high-capacity leaders who feel that every detail rests on their shoulders alone. Returning to what has worked so well in the past, they become hyper-responsible micromanagers who can't seem to let go of the anchor weighing them down. Eventually, they complain of being overworked, lonely, and burned out. Fortunately, this destination is completely avoidable.

What Only I Can Do

Without a sustainable systems in place and absolute clarity about what we will take personal responsibility for, we are destined to get loaded down with tasks that could be easily shared with our team. What if we changed our mantra from "I can do that" to "I'll do what only I can do"?

What are the things that "only I can do"? Here's a starting list:

1. Only I can tend to my joy in Christ.
2. Only I can lead my team.

3. Only I can align my team around a common direction.
4. Only I can take responsibility for building a great team.
5. Only I can create and protect the joyful culture of our children's ministry.
6. Only I can manage what I do with my time.
7. Only I can tend to my own emotional health, to the health of my marriage, and to my relationship with my own kids.

Sadly, too many children's ministry professionals neglect what only we can do in order to be excellent at the ministry minutiae someone else could handle. Our perfectionism about secondary things becomes a heavy burden.

Becoming a sustainable leader (and not just a workhorse) begins when we make the decision to be a different kind of leader. It begins with a decision to spend time on the parts of ministry only we can take care of. It begins with making a priority of gaining enough altitude to actually lead our ministries rather than be led by them. I know this may sound like it's beyond your reach, but the next few chapters will give you some practical steps that will help bring this dream closer to your reality.