

Can I Have a Do-Over?

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Happy New Year! A new year feels great, doesn't it?! It's the perfect time for a new beginning. We all need new beginnings—second chances, fresh starts, and a chance for a “do-over”.

The beauty and challenge of youth ministry is it's filled with moving targets (a rapidly changing adolescent world), risks (“at-risk kids”, split second decisions, life and death situations), and lots of other dynamics (cognitive development, physical changes, family dynamics, social pressures etc.). So this reflection is dedicated to those who need a “do-over”.

First of all, may we commend you for simply stepping up and taking a swing at youth ministry when others won't go near the youth room, video arcade, or football game?! Thank you for believing in youth. And if you've had a rough school year thus far, take heart. The year isn't lost! You have a second half. Look at where you need to have a do-over.

Do-overs don't mean simply repeating what we did the first time around and hope for a better result. Instead, a do-over suggests a radical shift. The shift isn't necessarily in how we're organizing our small groups or other programs but more of a shift in the assumptions that drive how we do what we do. Here are a few suggestions for how we might think about shifting our assumptions behind our do-overs.

Involve more people other than just you in the do-over

If you're going to declare a do-over, consider who else to bring in the loop. With whom do you need to talk? Is it your pastor, your friend, an elder, deacon, parent, and/or students? Do-overs start by involving others in helping you make a fresh-start. For example, if your teaching just doesn't seem to be connecting, talk with your team about how ALL of you can approach the teaching times differently. Often it's not that we just need to prepare more or use more entertaining stories or videos. It may well be that we need to explore how to re-frame our very assumptions about what and how to teach. Take the risk of bringing people into the problem, then they can be part of the solution.

Asking for a do-over means admitting mistakes.

Admitting our mistakes means more than saying, “I'm sorry. That will never happen again;” or “I'm really going to take care of that this time;” or “Just give me one more chance.” Let's avoid generalities and get specific with specific people about where we've failed and what we hope to change. Specific confession makes room for real change. Ironically, our credibility goes up when we admit how we've dropped the ball. Face mistakes. Address them early before they get too big to manage.

Do-Overs are damaging if they lead to procrastination.

Sometimes we ask for a do-over as a way to put off the inevitable. We must beware of asking for another chance just because it feels better than “getting in trouble” or because we know a hard decision has to be made that we don't want to make. Do-overs are appropriate when we're confident that doing it over really is going to yield a different result that will move us forward in our shared vision. Again, we cannot discern this in isolation. Some of us are eternal optimists and are sure that things will be less crazy this Spring so let's just try it again. But sometimes we've found we have to go back and say, “Guess what. I have to eliminate something because I just can't do it all.”

Do-Overs are dangerous if they are over-spiritualized.

We all make mistakes and we all can learn from them. We must beware however, of hiding behind statements about God's sovereignty rather than just saying, “I goofed.” Beware of statements like, “Oh well. It was God's will we screwed up. All things work together for good.” That's a dangerous statement. God can use our failures but God does not *will* them. God wants

us to succeed at what God's called us to do. Despite our failures (we all have them), God does remarkable work in and through us, reminding us that we're desperately dependent upon the Spirit for life and godliness. Ironically, God is mysteriously glorified by our weakness, but we must never claim our failures as God's will in the first place. Do-overs are an expression of God's grace and patience, not of God's will.

Youth ministry depends on culture that allows for do-overs. Here, there is space for risk-taking love toward teenagers and room for admitting our own failures. God bless you as you do-over, and as you and your ministry embrace it's full meaning.

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